

firearm in the first place. We need to make sure those systems work every time.

What Sutherland Springs has exposed is that the Federal Government is failing to comply with reporting requirements. This is unacceptable, and it must change.

Yesterday, Gen. David Goldfein, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, came by my office, and I am grateful to him for that. I told him that it must have been one of his worst days when he found out that the Air Force had failed to notify the Federal authorities of the information that would have disqualified this individual from buying a firearm. He appropriately expressed grave concern over the fact that the gunman's convictions were not sent to the NICS database. He pledged to get to the root of the problem, and I believe him.

It is worth noting that we have tried to address similar problems before, and we can do it again. In 2015, I introduced a bill called the Mental Health and Safe Communities Act, which addressed a related issue, and that was the failure of State and local authorities to upload valuable mental health records into this same NICS database.

I think there is a bipartisan willingness in this Chamber to work on problems inherent in the sharing of these records, and I hope my colleagues will join with me in supporting this new legislation once it is introduced. We are shooting for the first part of next week. We owe it to the men and women and the families of Sutherland Springs to make sure that our laws are enforced and that individuals like this shooter with a history of violence do not gain illegal access to firearms.

TAX REFORM

Mr. President, I want to address the work that the House Ways and Means Committee is currently engaged in and what we will be doing in the U.S. Senate to reform our overly complex, burdensome, and self-destructive tax system. I think there is a lot of momentum gathering each day.

Yesterday, Senator MCCONNELL, the majority leader, commented on our once-in-a-generation opportunity to overhaul our Tax Code. To accomplish this goal, both the House and the Senate are moving forward on different proposals.

This week, the House Ways and Means Committee completed its first 2 days of discussing the House bill unveiled last week called the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. At the same time, the Senate Finance Committee is continuing its work too. Chairman HATCH will continue to guide the committee through an open process, and members will have the chance to engage in productive discussions and debate. That will start once the chairman's mark or the base bill is released, hopefully by later this week. Perhaps as early as next week, we will begin the process in the Senate Finance Committee of marking up that bill, with Senators offering amendments and voting on it.

Once both Houses of Congress have completed their work, my hope is that we can get this bill on the President's desk by Christmas.

Some of our colleagues across the aisle, instead of contributing to the solution to this overly complex and self-destructive Tax Code, have been lobbing insults from their partisan bunkers, even though many of them have endorsed many aspects of the plans in years past. For example, early on, interestingly, there was criticism of our desire to make our global tax system more competitive so that more businesses will move their manufacturing facilities back to the United States and so that we can stamp more of their products "Made in America," creating more jobs here. It is ironic because they were criticizing us for giving tax relief to businesses when people like President Barack Obama, back in 2011, had endorsed the very same concept, not to mention the ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, Senator WYDEN, and Senator SCHUMER. All of them have endorsed similar proposals, yet they were quick to criticize us for doing exactly the same things that they themselves had previously endorsed. Unfortunately, our Democratic friends are quick to criticize our plans not just because they disagree with them on the merits but simply because it is our proposal and they are not interested in working with us across party lines.

This is really a shame and a lost opportunity. People are crying out for Democrats and Republicans to work together in the best interests of the country. Unfortunately, our Democratic friends are simply ignoring the urgency of the situation—the stagnation of American workers' wages and couples finding it harder to start families or, once they do, pay for a college education. As my friend the junior Senator from Florida, Senator RUBIO, wrote a few days ago in the *New York Times*, it is more than time to reconcile "our social contract to the realities that working families face."

The Tax Code has not been comprehensively overhauled since 1986. Now that some of us are trying to, the swamp is fighting back. It is important that we win this fight against the swamp—the special interest groups that try to come in and protect various special-interest tax provisions that make our code unnecessarily complicated, forcing us to look for additional revenue from other sources because they want to protect theirs at the expense of the rest of the country.

