

In the Midwest, as you well know, and all over this country, we have a major crisis in terms of pensions. So many of our older workers are scared to death about retiring because they have very little or nothing in the bank as they end their work careers. If Congress does not act soon, the earned pension benefits of more than 1.5 million workers and retirees in multiemployer pension plans could be cut by up to 60 percent. People who have worked their entire lives, people who have put money into a pension program, people who have given up wage increases in order to gain decent pensions now stand the possibility of seeing their pensions cut by up to 60 percent. How can we do that? How do you tell someone who has worked their entire life, who is looking forward to a decent retirement, that we are going to cut their pension by up to 60 percent? We cannot do that. When a worker is promised a pension benefit after a lifetime of hard work, that promise must be kept. Congress needs to act before the end of the year to make sure that no one in America in a multiemployer pension plan will see their pension cut. Yes, I also think that is more important than tax breaks for billionaires.

We need to make a downpayment on universal childcare. In my State of Vermont and all over this country, it is increasingly difficult for working families to find high-quality, affordable childcare. We must, in my view, double the funding for the Childcare and Development Block Grant to provide childcare assistance for 226,000 more children and move toward universal childcare for every kid in America. What the social sciences tell us is that there is no better investment than early childhood education. Every dollar we invest there is paid back many times over by kids doing better at school and by kids getting out, getting jobs, and becoming taxpayers.

There is another crisis in this country that has to be dealt with. Ten years ago, Congress passed the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program to support Americans who enter public service careers—teachers, nurses, firefighters, police officers, social workers, and military personnel. One of the absurdities that exists in America today is that we have tens of millions of Americans who are paying outrageous interest rates on their student debt. People who have done the right thing by trying to get the best education they could are now being punished because they went to college, went to graduate school, and are having to pay a significant part of their income back to the government in terms of their student debt. Congress must address this issue, and there is legislation to make sure that, at the very least, if you are prepared to go into public service work—if you want to be a teacher, a nurse, a firefighter, a police officer, a social worker, or want to go into the military—we will forgive your debt. That is an issue that should be dealt with before the end of the year.

We have a crisis in terms of our rural infrastructure, and I come from a rural State. In the year 2017, soon to be 2018, how does it happen that in rural communities all over America there are inadequate broadband capabilities? How do you start a small business in a small town if you don't have good-quality broadband? How do the kids do well in school if they can't gain access to the internet? This is the United States of America, and we should not be trailing countries all over the world that have better broadband access at lower costs than we do. If we want to grow rural America, if we want our kids to stay in rural America, we have to deal with the collapsing infrastructure in this country, especially in rural America.

Mr. President, I don't have to tell you—because Ohio has been hit hard, as has Vermont, New Hampshire, and all over this country—that we have a terrible, terrible epidemic in terms of opioid addiction. I am trying to deal with this issue in the State of Vermont, and I know it is severe in Ohio. We have to be adequately funding programs that focus on prevention, making sure that our young people do not get trapped into a life of addiction. We have to provide the kinds of treatment people need. We cannot ignore this. This is an epidemic that is sweeping this country. More people will die this year from opioid overdoses than died during the entire war in Vietnam. We have to adequately fund treatment and prevention for the epidemic that we are seeing in terms of opioids.

We ought to keep our promises to our veterans. We now have tens of thousands of positions at the Veterans Administration that have not been filled, and we need to make sure they are filled so that the veterans of our country, when they go into the VA, get high-quality care in a timely manner, which they are entitled to.

There was an article, I think it was in the Washington Post, a couple of weeks ago that talked about the fact that 10,000 people died in the last year, waiting for a decision on Social Security disability benefits. In other words, you have people who desperately need these benefits; they have applied for these benefits through the Social Security Administration, and they wait and they wait and they wait. Unbelievably, in the last year, 10,000 people died while they were waiting for a decision from the Social Security Administration. This has everything to do with the fact that there have been budget cuts in recent years that have been significant and have resulted in the loss of more than 10,000 employees in the Social Security Administration, the closing of 64 field offices, and reduced hours in many others. In Vermont, one field office has seen its staffing cut by 30 percent. We have to adequately fund the Social Security Administration so that our elderly and our disabled can get due process in terms of the benefits for which they have filed.

In 2016, the National Park Service recorded over 330 million visits to na-

tional parks and over \$11 billion in deferred maintenance. In other words, our national parks are very, very popular, but they are not getting the maintenance work they need. Meanwhile, the President wants to double fees for people visiting our beautiful national parks. This is an issue we must deal with.

