OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Mr. PORTMAN. I thank my colleague, and I am going to talk about him in a second and the work we have done with regard to pushing back against the opioid epidemic that has hit our States. In this body, every single Member is affected by it, and our country is affected by it in very significant ways.

Because of the dangerous hurricanes that are approaching our coast, it looks as though the vote we had expected tomorrow and the debate we had expected tomorrow on the opioid package may be postponed based on what I just heard from the majority leader. But in the next several days, the Senate is expected to take up comprehensive legislation that comes from four or five different committees in Congress to fight the addiction crisis, to help our communities combat some of the deadliest aspects of this crisis nationally. This help is urgently needed.

Let's start with talking about how Congress got here.

First, just a couple of years ago, we passed two bills in Congress that were historic and are making a difference. One is called the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, or CARA; the other is called the 21st Century Cures Act.

CARA, which I coauthored with my colleague SHELDON WHITEHOUSE, who is on the Senate floor with us—he spoke just a moment ago—provides resources directly to evidence-based prevention, treatment, and recovery programs. These are nonprofit programs. For the most part, they are able to apply to the Federal Government directly for grant money. They are doing things that are innovative and new to try to get at this problem, and in many respects, they are working and making a difference.

This year alone, there will be about $608 million spent on these programs that offer innovative solutions to this stubborn problem that is affecting everyone in this Chamber.

The Cures legislation, 21st Century Cures legislation, this year will be $500 million annually. That goes directly to the States, and the States then give grants to various programs in those States.

In my home State of Ohio, for instance, $26 million has come each of the last 2 years. Sadly, Ohio is one of the hardest hit States in the country, so we have a larger grant allocation than some States that have not had as many overdoses and deaths and rates of addiction that are as high as we have had.

I was a very strong supporter of the 21st Century Cures funding, and I applaud Senators ALEXANDER and MURRAY, as well as Senator BLUNT and other Appropriations Committee members on both sides of the aisle for their work on that.

Of course, with regard to the CARA legislation, it is actually working out there. I have now had the opportunity to see how it is working. I have been to about a dozen CARA grant recipients in Ohio over the last year alone. I have seen new and powerful ways that the communities back in Ohio are helping to turn the tide of addiction.

Last month, as an example, I visited the Whitehall fire station outside of Columbus, OH. They are doing something innovative for a fire station. They have opened their doors and partnered with another organization. They get CARA funding, and the other organization gets Cures funding to provide immediate help for those who are coming in and are seeking it or have overdosed; Narcan has been applied and has reversed the effects of these overdoses. Yet that gap that so often occurs in our communities doesn't occur there because it is seamless. People can go right into treatment.

The program, again, was made possible by this CARA grant. It opens the doors of the fire station, and it is working.

I was there at a time when, just coincidentally, an addict came in. His name was Blake. Blake was, as he described himself, a heroin addict, and he had heroin on his person. I had the opportunity to speak with Blake and offer him some words of encouragement. I had an opportunity to ask him why he was there and what had happened in the past. He said that he had been to three treatment programs. They hadn't worked. He had gone straight from a short-term treatment program right back to the streets. The gap had occurred.

He also said that he was ready, and he appreciated the opportunity to go straight into a treatment program, which he had not had before.

I had a chance to speak with him, and I told him to stay in touch with me, to let me know what is going on. Last week, he called, and Blake said that he is now in a 3-month treatment program in Portsmouth, OH. He is optimistic; he is confident. He believes that because of this approach, he has an opportunity now to get clean, to get back with his family and get back to work.

This is what is often needed: a seamless transition from immediate medical attention—the application of Narcan to reverse the effects—to treatment, to longer term recovery in order for people to overcome their addiction. That is what CARA and Cures prioritize, and that is why these programs are so important.

Once again, we will see in the funding this year that those programs have been held up. The good parts of the programs, in particular, are being used as an example for the entire country.

Despite the legislative progress we have made, and despite what I see back home with communities beginning to make a difference, overall, the situation is not getting better; it is getting worse. You might ask: Why is that?

Well, I believe it is for one simple reason, and that is the advent of new drugs, particularly less expensive and more powerful synthetic opioids that have come into our communities in the last few years. The new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, show that overdose deaths increased 9 percent from 2016 to 2017, the last year for which we have data. My home State of Ohio had a 9½ percent increase in overdose deaths.

In total, CDC estimates that 72,000 Americans—72,000 Americans—died last year from overdoses, the No. 1 cause of death for Americans under the age of 50. Over 48,000 of those overdose deaths were caused by opioids, and about 30,000 of those were caused by synthetic forms, particularly fentanyl. That is more than 60 percent, so this is the big issue right now.

