

actually have 259,000 couples who are paying this marriage penalty tax. What we are talking about eliminating is this portion of it, the marriage penalty that actually exists about 66 different places in the Tax Code. So we are going to have a lot of other places we need to ferret this out.

At the end of the day, I hope we sunset this Tax Code, reform the whole thing, go to a flatter, simpler, fairer system. But that is for another time.

I want to point out, for Members or others who are watching, how pervasive this marriage penalty tax is in their States. You can go down any of the States here: In Wyoming, where the Presiding Officer is from, 45,336 couples pay a marriage penalty, a tax on being married. That is in Wyoming. You can go anyplace. In Connecticut, 347,306 couples pay that; in Washington DC, 27,117. Go to the big population States, there are more there: New York, 1.5 million; California, 2.752 million couples paying a marriage penalty tax. It is all across the board, all across the country, that couples, for the privilege of being married, pay this tax.

People know about it. Now we are seeing public opinion polls that show people know they are paying a tax for the privilege of being married. As my colleagues can see, this is not an issue that just affects a few people in a few States; it affects America's working families. It simply must be corrected this year.

I say to my colleagues, do not hook any riders to this bill that will kill it and then say you are for eliminating the marriage penalty tax. If you hook riders to this bill that will kill it, you are against eliminating the marriage penalty tax.

Further, I point out to people, the marriage penalty tax affects America's children. I have many letters from people which demonstrate that. In fact, Gary and Charla Gipson commented in a letter they wrote on this subject:

If we are really interested in "putting children first," then why would this country penalize the very situation (marriage) where kids do best? When parents are truly committed to each other, through their marriage vows, their children's outcomes are enhanced.

I do not want to take the full length of time to talk about this bill today because we have talked about it enough in the past. But I do want to make sure people understand that this does affect two-wage earner couples making between \$20,000 and \$75,000 a year.

Clearly, we need to make the elimination of the marriage penalty tax a priority to help all of these families, not just a few. The House bill does much of this. I think we can put forward an even better bill in the Senate that takes away more of the marriage penalty tax than even the House version does.

America's families deserve this break. I would like to be able to tell my families back in Kansas that, yes, this Congress does stand for family val-

ues. One of the things we are doing to help support these families is eliminating the marriage penalty tax. It is a good and positive and right signal that we can send at a time we are having so much trouble with families.

I just came from a Commerce Committee hearing where we were talking about and had testimony regarding the impact of interactive violent video games on children. There the concern was the increased level of overall violence in this society, and even the interactive nature of it in video games and its negative impact on children.

Constantly, people in that hearing were saying: I hope parents know what video games their children are playing. We hope the parents are working with their children and communicating on this issue. In each case, they were talking about the role and the need and the importance of parents and their active participation.

What better signal can we send than to say we believe that is true and we are not going to penalize you for being married parents. We are not going to penalize you for being in that situation. We are going to remove this marriage penalty tax and let you keep an average of \$1,400 per year. We have a chance to pass this legislation. We have the time to do it. This is the appointed hour for us.

I also want to send a signal to the President that I think we are going to get this bill through this Senate. We have gotten it through the House. I am calling on the President to sign this bill, sign the marriage penalty tax elimination bill, and not to obfuscate the issue or say that it is about something else or it is too expensive. If it is too expensive for Government, imagine how expensive it is for these 21 million American couples who are out there paying this extra tax.

Is it really too expensive for us to invest a little bit of money in these working families to encourage them, to support them, to say they have the most important task in America; that is, raising our next generation? We should be saying to them: You deserve a break today. You deserve to be able to have this support coming to you from this Government instead of being taxed. You should be supported.

If anything, we should subsidize the family situation rather than tax it.

Mr. President, please sign this bill when it gets to you so we can do away with this onerous burden.

There may be other colleagues who will come to the floor later to talk about this issue but at this time that is the extent of my comments on this particular topic.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

PRESCRIPTION DRUG COVERAGE FOR SENIOR CITIZENS

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, for the last 3 months I have come to the floor of the Senate on more than 20 occasions to talk about the need for this Congress to pass legislation that would cover senior citizens' prescription drug needs under Medicare. I have said again and again that this country can no longer afford not to cover prescription drugs.

