

Ms. AYOTTE. I thank my colleague from Delaware.

As I look at the new Congress coming in, I view our bill—the Manufacturing Skills Act—as an opportunity where we can all work together to help workers and employers across the country meet the challenges of ensuring that manufacturing continues to thrive and grow in this country. These are good-paying jobs where the workers—who are excellent and want the opportunity but just need the skills—need the type of technology training and understanding of process, such as the lean process, and how we can improve our manufacturing.

The bill Senator COONS and I worked on together will allow the local decisionmakers to put together the best training that will help create good-paying jobs, not only in Delaware, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin but across this country.

I hope we can take up this bill very early on in the next session and get behind it.

In New Hampshire, there are 66,000 jobs that are directly connected and related to manufacturing. As I have traveled to visit manufacturing employers throughout our State, I have been hearing about the same issues that my colleague from Delaware has heard; that is, that they are challenged in actually finding the right workforce for excellent-paying jobs and opportunities, but they need partnerships and help to get that trained workforce in place.

New Hampshire, similar to Delaware, has had some strong partnerships among the private sector and community colleges in my State, and we need to do more of that in the future. I believe our bill will allow those local education institutions to partner with private employers and State and local officials so the training is valuable and will ensure that everyone has a stake in the right workforce going forward.

I wish to thank some of the businesses I have had the privilege of visiting in our State. So many businesses have told me—whether it is Burndy in Littleton or Velcro in Manchester or Codet in Colebrook or Hypertherm in the Upper Valley—that our private sector is focusing on this issue, and our Manufacturing Skills Act can help companies move forward and ensure that our workers have the right skills so we can grow jobs in this country.

I thank Senator COONS for his leadership on this issue and the work he has done every single day in this body to ensure that the people of Delaware have good-paying jobs and the right workforce training. This is a goal I share with the Senator from Delaware.

I wish to also thank him for his leadership on other issues, including the protection of this Nation and many other issues he has become an expert on in this body.

I hope we can all get behind bipartisan solutions, such as that offered by my colleague from Delaware, and I

hope many of our colleagues will think about joining us on this Manufacturing Skills Act. As we go into the new Congress, I hope this will be a priority for our leadership so we can bring this bill to the floor for a vote right away.

I thank the Presiding Officer, and I thank my colleague from Delaware for his leadership and work on this important issue. I look forward to continuing to work on this until we get it passed.

Mr. COONS. I yield the floor.

Mr. TESTER. Are we in a quorum call?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. We are not.

POSTAL SERVICE

Mr. TESTER. I wish to address the challenges we have at the Postal Service today.

There is an old saying that when you are in a hole, stop digging. Don't make things worse. Don't shoot yourself in the foot. It is actually quite simple advice that all of us need to follow.

Here in Congress we could apply it to a lot of different issues. Our budget and the immigration system come to mind. But that hole grows faster when two parties are digging. When you have two shovels, the walls become higher, the climb out becomes more difficult, and that is what is happening right now with the Postal Service.

On one side we have the Postmaster General and Postal Service leadership actively cutting services and mail delivery standards. They think they can cut their way to fiscal solvency, and quite frankly in this case they are wrong. The answer is not more cuts. In fact, if it wasn't for the prefunding requirement for retiree health benefits, the Postal Service would have made nearly \$1 billion in 2012.

Clearly, the Postal Service doesn't need to keep shutting down facilities and slowing down delivery. What the Postal Service does need is responsible reform legislation, and that is why I am here this afternoon.

All the Postal Service is doing with its shortsighted cuts is weakening trust in the Postal Service. Essentially, Postal Service leadership is cutting the legs out from underneath themselves. They are digging the hole deeper.

But Congress is in the hole with the Postmaster General. There are a lot of folks in Congress who would love to see the Postal Service go out of business, but the Postal Service, whether in urban America or rural America, delivers the goods America needs. It delivers medicine, newspapers, equipment, letters, and even election ballots. It is a critical part of our daily lives. But the Postal Service is preparing to end overnight delivery in all but a few American cities and close 82 mail processing facilities starting in January. These facilities route mail from New York to California, from Seattle to Sarasota, from a grandmother to her grandson.

When these facilities close or consolidate, it costs thousands of jobs, and more importantly it means mail goes to the remaining facilities and it means packages have to travel longer to get to where they are going. When that happens, more folks will not get the mail when they need it. It means more delayed credit card payments. It means more needed medicine sitting in a truck for another day. Come next election it might even mean lost ballots.

The Postal Service has already stopped overnight delivery in large parts of rural America. Even 2-day delivery is now hard to come by. If the Postal Service implements its new plan in January, that will be the case almost nationwide.