The bottom line is that we are coming toward the end of the year, and we have a lot of work to do, but the work we do has to start reflecting the needs of the working people of this country, not just the billionaire class. We cannot give \$54 billion more to the military and ignore the needs of our children, our elderly, our sick, our poor. We have to come up with a budget proposal that works for all of us and not just wealthy campaign contributors. As a member of the Budget Committee, I expect to be very active in that process.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

HEALTHCARE

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I stand today to call for bipartisan action on several things that are really critical. One of them has become routine, since it started as a bill that Democrats and Republicans did together. That was the Children's Health Insurance Program, something that my colleague from Vermont has referenced.

In my State, we have been a good-government State. We have had a budget surplus for years, and, believe it or not, we relied on the fact that Congress would come through and do what they were supposed to do and reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program, but that didn't happen. As a result, we have a slight budget deficit—something we haven't had for years. But it really hit home when I called our budget director in the State and I said: How did this happen when we have had these surpluses?

He said: Well, we actually thought that you guys would reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program, but you didn't.

Instead, what we have seen is a tax bill that adds over a trillion dollars to the debt. Even when you take into account any economic gain from that bill, a nonpartisan group said that it would, in fact, add \$1 trillion to the debt. That is what we are doing instead of reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program, which makes no sense to me.

Funding for CHIP expired more than 2 months ago, even though, as I said, it is one of the success stories out of this Congress. Both parties have come together for years to support this program that provides healthcare to millions of children across the country.

In Minnesota, these funds support coverage for more than 125,000 kids. Just last week, my State estimated that failing to reauthorize CHIP would cost us \$178 million. That is why the

deficit was at \$188 million. So the CHIP funding that our State has come to rely on through Democratic Presidents and Republican Presidents has suddenly gone away—that is why we have a deficit—while at the same time, a decision has been made by my colleagues on the other side to add over \$1 trillion to the debt. I don't know what to tell the people in my State, except that tax cuts for the wealthy appear to be a priority rather than reauthorizing this bill to help kids get their health insurance. Guess what. They don't understand that reasoning.

States like mine are running out of ways to make Federal funding last a little bit longer. Every single day that we don't act puts coverage at risk for millions of kids. Some States have already been forced to tell parents to start making other plans for their kids' healthcare. No parent should ever have to worry about whether their child will have healthcare. We must keep this strong program going. I have also heard from families with kids who get treatment at the children's hospitals and clinics of Minnesota and who count on this program for the medical care they need. That is why we must pass the bipartisan bill Senators HATCH and WYDEN have put together to extend CHIP for 5 years—so we can stop this nonsense and tell people back at home that that actually something is working here.

In 2015, the last time we renewed the program, it passed the Senate with 92 votes. We should demonstrate that same bipartisan spirit again. We should not hold these kids hostage with this bickering, and we certainly shouldn't be holding all of the States hostage either. This makes no sense. We must act before it is too late, or States like mine will not just have a deficit as a result of this, they will be forced to make difficult choices about insurance coverage for some of our most vulnerable constituents. CHIP is one part of our healthcare system that nearly everyone agrees works. We should be doing everything in our power to protect it.

In addition to CHIP, the American people want us to work together to make fixes to the Affordable Care Act. They don't want us to repeal it; we have seen that in the numbers. They want us to make some sensible changes. You can never pass a bill with that kind of breadth and reach without making some changes to it. I said on the day that it passed that it was a beginning and not an end.

I am a cosponsor of the bill Senator ALEXANDER and Senator MURRAY have put together because it is an important step forward and exactly the type of sensible, bipartisan legislation that we should pass. The bill has 11 Republican cosponsors and 11 Democratic cosponsors. Patient groups, doctor groups, and consumer groups have praised it, including the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, the Arthritis Foundation—and

those are just some of the A's. There are hundreds of national health groups who support this bill. They have Democratic members and they have Republican members. They just want to get something done.

Senators ALEXANDER and MURRAY held a series of hearings and discussions on commonsense solutions to bring down insurance costs with Senators on both sides of the aisle.

I fought for a provision in this bipartisan legislation that would help States like mine apply for and receive waivers. This was put together, by the way, in our State by a Republican legislature and a Democratic Governor. It is a plan that would bring down premium costs, a plan that made sense across the board and was broadly supported in our State. Our Federal Government should be encouraging that kind of flexibility. The waiver we are asking for is actually something we would like to see other States do. The provision we included in the Murray-Alexander bill would encourage other States to do exactly what we did; that is, apply for waivers for flexibility to bring down rates without getting penalized.

This bill would also expedite the review of waiver applications for proposals that have already been approved for other States.

