

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT FOR
H.R. 1562, THE VETERANS
HEALTH CARE COST RECOVERY
ACT OF 2003

HON. BOB BEAUPREZ

OF COLORADO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Mr. BEAUPREZ. Mr. Speaker, along with Mr. SMITH of New Jersey, Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs; Mr. EVANS of Illinois, the Committee's Ranking Member; Mr. SIMMONS of Connecticut, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Health; and Mr. RODRIGUEZ of Texas, the Health Subcommittee's Ranking Member, I am introducing a bill to improve health care cost recovery programs in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

The Veterans Health Care Cost Recovery Act of 2003 would strengthen VA's rights under law to collect third-party reimbursements from certain third parties for the costs the Department incurs in providing health care to veterans and others covered by a private or public health plan. It would specifically authorize reimbursement for services provided by VA to persons enrolled in and/or receiving treatment from VA health care facilities. The absence of a participating agreement or other contractual agreement would no longer serve as grounds for denying or reducing amounts the Department may collect from third party payers.

With this legislation, the Department of Veterans Affairs would be deemed a "preferred provider" for purposes of collections when a payer might be a managed care or preferred provider organization or other non-traditional payer. This bill would authorize VA to receive full reimbursement for services provided to all persons with insurance, with the exception of service-disabled veterans for health care provided related to their service connected conditions. This bill would require health plans to reimburse VA for legitimate expenses associated with a covered beneficiary. A number of payers and plans that fully cover veterans have either refused to reimburse VA or have legally been unable to do so. This bill would eliminate such barriers to reimbursements to the VA system.

The Veterans Affairs Committee is fully aware that the VA health care system is seriously under-funded and unable to meet the demands being placed on it by our nation's veterans. VA health care is under great stress, as increasing enrollment and rising health care costs have resulted in hundreds of thousands of veterans being forced to wait months, some even more than a year, to see a VA doctor for the first time. VA recently reported that over 200,000 veterans are waiting six months or more to be seen in VA primary care. These proud defenders of our freedom should not be told to wait because we lack the resources, or even more unthinkable—told to go away.

Mr. Speaker, my bill would correct serious deficiencies in VA's ability to recover costs of care provided to patients covered by other health plans. Since 1986, VA has had statutory authority to collect from traditional insurers such as Blue Cross-Blue Shield, Aetna, Mutual of Omaha and many others. These funds are used by VA to supplement appropriated funds to maintain high quality health care.

But currently, VA is unable to collect from the sizeable managed care and preferred provider sector, which accounts now for over two-thirds of all health plans in the United States. This segment of the health care industry also includes the managed care plans within the Federal Employee Health Benefits Plan. My legislation would require the private sector programs to pay VA for care it provides to covered beneficiaries. This would increase the amount of money VA could collect by hundreds of millions of dollars each year—providing funds that are desperately needed to reduce the waiting lists and promote better use of all available health care resources.

Mr. Speaker, this is a sound proposal that would increase available health care dollars for veterans. I urge prompt House action on this important measure.

LEGISLATION TO AID DISPLACED
AVIATION WORKERS

HON. JAMES L. OBERSTAR

OF MINNESOTA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Mr. OBERSTAR. Mr. Speaker, today, I have joined with Congressmen ENGLISH, NEY, HOYER, DUNN, LIPINSKI, HART, MENENDEZ, DEFAZIO and WEINER to introduce H.R. 1553, the Air Transportation Employees Assistance Act. I strongly support this legislation to ensure that workers in the aviation industry are not asked to bear a disproportionate share of the costs of fighting terrorism and the war with Iraq. These are national responsibilities and should be borne by the entire nation. We have already recognized this principle and granted financial relief to airline companies and their stockholders. Now we should grant some relief to the workers of these companies who have lost their jobs as a consequence of terrorism and war.

The airlines were the weapons used by the terrorists of 9/11, and, as a consequence, the airlines have suffered serious financial damages—from the groundings after 9/11, from the lost traffic which has never returned to pre 9/11 levels, from increased insurance costs, and from the loss of substantial revenues because of security limitations on the carriage of freight and mail.