Two-thirds of the overdose deaths in my home State of Ohio are being caused by synthetic opioids, fentanyl. Columbus, OH, unfortunately had a number of deaths over a short period of time, all due to fentanyl. There were about 20,000 fentanyl overdose deaths in 2016, meaning there has been a 50-percent increase in just 1 year.

When you go from 2013 to 2017, there has been an 850-percent increase just during 5 years—an 850-percent increase in fentanyl overdose deaths in our country.

The opioid crisis has continued to tighten its grip around communities across our country, and the emergence of fentanyl has presented a new challenge in turning the tide of this epidemic. Just as we were making progress, this more deadly, less expensive scourge has come into our families, our communities, our States. That is why we need to take action—and take action this week.

I would like to thank the majority leader, Senator MCCONNELL, and the Democratic leader, Senator SCHUMER, for agreeing to bring this legislation to the floor.

I would also like to thank Chairman LAMAR ALEXANDER for his good work in bringing together all of the different proposals from these four or five committees I talked about and negotiating with all sides to come up with consensus legislation. This should be nonpartisan, not just bipartisan. This is something that is attacking our communities at their core.

I would like to thank and commend the several committees that have held public hearings and contributed legislative ideas to this mix. That includes the Judiciary Committee, the HELP Committee, the Finance Committee, and others.

This bipartisan consensus package puts politics aside and does what is right for our communities. It includes some additional legislative priorities I have been working on over the past couple of years that I believe are going to make a real difference in this fight.

Earlier this year, again with Senator WHITEHOUSE and others, we introduced CARA 2.0, the next version of the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act. A number of those provisions are included in this package.

One is a national quality standard and best practices for recovery housing. It is critical for people, as they transition out of treatment and into longer term recovery, to have this housing. But it also needs to meet these higher standards because of many examples where it has not and has failed those individuals and families.

The legislation also authorizes support for high school and college students to help children and young adults recover from substance abuse disorders. We have had amazing models in Ohio for this, like the Collegiate Recovery Community at Ohio State. Columbus is now opening its first recovery high school next year.

Finally, CARA 2.0 contributed the opioid legislation that includes $60 million for a plan of safe care for babies born dependent on drugs. Their mothers are addicted, and they are born with neonatal abstinence syndrome. It is a very sad situation, but it is a reality in my State and in so many others.

To further help these newborn babies, the legislation includes what is called the CRIB Act, which is bipartisan legislation I coauthored that helps newborns suffering from addiction get the best care possible in the best setting possible to get the love and support they need to be able to recover.

It will also help ensure that babies born with neonatal abstinence syndrome get the help they need in their early stages of development, so they can live up to their God-given purpose in life, which is not to live with this.

The legislation before us also reauthorizes a number of important programs that have a proven record of success, like drug courts, like the drug-free communities prevention grants, like the high-intensity drug trafficking areas, where law enforcement can better coordinate at every level. These are all positive strides that will help improve what is working in combating this epidemic and provide more resources to help some of the most vulnerable groups affected.

But, colleagues, I think the most important and immediate difference in turning the tide on this opioid epidemic will come from a bill that is called the STOP Act. It is a bipartisan bill that I coauthored with AMY KLOBUCHAR from Minnesota. It will combat the scourge of fentanyl we talked about earlier. This issue of an 850-percent increase in this one kind of drug coming in, causing more and more overdoses—synthetic opioids—has to be addressed; 81 Americans are dying every single day. That is the best data we have from last year. This year, unfortunately, it is likely to be even higher. It is a new poison flooding our communities.

The STOP Act will close a loophole that drug traffickers have been using to ship fentanyl into our country. Unbelievably, fentanyl is actually manufactured primarily in China, and it primarily comes into our communities through the U.S. mail system. You might think this comes overland from Mexico or somewhere else, but this is coming in through our mail system, primarily from China.

We conducted an 18-month investigation into this in the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which I chair, and we revealed just how easy it is to purchase fentanyl online and have it shipped to the United States.

Based on our undercover investigation, these drugs can be found through a simple Google search, and overseas sellers we accessed essentially guaranteed delivery if the fentanyl was sent through the U.S. mail system.

To be clear, they guaranteed delivery if it is sent through the U.S. mail system, not if it is sent through other carriers, like private carriers—FedEx, UPS, DHL, and others.