Congress has the power to stop these closures, and it would make sense to keep these facilities open while we work to reform the Postal Service in a way that treats its employees and its customers and the general public fairly. But in the Senate, and in the House, too many folks have their shovels out. So far the proposals coming out of this Congress fall far short of what is needed to put the Postal Service on sound financial footing.

We are here today to urge the House of Representatives and this body, the Senate, to include a provision in the government funding bill that will keep the processing facilities open. There is no point in closing mail processing facilities while Congress works on a comprehensive postal reform bill. I know we have trouble passing responsible legislation around here, I get that, but there is painstaking—and I do mean painstaking—work going on around here to pass a Postal Service reform bill.

The bill that passed the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee earlier this year needs work—serious work. It does not preserve strong rural mail standards. It is opposed by folks in rural America, by postal unions, and by mailers. Under the bill—except in the big cities—we can kiss 1-day delivery goodbye. With the cuts it proposes, the bill fundamentally prevents the Postal Service from performing its constitutional duty of keeping this Nation stitched together.

But along with other members of the committee, and some like-minded folks in the House, we are trying to find a way forward. We are trying to reform the Postal Service without putting the burden on rural America. A proposal I am working on will give the Postal Service the flexibility to raise new revenue while reducing the costly mandate to prefund retirement benefits. That requirement is swamping the agency's books.

Other Members of Congress are pushing to allow the Postal Service to continue its crusade against rural America. My effort, on the other hand, is a balanced solution that preserves strong rural mail standards while putting the Postal Service on the path to fiscal solvency.

We have been here long enough to know that there is no magic bullet. Congress is full of too many interests and too many constituencies, but the least we can do is to stop making things worse. There is no reason to keep digging the hole. We have evidence behind our case.

The GAO, in its analysis of past closures of the processing facilities, said the Postal Service is already unable to meet its reduced service standards—already unable to meet the standards that have already been reduced.

The Congressional Budget Office—looking at potential savings from facility closures—didn't take into account the loss of mail volume resulting from reducing the quality of service.

There are simply way, way, way too many unanswered questions about how these closures would affect mail service, and that is why a bipartisan majority of Senators, including myself, have called to stave off the closures of these processing facilities. Over 160 House Members have done the same.

A moratorium on mail processing facilities is the way to go. It will stop the bleeding and stop the digging that Congress and the Postal Service are doing right now. It will send a signal that the American people's representatives will not sit by as opponents work to privatize the Postal Service.

This is the busiest season of the year for the Postal Service. Folks send presents and cards through the mail. We hear from old friends and families whom we have not heard from in a long time. It is a busy and important time but no more critical than any other time of the Postal Service's year. Mail processing facilities don't just get used for mailing Christmas cards and presents, nor do the post offices. Reduced post office hours will affect Americans' lives as well.

Westby, MT, is in the far northeastern corner of Montana. It is along the border with North Dakota. It is a beautiful little town. The Westby Post Office is where Ken Keldsen, a veteran in his ninth decade, goes to pick up his prescription medicine. The mail takes a little longer to get to Westby these days because the processing plant was closed last year, and the post office is open for a few less hours each day.

Ken wrote my office and told me the reduced hours make it harder for him—this veteran in northeastern Montana in his nineties—to get his medication.

Here is what it comes down to: We need a reform bill that keeps the Postal Service financially viable while maintaining strong mail service standards for people such as Ken. It is not an easy proposition. We have been working on it for quite a while now. But the calls and need for reform are stronger than ever. There is no reason to keep digging. There is still time for Congress to stop the mail processing facility closures scheduled to start in January. That will give us more time to pass good legislation that sets the Postal Service straight.

I urge my colleagues in this body to do just that because this country needs a viable Postal Service, one that the American people can trust.

It is more than just holiday cards and packages. It is about making sure payments arrive on time. It is about making sure lease agreements get to the proper people, but it is not just about these things. It is also about having faith as a nation that we as a body—as a Senate, as a House, as a Congress—can make responsible decisions to preserve what is important in this country.

There has been a lot of talk about working together and getting things done since the election. I wish it could have happened before the election, but we are where we are. We have a great opportunity to work together to keep the Postal Service solvent and keep those standards high for not only urban America but for rural America also. We need to do that today. This is an important effort.

With that, I would love to hear from the Senator from Vermont, Mr. SANDERS.

Mr. SANDERS. Madam President, let me begin by thanking Senator TESTER not only for being on the floor today but for working on the issue of making sure that in 50 States in this country—in rural America and in urban America—we continue to have a Postal Service of which the American people are proud. I wish to acknowledge Senator BALDWIN, who is presiding, for her strong work on this issue, as well.

I represent one of the most rural States in America. I don't know if it is more rural than Montana, but it is very rural. Most of our people live in very small towns. The local post office is not just the place to pick up mail or to mail letters. It is a symbol of what the town is about. It is an institution that identifies the town. It is where people come together. It is a very important part of rural America.