This legislation also shortens the overall time period that States have to wait for the Federal Government to decide whether to approve their waivers. The last time I checked, I thought this administration was touting the fact that they like to get things done, that they want to move things faster, and that they don't like the redtape of bureaucracy. Well, here we have a bill that actually says that States shouldn't have to wait for the Federal Government to make decisions. Why can't we get it passed?

Not only does the bill improve the process for waivers—this is my favorite part because when you hear me talk about it, you might think, wow, this must be expensive. No. The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office says that the Alexander-Murray bill would actually cut the deficit by \$3.8 billion over the next 10 years because it simply gives States the flexibility to cope with the issues they are having in their own States, to adjust to their own particular circumstances, and to make it easier for people to afford healthcare, while saving money for the Federal Government. It makes no sense to delay by even 1 day the passage of this legislation, nor does it make any sense to cut all those kids off of health insurance.

Renewing the Children's Health Insurance Program and passing Murray-Alexander would be important steps forward, but we still must do more. I don't think we are going to get all my prescription drug bills passed by the end of the year, but we should. We won't, but we should. That doesn't mean I am giving up. I think the Amer-

ican people aren't giving up because they have been able to see clear-eyed what is going on because they are starting to see what is happening with the cost of their prescription drugs. The costs are skyrocketing.

I have heard from people across Minnesota who are struggling to afford the medicine they need. This is about the woman in Duluth who told me that she chose not to fill her last prescription because that one drug would cost a full 25 percent of her income. This is about the woman in St. Paul who, even with Medicare, can't afford a \$663-a-month cost for medicine that she needs. This is about a woman from Crystal, MN, who told me: "I am practically going without food to pay for my prescriptions." It is heartbreaking that this is happening in America.

Reducing the costs of prescription drugs has bipartisan support in Congress, and the President has said that he cares about this. So why can't we get this done?

I have one bill that has 33 cosponsors that lifts the ban that makes it illegal for Medicare to negotiate prices for Part D prescription drugs for 41 million American seniors. Yes, right now, it is in law that we can't negotiate for 41 million seniors. Last time I checked, I think they would have a lot of bargaining power, but right now, we can't do that.

A bill Senator MCCAIN and I have would allow Americans to bring safe, less expensive drugs from Canada.

A third bill that Republican Senator GRASSLEY and I have is to stop something called pay-for-delay, where big pharmaceutical companies actually pay off their generic competitors to keep less expensive products off the market. How can that kind of practice be any good for American consumers? Guess what. It is not. We need to put an end to this outrageous practice. This bill would save taxpayers \$2.9 billion.

Senator LEE and I have a bill that would allow temporary importation of safe drugs that have been on the market in another country for at least 10 years when there isn't healthy competition for that drug in this country. Believe me, there are plenty of areas where we don't have healthy competition, where Americans aren't getting the kinds of deals they should get.

I have a bipartisan bill with Senators GRASSLEY, LEAHY, FEINSTEIN, LEE, and several others called the CREATES Act to put a stop to other pharmaceutical company tactics—such as refusing to provide samples—that delay more affordable generic drugs from getting to consumers. According to the Congressional Budget Office, this legislation would save approximately \$3.6 billion.

People in this Chamber are talking about saving money. How are they doing it? On the backs of kids. They are talking about saving money. How are they doing it? On the backs of Americans who would like to afford premiums.

I have laid out a number of bills that actually have been scored to save money. Passing the Alexander-Murray bipartisan bill would save us money. We have the actual accounting to show it. Allowing for less expensive drugs from other countries would save money for consumers. It is pretty easy to understand. It is called capitalism. It creates competition.

For our own American drug companies—we are proud that they have developed lifesaving cures. They are important employers in our country. But if they refuse to bring down those prices and if they have a monopoly on the market, we should be bringing in competition. There are two ways to do it. One is generic, and that is making it easier to produce generic drugs, and also stopping big pharma companies from paying off generic companies—their competition—to keep their competitive products off the market. The other is simply allowing drugs from less expensive places, but safe places, like Canada. That is a bill I have put forward with Senator MCCAIN, but also Senator BERNIE SANDERS and I have worked on this, as well as many others. These are commonsense ideas. Yet we cannot even move to a vote. Why? Because the pharmaceutical companies don't want us to have that vote.

So I am asking my colleagues, No. 1, let's end the year with some common sense and pass two commonsense bills to help the American people with their healthcare, and those are the children's health insurance bill and the Alexander-Murray compromise to make some fixes to the Affordable Care Act. Then, when people are home for a week over the holidays, maybe they should start talking to their constituents, as I have. Maybe they should talk to their friends and their neighbors and see what they think about what is going on with prescription drug prices. Maybe they will come back with a New Year's resolution that they are no longer going to be completely beholden to the pharmaceutical companies, that they are willing to give the American people some relief and take these companies on and create some competition for America.