Before we broke for the work period at home, I talked about a case, for example, from Hillsboro, OR, of a senior citizen who had to be placed in a hospital for more than 6 weeks because he could not afford his medicine on an outpatient basis. Just think about that wasted money. The older person could not get help on an outpatient basis for his medicine, and the doctor said we have no choice but to put that person with a leg infection in the hospital so he can get prescription drug coverage under Part A of the Medicare program.

Today, I brought with me a letter from an elderly woman in Phoenix, OR. She receives \$1,100 per month in Social Security. Her prescription drug bills run \$1,000 a month. She is 74 years old, and she wrote me: What can you do to help?

I think it would be a tragedy for this Congress to not go forward on a bipartisan basis and enact meaningful relief for the Nation's older people who are getting clobbered with these prescription drug bills. Again and again, we are hearing from seniors in these instances where they have been hospitalized because they could not afford their medicine on an outpatient basis, where when they are done paying for their prescription drugs for the month, they have only a couple hundred dollars left to pay for food, heat, and housing. In a country as strong and prosperous as ours, we can't allow this kind of tragedy to continue. I think it is absolutely critical that this be addressed on a bipartisan basis.

For many months now, I have teamed up with the Senator from Maine, Ms. SNOWE, on a bipartisan bill. We use marketplace forces to ensure that older people have bargaining power in the private sector to be in a better position to afford their medicine. Right now, these HMOs get big discounts; they have lots of clout in the marketplace—HMOs and the private sector plans. If you are an older person who walks into a local pharmacy, you in effect have to subsidize those big buyers. You get shellacked twice. Medicare doesn't cover prescription medicine and, in effect, in the marketplace you subsidize the people with clout.

The Snowe-Wyden legislation uses private sector bargaining power, along the lines of what we have in the Congress with the Federal Employees

Health Benefits system, so that the dollars seniors use for private health insurance are pooled, and they have real negotiating power so they are in a position to get more reasonable prices for their medicine.

Some have said we ought to just put the Government in charge of this, sort of have rate regulation. Well, I think that would be a big mistake. The biggest concern I have about that approach is it would cause a lot of cost shifting. You could have the Government be the big kid on the block and drive the system through the Health Care Financing Administration, but you would put all the costs onto somebody who is 27 or 28 and is working hard trying to get ahead, and their prescription drug bill would have gone up because the Congress didn't address this Medicare issue in the right way.

Fortunately—and I think he deserves enormous credit—Senator DASCHLE has been working to try to reconcile the various approaches. He has talked with me about this issue, almost on a daily basis, in an effort to try to have the Senate come together and enact meaningful relief. He stakes out principles that I think can be supported on both sides of the aisle—principles such as making sure the program is voluntary, that no senior citizen be required to do anything; if they wanted to keep their current coverage, they would be allowed to do that. We want to make sure the action we take on prescription drugs is consistent with long-term Medicare reform. I think the approach I have advocated, in terms of creating more choices and more options in the marketplace, is consistent with responsible Medicare reform.

We have talked about bargaining power in the private sector, the way the responsible private insurance companies have acted. I think that is something that will attract Members on both sides of the aisle. I think Senator DASCHLE is absolutely right in terms of trying to bring the Senate together to find the common ground and pass meaningful legislation.

We will have a chance this week to make the first significant step in the Senate toward passing this legislation. As the Budget Committee meets—and I sit on the Budget Committee, and Senator SNOWE sits on the Budget Committee—we will have a chance to ensure that in this budget, which is not just facts and figures but, really, the hopes and aspirations of the American people—we, in effect, set aside the funds needed to go forward and enact a meaningful prescription drug program for the Nation's older people.

I don't want to see this Congress adjourn without making this important addition to the Medicare program. There is not a single expert in the health field—Democrat or Republican—who doesn't believe that if you designed the Medicare program from scratch today, you would not cover prescription drugs. They all think it is something that is essential to mean-

ingful Medicare reform. I intend to keep coming back to this floor again and again and again throughout this session of the Congress to talk about prescription medicine.