But the do-nothing approach of the recent past will not work. We can't let them stop us because hard-working families are waiting. They are waiting on us to quit stuffing our own pockets and start putting money back into theirs.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that notwithstanding rule XXII, at 3:45 p.m. today there be 30 minutes of postcloture time remaining on the Robb nomination, equally divided between the leaders or their designees; that following the use or yielding back of that time, the Senate vote on the confirmation of the Robb nomination; and that if confirmed, the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table and the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; finally, that there be 2 minutes of debate equally divided prior to the cloture vote on the Wehrum nomination.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Hawaii.

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, Donald Trump has consistently made promises to the American people that he refuses to keep. He says one thing and does the exact opposite. His empty promises have already hurt millions of people across the country, from our seniors who depend on Medicare and Medicaid, to the LGBTQ community he promised to protect and Dreamers living in fear of deportation.

Now, with the nomination of Peter Robb to serve as the General Counsel at the National Labor Relations Board, or NLRB, Donald Trump has broken yet another promise—this time, to fight for and protect American workers. As an independent agency, the NLRB has an important mission to enforce our Nation's labor laws, protect American workers, and safeguard their right to organize collectively.

The NLRB's mission is not to ignore our Nation's labor laws, to go after American workers, or to weaken their right to organize. Yet Peter Robb's career has been dedicated to doing all the things that NLRB is not about.

Joining the anti-union, anti-worker forces, President Trump has consistently nominated people to the NLRB who are best positioned to destroy and undermine the core functions of the agency itself. Earlier this year, President Trump forced through two management-side lawyers to create an anti-worker majority on the NLRB.

Today the Senate is debating the nomination of someone who has spent his entire legal career fighting to screw over the very workers the NLRB is supposed to protect. If confirmed as General Counsel, Mr. Robb will be responsible for supervising nearly 1,500 agents investigating and prosecuting unfair labor practice cases and overseeing elections where workers decide whether or not to unionize. This is a position

of great consequence for millions of workers across our country, and they deserve someone much better than Peter Robb.

Mr. Robb has spent his career defending management and employers from workers fighting to form a union, unionized workers on strike, and workers who brought forward discrimination and disability claims. You don't have to take my word for it. Mr. Robb's biography on his own law firm's website tells the story clearly:

[His] extensive experience includes advising on mergers/acquisitions, plant closings, labor contract negotiations (both large and small), managing lockouts and strikes, securing labor injunctions, discrimination issues and disability claims.

His litigation includes defending employers from unfair labor practice charges, age and sex discrimination charges, class action age claims, and wage/hour claims as well as bringing suits against labor organizations. With such vast experience and a no-nonsense approach, Peter's clients look to him for sharp advice, rigorous representation and powerful litigation.

That is a description on his own law firm's website.

Mr. Robb cut his teeth busting unions and retaliating against workers as lead counsel at the NLRB in the early 1980s when President Reagan decertified the air traffic controllers union, fired 11,000 air traffic controllers, and barred them from Federal service. More recently, he represented Dominion Energy's successful attempt to defeat a union organizing campaign at a power station in Connecticut.

Management and corporations have a right to hire lawyers like Mr. Robb who will vigorously represent their interests, but Mr. Robb is certainly not the right person to lead an agency whose mission is to protect workers' rights, not to go after those rights tooth and nail. Mr. Robb's record clearly demonstrates that he will side with powerful corporations and special interests over workers who lack the resources to defend themselves.

Unions built the middle class in Hawaii and across our country. Instead of confirming another management protector at the NLRB, we should be working together to protect workers and make it fairer for them to form and to join a union, which is their right.

I urge my colleagues to join me in opposing this nominee.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Ms. CANTWELL. Mr. President, I rise to talk about the affordable housing crisis that is gripping our Nation. When I say "crisis," I mean I know that people here are on the precipice of talking about what we are going to do in response to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma and Maria, and I would like to say, the housing crisis that will exist in the aftermath of those hurricanes is real, but there are also even greater implications from the housing crisis

that exist today without those hurricanes, and it is only going to continue to grow and get worse until we deal with it.