I thought this was supposed to be a capitalistic system. In a capitalistic system, you do not have monopolies for certain drugs. You do not have a drug like insulin, which has been around for decades, triple, so that one elderly constituent in my State actually saves the drops at the bottom of the injectors so they can use them the next day. That is what is happening, while at the pharmaceutical companies, they are taking home big bonuses at the end of the year.

I implore my colleagues, let's get these commonsense things done so you can go home and not think, when you are sitting there at your holiday dinner, that you have basically left millions of kids without healthcare, and then on New Year's, the next week, make a resolution to do what is right

for your constituents, not for the pharmaceutical companies.

Thank you, Mr. President.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. HOEVEN). The Senator from Rhode Island.

NET NEUTRALITY

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I rise to discuss the Trump administration's irresponsible plans to dismantle net neutrality.

This is a very important and timely issue for Rhode Islanders. The Federal Communications Commission's—the FCC's—efforts to repeal net neutrality protections could have a devastating impact on students, small businesses, and ordinary Rhode Islanders who cannot afford to pay higher premiums on internet traffic.

I have joined many of my Democratic colleagues in urging the FCC to abandon its reckless plan because it would radically alter the free and open internet as we know it and be an abdication of the FCC's responsibility to protect consumers.

Net neutrality does something incredibly important. It requires internet providers to treat all data equally. Net neutrality ensures a level playing field for everyone on the internet. It means free and open access to websites and information.

Over the past 20 years, the internet has become central to the lives of Rhode Islanders and, indeed, millions of Americans—practically every American. From students completing homework assignments to small businesses conducting e-commerce, or family members communicating with loved ones on the other side of the country or the world, the internet is now our primary means of communication. As such, I believe this is an issue of fundamental fairness and equality of opportunity.

This proposed repeal of net neutrality protections undermines the principles of a free and open internet and could be an unprecedented giveaway to big broadband providers, benefiting a few large corporations at the expense of their customers who use and rely on affordable access to the internet every day.

Net neutrality protections also ensure that all content is treated equally. Without these rules, large internet service providers may choose to block, throttle, or prioritize certain internet traffic. Without these protections, big internet service providers will be given the power to erect virtual toll booths for some customers and fast lanes for others. As a result, the repeal of net neutrality rules will likely be bad for consumers, businesses, students, and everyday Americans who cannot afford to pay additional premiums for internet access.

If these rules are repealed, internet providers can essentially say, if you want a quick download from a Web site, you have to pay more. They can go to businesses and ask them to pay

more for this fast service. They can't do that today. Everyone is treated equally.

This is particularly important when it comes to small businesses. As I go around Rhode Island to small businesses, as I have done these last few weeks, one of the reasons they are growing is because they are starting to take a presence on the internet. They have an internet business; they are beginning to sell across the country or across the globe. A small business in Wickford, RI, East Greenwich, RI, or Smithfield, RI, is not going to be able to pay the same premium for access that Amazon or a big corporation like Walmart can, and they will be squeezed further. The reason a lot of these small businesses are able to keep a store open in Rhode Island—or anyplace else in the country—and employ local workers is because they are starting to see a share of their profit come from the internet. They would like to see that grow, but if that diminishes, then the pressure on them to stay in business locally becomes acute.

These are real consequences, not hypothetical. If these rules are repealed and net neutrality is done away with, the consequences for businesses, communities, and individuals will be significant.

Let me make another example. Places of learning like our libraries, schools, and institutions of higher education all rely on offering internet access, which is already expensive. I did a press event at a public library, and they pay significant amounts of money so they have broadband access, and it is a mecca for everyone to come. The head librarian told me that they have people sitting on their doorsteps in the morning before they open and after they close so they can get a broadband signal from the library. Why are they doing that? You can't get a job today unless you can get online because that is where they post job offerings, that is where you have to send your resume, that is where you have to get the response back when you have a job interview. If you can't get on the internet, the chances of getting a job today are close to zero. It was a lot different 20, 30, or 40 years ago, when you could go down to the factory, fill out the form, pass it over the divider to the person in charge, and they would give you a telephone call back or you would come back in a few days and see how you were doing.

Local libraries are also the place where students across Rhode Island and the Nation gain access to the internet to do their homework, apply to college and financial aid, and explore the world around them. This is particularly the case in poorer neighborhoods. They can't afford to have computers or internet in their home. If you go to the public library in South Providence, right next to St. Michael's Church, in the afternoon, the kids are all there and are on the computers doing their homework. They can't do