For about 7 years, before I had the honor of being elected to the other body, I was director of the Gray Panthers at home. We believed that prescription drug coverage in Medicare was important then. But, frankly, it is vastly more important now because the drugs of this century essentially aren't just drugs that, as we saw back then, are primarily to help people when they are sick; the new drugs are absolutely key to helping folks to stay well. They help folks to lower blood pressure and cholesterol. It is a way to hold down Medicare costs. Because of the result of folks being able to stay healthy, they don't land in the hospital and incur enormous costs that are engendered by Part A of the Medicare program.

I am going to keep coming to the floor of this body to talk about the need for bipartisan action on prescription drugs, to urge the Senate to follow the counsel of Senator DASCHLE. I know Senator SNOWE and others on the other side of the aisle are interested in finding common ground. I am going to keep urging that we work on this issue and not adjourn this session of Congress until we have provided this relief to the Nation's older people. I come again with a whole sheaf of cases of older people who are writing and asking what we can do to help. They are asking Congress to act this year, not put this off until after the election and use it as a political football again.

I think we owe it to the Nation's older people and their families to address this issue, as Senator DASCHLE suggests, in this Congress; that we come together as Members of the Senate to make this improvement to the Medicare program that is long overdue. I intend to keep coming back to the floor of this body again and again and again reading these direct and very poignant accounts about why this coverage is so important until we get this legislation enacted.

I yield the floor.

RECESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate stands in recess until the hour of 2:15 p.m.

Thereupon, at 12:31 p.m., the Senate recessed until 2:15 p.m.; whereupon, the Senate reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer (Mr. INHOFE).

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

SENIOR CITIZENS' FREEDOM TO WORK ACT OF 2000

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will now

proceed to the consideration of H.R. 5, which the clerk will report.

The assistant legislative clerk read the title as follows:

A bill (H.R. 5) to amend title II of the Social Security Act to eliminate the earnings test for individuals who have attained retirement age.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Delaware.

Mr. ROTH. Mr. President, before proceeding to the opening statements, I yield to Senator GREGG who will speak briefly on his proposed amendment. I yield 10 minutes to the Senator.

Mr. GREGG. Mr. President, I appreciate the courtesy of the Senator from Delaware allowing me to proceed out of order. I very much appreciate that generosity on his part. I also appreciate his courtesy as we develop this piece of legislation and congratulate the Senator for bringing it to the floor.

Repealing the earnings limitation is a very important step to assist people who have reached eligibility age for retirement to have a better lifestyle. It allows them to work harder, work longer, work at their option versus at the Government's option, and keep the proceeds of what they earn versus losing it because of this artificial reduction in their benefits, which is presently the law under the earnings limitation test.

It is a very appropriate piece of legislation. It is one which I fully congratulate the chairman of the Finance Committee for authoring and bringing forward, and it is something which I have strongly supported for many years. In fact, yesterday I spoke at some length relative to a bill that has been introduced by myself and a number of other Members of the Senate, including members of the Finance Committee, Senator KERREY, Senator BREAUX, Senator GRASSLEY, Senator THOMPSON, and Senator ROBB, along with Senator THOMAS. That piece of legislation is a comprehensive attempt to reform Social Security, to make it solvent for the next 100 years. As part of that comprehensive reform, we included the earnings limitation repeal, which is very appropriate legislation.

However, I do think if it were being done in a perfect world it would be done in a comprehensive reform of the entire Social Security system because we well know Social Security is facing disastrous consequences beginning in the year 2008 when the baby boom generation retires, followed closely by the year 2014 when the system actually starts to run a cash deficit and is aggravated to the point of crisis by the period 2020 to 2040 when we actually run up an absolutely massive deficit which will have to be passed on to the younger generation through tax increases or through a cut to the benefits of the older generation, but it would be a deficit in the vicinity of \$7 trillion under the present benefit structure.

We need to address that. We need to address the whole issue of Social Security reform, in my opinion. That is why