The war with Iraq is also having a significant impact on the airlines, producing increased fuel costs, loss of revenue from the reluctance of passengers to fly, and from the need of our military to use the airlines' aircraft to carry troops and equipment to the war zone.

Shortly after September 11, Congress responded to the aviation industry's financial problems caused by terrorism, by passing a \$15 billion package of direct assistance and loans. Now proposals are going forward to furnish \$3.0 billion more to help the airlines meet the costs of a war with Iraq.

While I have supported these efforts to aid the industry for the problems created by terrorism and war, I, and many of my colleagues, are deeply disappointed that there has not been the same fair treatment of aviation industry employees who have also suffered from terrorism and war.

Even prior to the war with Iraq, the financial state of the airlines and the fate of their employees was deteriorating daily, as more than

150,000 industry employees were laid-off or furloughed. The situation has reached a crisis point and Congressional action is desperately needed to avert a total collapse of several air carriers and the elimination of thousands of jobs. The air carriers are now bleeding millions more each day as bookings plummet in the wake of the war. The airline industry predicts another 70,000 layoffs due to a severe drop in business resulting from the war. Moreover, Boeing, which already cut 30,000 workers due to aircraft order cancellations and deferrals following 9/11, says it will lay off nearly 1,000 more workers.

The issue of aiding aviation employees is not new. When we passed the \$15 billion assistance bill soon after September 11, many of my colleagues and I insisted that if the airline companies were to be afforded relief, so should employees who had lost their jobs. The Republican Leadership told us that there was no time to develop a consensus proposal on employee relief, but on the House Floor, Speaker HASTERT promised prompt consideration of employee relief, including financial assistance, ability to retain health insurance, and training for new careers. Regrettably, the Leadership has not followed through, and the House has never considered assistance for displaced airline employees.

Mr. Speaker, if the airline industry is entitled to special relief because it has suffered disproportionately from terrorism and war, its displaced workers are equally deserving of relief. Our bill will redress the imbalance, and help the industry's employees cope with difficulties arising from events outside their control. Our bill provides industry employees 26 additional weeks of unemployment benefits. Aviation industry employees were the first to be laid off after 9/11, and they were among the first to exhaust their state and federal jobless benefits. The current federal extension of those benefits as enacted earlier this year will soon expire, and it did not give any help to thousands of workers who had exhausted all their benefits. Aviation workers need and deserve our assistance as the war on terrorism causes a further contraction of the industry.

I urge my colleagues to support the Air Transportation Employees Assistance Act. We hope that it can be included in the Supplemental Appropriations Act which will soon be considered by the House.

HONORING THOMAS N. LESCH FOR
40 YEARS OF DEDICATED SERVICE

HON. GERALD D. KLECZKA

OF WISCONSIN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Mr. KLECZKA. Mr. Speaker, today I announce the retirement of a great friend of labor, Tom Lesch. Over the years, the machinists of Wisconsin have had no greater an advocate than Tom. For four decades, he has ably served in one capacity or another as a committed member and leader of Local Lodge 2110 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW).

Mr. Lesch started his union career as Local Lodge President, Recording Secretary, and Shop Committee Chair representing workers at Geuder, Paschke and Frey. In 1976, he became a Business Representative with District

10 of IMAAW, AFL-CIO, and he was named Assistant Director in 1981, rising to Director in 1994.

In addition to Tom's active involvement in Local 2110, he holds the distinction of having been a leader at all levels of the labor movement. Tom has been the stalwart head of the union's state organization for over two decades. He is currently the President of the Wisconsin State Council of Machinists, a position he has held since 1982. Prior to that, he served as Financial Secretary to the Council. Active at the county level as well, he served on the Milwaukee County Labor Council Board for 13 years until leaving in 1994. And even with all he has been doing these days, Tom has also taken up the cause for workers across the nation, maintaining a position on the AFL-CIO Executive Board and Executive Committee.

