

Stamp Program now issues benefits completely electronically. Through Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), the program moves into the 21st century, allowing over 20 million food stamp recipients to shop at over 145,000 businesses more efficiently than ever.

The Food Stamp Program now runs completely on an electronic-based system. Using the same technology as most debit card systems, recipients carry a plastic card secured with a Personal Identification Number. Service is improved for clients and accountability for purchases is ensured. In addition, it reduces administrative costs allowing more funds to be channeled into food purchases rather than printing, shipping, counting, endorsing, and destroying coupons.

EBT began as a demonstration project in 1984 in Reading, PA. However, it wasn't until the early 90s that the project expanded into Maryland, Ohio, New Mexico, and my home State of Minnesota. Due to high demand by the States, an EBT Task Force was established in 1993 and published an article in 1994 demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of the program modification. This article proved pivotal, and in 1996 Congress passed the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which mandated that all States implement EBT by October of 2002.

This month marks a tremendous achievement. As of June 15, every State in the Nation has finally implemented EBT. It took the work of thousands of Federal, State, and local staff along with numerous contractors, financial institutions, retailers, and the advocacy community.

Thanks to the new electronic system, the Food Stamp Program error rate is the lowest in the history of the program. It has already helped to eliminate much of the theft, fraud and abuse related to paper coupons. EBT brings the program into the 21st century with new mainstream technology. Now, eligible recipients can readily patronize authorized stores for nutritional purposes.

None of this could have been done without teamwork and the genuine care of so many individual and organizations. Today our Nation's hungry can more efficiently receive the nutrition assistance. I am proud to recognize and congratulate not only the USDA and Food and Nutrition Service, but all of the people, agencies, and businesses as well that have brought the Food Stamp Program into a new era.

Mr. Speaker, I rise tonight to talk about the Federal budget and what has happened over the last several years in terms of Federal spending.

I know that there are others of my colleagues that are here tonight that came in the election of 1994. When we first came here, we were told by the Congressional Budget Office and others that if we did not get serious about balancing this Federal budget that by the time my children got to be my age, my children could be facing a Federal tax rate of over 80 percent just to pay the interest on the national debt.

I am happy to report that during the first 5 years of the Republican-led Congress, we dramatically reduced the rate of growth of spending here in Washington. From 1995 until the year 2000, overall spending here at the Federal level increased at an average rate of

only 3.2 percent. That is at a time when the average family budget was going up about 3.5 percent. So the good news is we literally controlled the Federal budget so it was growing at a slower rate than the average family budget. The net result is we went from roughly \$250 billion deficits to \$250 billion surpluses.

That is the good news. Starting in about the year 2000, and certainly accelerating in 2001, for a whole lot of reasons, and I will talk about those in a minute, Federal spending began to explode. We started to return to some of the old bad habits. I think in some respects it happened in part because we had the surpluses.

It is much easier to say "no" to new spending when you have a deficit. When you have extra money in the bank, everybody comes in and says, now we can finally afford to pay for this program or to fully fund that program. So spending began to increase.

As I mentioned, from 1995 until 2000, Federal spending grew at a rate of about 3.2 percent. Since 2001, as you can see in this chart, things began to accelerate. Assuming that we can live with the budget numbers that we have passed here in the House with our blueprint, Federal spending between 2001 and today will grow at a rate of 6.4 percent: 3.2 percent, 6.4 percent.

I do not want to bore people with statistics; but in simple terms, we have allowed Federal spending to grow at double the rate it grew through much of the 1990s, and it really is time for us to get serious; to get back on a plan not only to balance the budget, but ultimately to pay down additional parts of that huge Federal debt.

Back in the Midwest, we know that, generally speaking, there is almost an ethic among farmers that you pay off the mortgage and you leave the kids the farm. Well, unfortunately, we are back to the business of selling the farm and leaving our kids the mortgage.

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One of the answers is to go back to what we did back in the 1990s, and that is something we call PAYGO and spending caps. A lot of people were skeptical in terms of whether they would work. Even Chairman Alan Greenspan was skeptical in terms of whether or not long-term spending caps and PAYGO would work. But I would like to read some quotes from Chairman Greenspan, the first of which was from the House Committee on the Budget testimony, September of 2002. He said, "Restoring fiscal discipline must be a high priority. The progress of the 1990s in reducing budget deficits might have been elusive were it not for the budget rules that worked far better than many skeptics, myself included, had expected."