It is easy to see why they prefer the Postal Service for shipping these deadly synthetic drugs. The Postal Service has a weaker screening standard than do the private carriers.

After 9/11, Congress passed a law requiring carriers like UPS, FedEx, and DHL to get what is actually called electronic advance data on international packages entering the United States. This electronic advance data allows law enforcement to have a chance to stop this poison because they can find out where the package is from, what is in it, and where it is going. They can then use good data, use algorithms that they have come up with to determine which packages are suspect and pull them off the line.

I have seen this. I have seen U.S. Customs and Border Protection do it at distribution centers for these private carriers. I have also seen, unfortunately, that the Postal Service is not doing what they should be doing.

Without the information identifying packages, it is next to impossible; it is like identifying a needle in a haystack.

Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin, and it is relatively inexpensive. It is so deadly that as little as 2 milligrams, equal to a few specks of salt, is enough to be fatal. Drug users and dealers have moved to fentanyl as a more accessible, less expensive alternative. I am told that 1 gram of the deadly mixture of heroin and fentanyl can cost about half as much on the street as 1 gram of heroin alone.

Drug users seeking a less expensive and stronger high are seeking it out, and drug dealers are mixing it into a number of other street drugs. No street drug is safe because the fentanyl is being mixed. It is being laced into all kinds of other drugs, often unknowingly to the person buying the drug.

To give you an idea of how deadly this drug is, recently police in Columbus seized 2.2 pounds of fentanyl, which is equal to about 3½ cups—a small enough amount to fit in a plastic bag in your kitchen. That 2.2 pounds of fentanyl is enough to kill 500,000 people, roughly the population of the city of Cleveland.

Because of its extreme potency, deadly doses can be shipped in small packages that are almost impossible to identify without having the necessary information and screening devices in the Postal Service. The U.S. Postal Service system isn't required to do it yet. As a result, they have chosen not to do so. Only recently, under congressional pressure, have they begun getting this data on some packages entering the United States.

Even so, last year, based on their testimony, they say they have received data on 36 percent of the international packages. That is a step in the right direction. By the way, that still means that over 318 million packages are coming here with no screening at all.

Even when they have identified drugs—packages that are likely containing drugs—only 80 percent are given to law enforcement. So 20 percent is still going into our communities. This needs to be changed. It is a glaring loophole. Everyone knows it. It undermines the safety and security of our country in fundamental ways.

The STOP Act will significantly disrupt the flow of fentanyl into the United States by simply holding the U.S. Postal Service, a Federal agency, to the same standards as private carriers. It will require the Postal Service to collect advance electronic data immediately on 70 percent of packages entering the United States by the end of the year and 100 percent for China. Then, it will require 100 percent of international packages in the United States by the end of 2020.

It is a commonsense solution to address the most urgent and deadliest aspects of the opioid epidemic we face. At the very least, it will increase the risk of sending these drugs into our country and raise the street price of fentanyl. That is why it has such broad bipartisan support. There is a growing momentum behind this legislation, and I look forward to the Senate's passing it in the next several days as part of the broader legislation we talked about earlier.

It will not solve the crisis, but it will act as a tourniquet to stop the flow of fentanyl in this country and it will allow comprehensive programs, such as CARA and the Cures legislation, to be prioritized and to function and to allow Americans to live up to their full potential and to allow our communities to heal.

I look forward to President Trump's signing this legislation into law—both the broader opioid legislation and the STOP Act—so it can begin making a difference in communities in my home State of Ohio and all around the country.

I yield back.

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

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, I am delighted to be joined today by my colleague Senator TINA SMITH of Minnesota. Both my home State of Rhode

Island and her State of Minnesota are heavily involved in the booming renewable energy sector.

President Trump has called climate change a hoax, but no matter how much his administration may try to prop up the old, dirty, dangerous, polluting fossil fuel industry, there is no denying the clean energy revolution.

The rapid growth of renewables has been underway for decades, but it has really accelerated in the last several years. It took global wind and solar developers 40 years to install the first 1 trillion watts of power generation. A recent estimate from Bloomberg found that the next trillion will be installed within 5 years. That is 40 years for the first trillion and 5 years for the second. Part of the reason is that lower costs of renewables mean that building out the second trillion will cost half as much as the first trillion.

This chart shows the year-to-year costs of generating energy from wind, from Lazard. Since 2009, the costs for onshore wind have dropped by two-thirds. Onshore wind costs are down two-thirds in basically a decade.