Tom has served on the boards of many other worthy community and labor organizations over the years, including the Red Cross, the United Way Labor Cabinet, Guide Dogs of America, and the Wisconsin Labor-Management Council, just to name a few. But most recently, he has been the driving force behind a broad labor-management effort to come up with possible solutions to the critical problem of rising healthcare costs in our state. His personal involvement in spearheading this initiative can, in large part, be credited for the productive dialogue and progress they've made.

Mr. Speaker, I ask you to join with me in thanking Tom Lesch for his tenacity and willingness to hold out for the rights and living standards of the people he represented. His leadership was felt by all, and has left its mark on the ongoing struggle for the cause of working men and women. Along with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and the entire Wisconsin labor community, I wish him a long, healthful, and well-deserved retirement.

CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS
ON THE BUDGET

HON. SHEILA JACKSON-LEE

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, April 2, 2003

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to talk about the budget. When the

President took office two years ago the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projected a ten-year budget surplus of \$5.6 trillion. Now CBO projects a \$1.8 billion deficit over the same time period.

As our nation's men and women are on the frontlines of a war in Iraq, the Republican budget cuts funds for the nation's veterans. As we talk about rebuilding and constructing schools in Iraq through the Wartime Appropriations Supplemental, we have not fully funded our own educational priorities here at home. This budget, in particular, hurts African Americans.

The Members of this Congress must not forget about the neediest Americans who will see services simply erased under the Republican's budget. In my district, as in so many others, the unemployment rate is not improving.

Yet the Republican budget proposal provides no extension of unemployment benefits for the one million Americans who have run out of federal benefits. The Republican plan also fails to create new jobs that would allow the currently unemployed to take care of their families.

Republicans are short changing vital priorities. With their budget proposals the President and the Republicans have shown their dedication to cutting taxes for the very wealthy.

The posture of the Republican majority decrees that there should be an end to Federal responsibility for domestic programs and an end to safety net compassion as we know it.

The Republican majority has snatched off their mask of patronizing charity and phony concern. Contempt for the poor is no longer camouflaged. By their current actions the Republicans have thrown a searing spotlight of exposure on their deep-seated belief that the nation, the government is primarily a structure for the protection of the privileges and interests of the rich. For Republicans the tax cuts have suddenly become the mission and purpose of this 2004 budget and this nation.

Our domestic priorities: Medicaid, Medicare, education, and benefits for veterans are underfunded in this budget. We must invest in people capital—our children, our poor, and our ill.

We do not know how much the war will cost, how long our soldiers will be fighting in the region, and how this war will impact our economy. Already, oil prices have risen and the stock market is uncertain in the face of this crisis.

We have been presented with a budget that cuts key domestic priorities and once again includes irresponsible accounting methods. It cuts domestic programs in a Draconian fashion.

We must make a commitment and investment in the education of our nation's children. Programs like Title I, which provides funds to impoverished school districts across the nation, would be cut under this budget.

We passed a landmark education law last year to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—now it is time to fund these programs fully, if we are serious about improving our nation's schools.

This budget cuts important higher education programs like the Pell Grant. The budget provides only \$22.6 billion for programs under the No Child Left Behind Act, which is \$9 billion below the amount authorized for 2004 and \$199 million below the amount needed to maintain programs and services at the 2002 level.

The budget continues the theme of the previous budget by eliminating many education programs, freezing most others at the level in the 2003 continuing resolution and increasing funding for just a few programs such as special education and Title I. Education is critical to our country's growth.

In my 18th Congressional District in Houston, some of the nation's most under-funded schools rely on Title I funds to supplement state and local funding. It is absolutely unconscionable to cut this program.

The Republican budget cuts \$215 billion in Medicare, Medicaid, school lunches and student loans, agriculture, and veterans' programs.

As the nation's unemployment rate remains at critically high levels, millions of Americans lack access to health care, education continues to be woefully underfunded, and veterans' benefits are cut, we must remember our moral obligation to our poor, disabled, children, and veterans. This Republican budget does not.