We have been battling on this issue now for a number of years. As Senator TESTER will remember, it wasn't so many years ago when the Postmaster General came up with a proposal that would have led to the shutting down of 15,000 mostly rural post offices all over America. To my mind, that was a disastrous proposal. Many of us stood up and fought back and worked something out. While the compromise was not all that I wanted, at least it prevented the shutdown of 15,000 post offices all over this country.

Right now—and I think Senator TESTER made this point—the Postal Service has announced that beginning next month, it will be shutting down up to 82 mail processing plants. Those are the plants that move the mail along into areas all over the country. They also want to abolish overnight delivery standards and first-class mail. In the process, at a time when we need to create decent-paying jobs, this proposal would eliminate up to 15,000 good-paying, middle-class jobs at the Postal Service.

The reason Senator TESTER and I and hopefully others have come to the floor today is to send a very loud and clear message to the Postmaster General, to our colleagues here in the Senate, to our colleagues in the House, and to the President of the United States. The message is that at a time when the middle class is disappearing and the number of Americans living in poverty is almost at an alltime high, do not destroy decent-paying jobs at the Postal Service. At a time when the Postal Service is competing with the instantaneous communication of emails and of high speed Internet, do not slow down mail delivery service, but speed it up. Do not dismantle the Postal Service by shutting down up to a quarter of the mail processing plants that are left in this country.

On August 14, I was delighted to work with Senator TESTER and others on a letter to the Appropriations Committee, urging them to include language in the omnibus appropriations bill or the continuing resolution to prevent the Postal Service from making these devastating cuts and protecting these 15,000 jobs and these 82 processing plants. I am happy to say that a majority of the Members of the Senate—51 of them, including Majority Leader REID, Senator DURBIN, Senator SCHUMER, and six Republicans—Senator HATCH, Senator INHOFE, Senator HOEVEN, Senator BLUNT, Senator THUNE, and Senator COLLINS—all signed on to this letter. They understand—many of them coming from rural areas—that this is not a Republican issue or a Democratic issue; this is an issue to protect mail delivery all over this country and especially in rural areas.

Shortly after we sent our letter, 160 Members of the House signed on to a similar letter calling for a 1-year moratorium to stop these mail processing plants from closing, and 23 Republicans signed that letter as well. So we are seeing bipartisan support in the House and in the Senate saying loudly and clearly: Do not shut down 82 processing plants; do not slow down mail delivery service; do not eliminate 15,000 decent-paying jobs.

I know Senator MIKULSKI, the chair of the Appropriations Committee, wants to see this happen, but to make it happen, she needs Republican support. I very much urge my Republican colleagues to stand up for rural America, stand up for 15,000 jobs. Let's protect these 82 processing plants.

As Senator TESTER has made clear, the beauty of the Postal Service is that it provides universal service 6 days a week to every corner of America—no matter how small or how remote. It supports millions of jobs in virtually every other sector of our economy. It provides decent-paying union jobs to some 500,000 Americans, and, in fact—and I say this as the chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs—it is the largest single employer of veterans. Whether one is a low-income elderly woman living at the end

of a dirt road in Pennsylvania or Vermont or a wealthy CEO on Wall Street, people get their mail 6 days a week.

The American people, by the way, pay for this service at a cost far, far less than anywhere else in the industrialized world. But if Congress doesn't stop the Postmaster General from making these devastating cuts, it will drive more Americans away from the Postal Service and will lead to what we call a death spiral. The quality of service deteriorates, fewer people use the Postal Service, less revenue comes in, and the process continues to deteriorate.

Despite what some in this country have been hearing in the media, and despite what some in the Postal Service have been saying, the Postal Service is not going broke. We hear that every three months—people telling us the Postal Service is going broke. That is not true. The major reason the Postal Service is in bad financial shape today is because of a mandate signed into law by President George W. Bush in December 2006, during a lameduck session of Congress, that forces the Postal Service to prefund 75 years of future retiree health benefits over a 10-year period. This burden is unprecedented in any other government agency or any private sector company in the United States of America. It is a burden that every single year costs the Postal Service \$5.5 billion, and that one provision—that one provision—is responsible for all of the financial losses posted by the Postal Service since October 2012—just that one provision.

Over the past 2 years, the Postal Service has made an operating profit of nearly \$1 billion. Let me repeat that. Over the past 2 years, the Postal Service has made an operating profit of nearly \$1 billion, excluding this prefunding mandate that must be gotten rid of. Further, before this prefunding mandate was signed into law, the Postal Service was also profitable. In fact, from 2003 to 2006, the Postal Service made a combined profit of more than \$9 billion. So when we hear that the Postal Service is in financial difficulty, the key reason—the overwhelming reason—is this onerous, unprecedented burden of coming up with \$5.5 billion every year to pay for future health retirees.