"Now is not the time to abandon the discipline and the structure that worked so well for so long. The framework enacted in the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990 must be preserved."

Those are pretty strong words for Chairman Greenspan.

He went on to say even more. In fact, in response to a question that I made in the House Committee on the Budget about spending caps and PAYGO, he said, specifically in July of 2003, "I would like to see the restoration of PAYGO and the discretionary caps which essentially will restrain the expansion of the deficit and, indeed, ultimately contain it. It did that back in the early 1990s, and I thought it was quite surprisingly successful in restraining what had been a budget which had gotten out of kilter. I would like to see those restraints reimposed; and by their very nature, they will bring back fiscal balance."

Mr. Speaker, it is time that we bring back fiscal balance. Chairman Greenspan is exactly right. We thought that we could allow spending caps and PAYGO to expire, and it would have no consequence. We were wrong.

We will get a chance later this week to vote on spending caps and PAYGO. I hope all Members on both sides of the aisle will join me in supporting that measure.

BUSH ADMINISTRATION CONTINUES TO SHORT-CHANGE VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. CHOCOLA). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, as a new generation is being created in Iraq and Afghanistan, Republicans are underfunding programs that are vital to our Nation's veterans.

The Bush administration has tried to increase the cost of health care for veterans which would have forced 1 million veterans from the system. Their budget slashed funding for staff needed to process disability claims and cut funding for prosthetic research and long-term care.

House Republicans passed a budget that underfunds veterans health care by \$1 billion, and they rejected efforts by House Democrats to fully fund VA health care.

Their budget cuts do not stop there.

The Bush administration, in order to make room for tax cuts for the wealthiest 5 percent in our Nation, their plan for the 2006 budget includes a \$900 million cut in funding for veterans health care. That would be catastrophic for the VA and for our Nation's veterans.

Last month, Secretary Principi and President Bush announced they had closed three VA hospitals, one in Mississippi, one in Pittsburgh, and one in my district in northeast Ohio in Brecksville. The Ohio facility serves 48,000 veterans and is a national leader in programs that treat substance abuse and mental illness. The Brecksville VA hospital is critical for ensuring the health and well-being of the thousands

of homeless veterans who rely on Brecksville and who now will be forced to find another way and go somewhere else.

For whatever reason, the administration chose the same month in which we honored our war heroes on the anniversary of D-Day and dedicated the World War II Memorial to close those three health care VA facilities.

Ohio is home to more than 1 million veterans. That number obviously is increasing with our commitments abroad. There are 61,000 active Reserve or National Guardsmen and -women from Ohio, 9,000 serving in Iraq and in Afghanistan. When these brave men and women serving our Nation come home to Ohio, they face, as a result of the administration's negligence and policies, they face cuts to health care benefits, cuts to VA hospital closures; and they face, in some cases, loss of their livelihoods.

Not since World War II has the U.S. made such heavy use of part-time soldiers.

Twenty-seven percent of self-employed Reservists said their businesses were irreparably damaged while deployed in Iraq. Other Reservists and Guardsmen and -women have taken pay cuts in order to fight for our Nation in Iraq. When they return home, many of these veterans will have to take out second mortgages to repair their businesses and to get back on their economic feet.

While they struggle to rebuild their source of income and economic support to their communities, they are forced to pay more for prescription drugs, and they are forced to travel further for their health care needs.

How do we look a veteran in the eye and ask a veteran to go to Canada to buy less expensive prescription drugs?

While our brave men and women serve our country, their benefits and their ability to support their families are being threatened by this administration's policies that hurt America's veterans. In only 3½ years, we have seen rising costs for prescription drugs from a \$3 copay per drug per month to a \$7 copay per drug per month, and now the Bush administration wants a \$15 copay per drug per month. Mr. Speaker, 330,000 veterans have unprocessed claims and 100,000 veterans are waiting for appeals decisions. New enrollment fees and increased costs of prescription drugs will cost veterans \$2 billion over the next 5 years. All of this has happened since President Bush took office.