This past February, more than 2,000 families packed into the New Holly Gathering Hall in South Seattle. Each family was hoping to hear its name called. It wasn't a contest. It wasn't a game. It wasn't the lottery. It was a lottery to see if families could get affordable homes.

The Mercy Othello Plaza would soon open 108 affordable housing units. That is hardly a match for the more than 2,000 families who were interested in trying to get into one of those affordable units. Based on the numbers alone, their chance of getting an affordable home was lower than an applicant's chance of getting into Harvard.

Ninety-five percent of the families attending that night left disappointed, continuing to search for affordable housing. This is just one story of how the affordable housing crisis is gripping our Nation. I am sure every one of my colleagues in the Senate could talk about a story they have heard in their State because this crisis impacts every State. It impacts every community, both urban and rural alike.

As I have traveled across the State of Washington, I have seen some of the most hard-hit areas for affordable housing. I even have veterans returning home not being able to find affordable housing. I have seen an aging population living longer and also not having the resources when looking for affordable housing. I have seen young workers who want to be close to where their employment is and yet having to drive so far away because that is the only place they could find affordable housing. We have seen homelessness in numbers that harken back to previous days when we had a true recession.

The most damning part of the housing crisis is, we know how to solve it. We just need the courage to act.

For decades, the housing growth was the most stimulative part of our economy. Throughout the 1980s, housing was 18 percent of GDP. Today that number has dropped to just 15 percent. When people discuss tax reform and GDP growth, housing is still one of the ways that economists will tell us that we can grow GDP.

In the sixties, seventies, and eighties, if somebody asked, How do we stimulate our economy, usually a cheer would go up for housing, but since the economic downturn, we haven't heard that cheer. In fact, it is almost as if we have forgotten how stimulative housing is to our economy.

The total number of houses built between 2007 and 2016 total just 8.9 million units, which is far below the 15 million-plus average for every 10-year period through the seventies and nineties. We are off the pace of what it takes to provide affordable housing. As a result, the vacancy rates and inventories of homes for sale have also fallen. The national vacancy rate—which

is the number of homes for sale—has receded to the 2000 level, erasing all the runup we saw in the housing boom. Moreover, homeownership in the United States is now at its lowest rate since the 1960s.

Twenty million American families, including 11 million renters, are now spending more than half of their income on housing. That means less money for other essentials like food and healthcare and gas.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition tells us that 7.4 million more available affordable homes are needed because we have seen an increase of 60 percent since the year 2000 in the need for affordable housing.

So the United States has become a rent-burdened economy. If we don't address this crisis, the problem is only going to get worse. In fact, one study found that if we don't address this crisis, we are going to see another 25-percent increase in the number of Americans spending more than half of their income in rent.

I know my colleagues on the other side of the aisle in the House of Representatives are talking about what they want to do in tax reform. I would say they should look at this data as it relates to where we are with homeownership and housing and things that would eliminate the private activity bonds—one of the key drivers of affordable housing production. It would be a big mistake if they got rid of that. Obviously, there are units of affordable housing that are being planned and built right now. In fact, one estimate is that over 1,000,000 units wouldn't be completed just because of the House provision.

Obviously, limiting the mortgage interest deduction for new homeowners could potentially increase taxes on homeowners and thereby limit the number of people who could afford a home. Almost one-third of taxpayers nationally claim the property tax deductions. They could also see an impact to that. I hope our House colleagues and our Senate colleagues will see, in light of the housing crisis, what a terrible idea those things are.

How did we get to this crisis as it exists now? Part of the issue was demand. For starters, the 2007 housing crash pushed millions of families into the rental market and reduced wages on working families. The demand for rental housing skyrocketed.

Over 7 million Americans lost their homes to foreclosure, and they demanded more affordable places to live. Today the homeownership rate is the lowest in our Nation since the 1960s. The last 10 years have seen the largest gain of renters on record. The demand for rental housing shows no sign of slowing down.

Millennials, like many of the young people we see who want to be close to jobs in our burgeoning economy, are forced to rent instead of own. They are seeing that challenged, in big numbers, by the fact that there is not enough supply.