Given the improved financial condition of the Postal Service, it makes no sense to me to close down mail plants, destroy jobs, and slow mail delivery. Our job right now is to make the Postal Service an agency that functions efficiently in the 21st century. We have to give them the tools to effectively compete. But the way we do that is not by cutting, cutting, and cutting. That is a path toward disaster.

So I hope the Members of the Senate and the Members of the House of Representatives will stand together and prevent these 82 processing plants from shutting down and come up with some legislation which expands the capa-

bility of the Postal Service to compete and protects the American people who want high quality Postal Service.

With that, I yield the floor to the Senator from Wisconsin, Ms. BALDWIN. The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. TESTER). The Senator from Wisconsin.

Ms. BALDWIN. Mr. President, I am delighted to join the senior Senator from Montana and the Senator from Vermont on this important topic.

The issue of postal processing facility closures greatly impacts my State of Wisconsin, and it greatly impact States across the country, I must say.

Since 2012 the Postal Service has closed or consolidated 141 processing facilities throughout the United States. In June the Postmaster General announced plans to consolidate up to 82 mail processing facilities, and eliminate 15,000 jobs in 2015. Four of these facilities are in the State of Wisconsin: Eau Claire, La Crosse, Madison, and Rothschild in the Wausau region of the State of Wisconsin.

When postal processing facilities close, that impacts service standards, which really boils down to the time it takes for a piece of mail to get from point A to point B. At this moment, I can't tell my constituents, my Wisconsinites, how long these delays will be because the Postal Service has yet to study this impact. These closures are set to begin within a month. So for small businesses who rely on the Postal Service to get their goods to market and for seniors such as the veteran who was described earlier by the senior Senator from Montana who gets his medicine through the mail, there is really no way for them to know at this moment how these closures are going to affect them, and sometimes what is in the mail is a lifeline for them.

In fact, the inspector general found the Postal Service failed to follow its own rules, which require the Postal Service to study the impacts these consolidations will have on their service standards—again, the time it takes for a piece of mail to get from point A to point B. They are also supposed to inform the public of these impacts and, additionally, to allow affected communities to provide input before a final decision is made. However, this simply didn't happen. That is why I was proud to join Senator McCASKILL in a bipartisan letter to the Postmaster General requesting that the Postal Service delay these proposed closures and consolidations until they have a fair, complete, and transparent process in place.

The Postal Service exists to serve all Americans, and my constituents and the consumers who fund the Postal Service deserve to have their voices heard in this process. They are stakeholders in this process. While there are certainly process and transparency problems with these closures, another issue that concerns me is the fact that these shortsighted cuts are harming the very thing that makes the Postal Service unique. The major strength of the U.S. Postal Service is its signifi-

cant network which can reach every community in America. Whether one is in an urban city such as Milwaukee, WI, or in a rural town such as Prentice, the Postal Service reaches these Wisconsin communities. But by continually chipping away at the substantial service network, the Postal Service is developing into an urban package delivery system at the expense of rural Americans and rural Wisconsinites.

Proponents of this idea of closures and consolidations say it is counterproductive to delay these closures because they should happen as soon as possible. They say Congress has failed to act and that the Postal Service has been left with no alternative but to close more processing facilities.

I agree on one point; that is, that Congress has, indeed, failed to act. We must. Congress has failed to act. I do not know how many have sort of heard this in relation to bills to try to fix problems. Have you ever seen someone present an idea and they say, look, everybody who is a stakeholder hates this so it must be a good bill?

Well, I kind of disagree with that proposition, that it has to be that way. I can tell you there is another way forward. That path involves working with, not against, Postal Service employees and customers. It relieves the Postal Service of congressionally mandated overpayments. It maintains service standards for all communities. It provides Postal Service customers with certainty on postal rates.

I am going to continue to fight on this issue. I am delighted and proud to be joining my colleagues here today on the floor to raise this immediate issue of postal process facility closures, this pending issue, but also to renew our commitment to the longer range, broader postal reform that gives our constituents, whether rural, suburban, or urban, the confidence and service they deserve.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. HIRONO). Without objection, it is so ordered.

“ORION” SPACECRAFT

Mr. NELSON. Mr. President, I wish to share with the Senate the fact that we are about to do the first flight test of the new NASA human spacecraft, called *Orion*.

As a matter of fact, it was attempted earlier this morning. There was a launch window between 7:05 and 9:44 eastern time. In fact, a combination of some weather concerns plus some questions of valves opening on some of the fuel lines in the rocket and trying to rework those valves ultimately led to the decision to scrub the mission today.