The President opposes the renewal of "imminent danger" pay for families of active duty soldiers in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

The President opposes mandatory funding for veterans health care; and maybe most importantly, the President, in his campaign in 2000, told veterans that "help is on the way." Three years later, this administration continues year after year after year to cut veterans benefits. We must do better than that.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. CHOCOLA) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. CHOCOLA addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

EXCHANGE OF SPECIAL ORDER TIME

Mr. JONES of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to claim the time of the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. CHOCOLA).

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from North Carolina?

There was no objection.

RESTORING FREEDOM OF SPEECH REGARDING MORAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. JONES) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. JONES of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I am back on the floor tonight, because when I think about the sacrifice of our many men and women in uniform from the beginning of America through and including today, I think about the fact that many have fought and died and been injured for freedom. Yet in America today, our churches do not have the freedom to speak about the moral and political issues of the day.

I share that because for the last 4 years, I, along with many others, have been working to try to return that first amendment right that was taken away in 1954. Prior to 1954, any minister, priest, or rabbi or cleric in this great Nation could speak on the policies and the political issues of the day. Many times when they are speaking, it is based on the teachings of their religion; and, therefore, they are very important to maintaining the Judeo-Christian values that have made America the great Nation that it is.

I want to share with my colleagues that 2 or 3 weeks ago, the Bishop of Colorado Springs, Bishop Sheridan, issued what is called a pastoral letter to every member of his diocese in that region of Colorado. In his letter, let me just share this with my colleagues, Mr. Speaker. It goes on to assert, the letter says, "Dear friends in Christ: I exhort you with all my heart to take courage and claim the gospel of life to those who will stand for elected office this fall. It is by your prayers and by your vote that politicians who are unconditionally pro-life and pro-family will serve our country. Conversely, if our voices remain silent, or if, God forbid, we vote contrary to our informed conscience, we will see our country led down a short path to ruin."

Now, let me make this clear. This is the teachings of the Catholic Church. I happen to be a Catholic, and I know for

a fact that our church for years and centuries has stood for protecting the unborn and their life.

What really upsets me, Mr. Speaker, is the fact that Bishop Sheridan wrote a pastoral letter reminding the parishioners of the teachings of the church and what the church stands for. Because of that pastoral letter, a letter was written to the Internal Revenue Service by Barry Lynn to complain that the bishop violated the Johnson amendment, which I am trying and would love to have more support to change so that our ministers can speak as they did in 1953 without any restriction. He filed a complaint with the Internal Revenue Service and said that he violated the Johnson amendment.

Now, let me make it clear. He did not violate the Johnson amendment. What he did was, in the rulemaking authority of the Internal Revenue Service, there is a section, not because of the Congress, not because of the Johnson amendment, but they took it upon themselves in the early 1990s to expand the Johnson amendment; and any time a minister might say pro-life or pro-choice, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, then the IRS is saying that they have violated the Johnson amendment.

I think it is so sad. There is a young man who is here tonight that I cannot mention who has returned from Iraq. He lost a limb for this great Nation. Yet last night I was with the Prime Minister of the Ukraine, and I asked him the question, I said, in the Ukraine, can your ministers stand up and talk about the people running for office in your country? He said, yes, sir. They can say anything that they want to say. And I said, Mr. Prime Minister, they could here in this great Nation until 1954. They could say anything and everything that they thought should be shared with their congregation.

I want to share, if I might, as I begin to close, Mr. Speaker, that Rabbi Daniel Lapin, who is one of the finest men in this great Nation, is a strong supporter of this legislation. I cannot find right now the statement that he sent to me, but Rabbi Lapin understands that America's strength is the fact that we continue to support Judeo-Christian principles.

I would like to say that I believe that every minister in this country, every priest, every rabbi, every cleric that would like to speak on the issues of the day should be allowed to do so without the Federal Government intervening in their sermon or their dialectic or whatever it might be, that they should be set free to talk about these issues.

So, Mr. Speaker, I close this way because of our men and women in uniform. America's greatness is dependent on the fact that we remain a country of morality, that we remain a country that remembers the Judeo-Christian foundation of America. So I ask God to please bless our men and women in uniform, to please bless their families, and