Here is the same chart for solar power. Utility-scale solar costs have dropped 86 percent over the same time period. ''In some scenarios,'' writes Lazard, ''the full lifecycle costs of building and operating renewables-based projects have dropped below the operating costs alone of conventional generation technologies such as coal or nuclear.''

When you look at the drop in solar costs compared to other resources, you see how dramatic the change has been. This graphic is from the World Economic Forum.

The renewable industry in America has grown to 3.3 million jobs—more than all fossil fuel jobs combined. AT&T has been a leader in this, adopting the World Wildlife Fund's Corporate Renewable Energy Buyers' Principles and signing up under that for 220 megawatts from an Oklahoma wind farm and 300 megawatts from a Texas wind farm, one of the largest corporate renewable purchases in history. So, congratulations, Texas and Oklahoma, for the new home State renewable energy jobs, and AT&T, for your leadership.

In Rhode Island, the Governor's 2018 Rhode Island Clean Energy Industry Report has shown that clean energy jobs have risen by 2 percent since 2014, bringing over 6,600 new clean energy jobs and bringing us to nearly 16,000 Rhode Islanders working in clean energy, and it is projected to continue to grow. We lead also on energy efficiency, ranking third on the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy's 2017 scorecard.

In Senator SMITH's State of Minnesota, the public utilities commission has required since 1993 that there be a social cost of carbon standard for new infrastructure at $43 per ton of carbon emitted. Minnesota leads in being a State whose public utility commission is factoring the cost of carbon into its decision making rather than making the general public pay for what the carbon-producing utilities should be paying for.

Other States are powering forward. I saw Mr. BENNET on the floor. His State of Colorado Public Utilities Commission just unanimously approved an Xcel Energy program to build out a cleaner energy mix and retire older fossil fuel units. Specifically, they are going to retire 660 megawatts of operating coal, close it down, and replace it with $2.5 billion in new renewables and battery storage. The initial request for bids brought in a flood of new renewable energy proposals below the cost of existing coal and natural gas facilities.

Now, here, because of the politics, political funding, Citizens United, and all the trash that is unleashed in our politics, there is a sharp political divide on climate change and renewable energy brought to you by our fossil fuel friends. But out in the real world, some of the most Republican States are actually at the forefront. The Department of Energy last week released a report showing that Texas is leading the Nation in generation, with over 22 gigawatts of wind capacity. Right behind them are Oklahoma and Kansas, with more than 5 gigawatts of installed wind capacity. Just over 6 percent of the nation's electricity in 2017 was wind nationally, but if you go to Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, and South Dakota, they all have more than 30 percent of their power coming from clean wind power.

Oklahoma is at 32 percent. Kansas is at 36 percent. Iowa is at 37 percent. South Dakota is at 30 percent, and North Dakota is at 27 percent.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have the Department of Energy reports printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

TEXAS, OKLAHOMA, AND IOWA LEAD THE NATION

WASHINGTON, DC—Today, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) released three wind energy market reports demonstrating that as wind installations continue across the country and offshore wind projects move beyond the planning process, technology costs and wind energy prices continue to fall. The reports cover three market sectors: land-based utility scale, distributed, and offshore wind.

Highlights from this past year include larger, more powerful wind turbines and lower technology costs and wind power prices for on land and offshore applications, as well as U.S. distributed wind capacity crossing the 1 gigawatt (GW) threshold.

The 2017 Wind Technologies Market Report, prepared by DOE's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, found the following:

The U.S. wind industry installed 7,017 megawatts (MW) of capacity last year, bringing total utility-scale wind capacity to nearly 89 GW.

In total, 41 states operated utility-scale wind projects. Texas leads the nation with over 22 GW of wind capacity, while Oklahoma, Iowa, California, and Kansas have more than 5,000 MW.

Another 13 states have more than 1,000 MW.

In 2017, wind energy contributed 6.3 percent of the nation's electricity supply, more than 10 percent of total generation in 14 states, and more than 30 percent in four of those states—Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, and South Dakota.

Bigger turbines with longer blades are enhancing wind plant performance. Wind projects built in the past few years have seen capacity factors increase by 79 percent compared to projects installed from 1998 to 2001.

The average installed cost of wind projects in 2017 was $1,611 per kilowatt (kW), down 33 percent from the peak in 2009–2010.

The U.S. wind industry supported more than 105,000 jobs and saw $11 billion invested in new wind plants in 2017.

The 2017 Distributed Wind Market Report, prepared by DOE's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, highlights the following:

In total, U.S. wind turbines in distributed applications reached a cumulative installed capacity of 1,076 MW. This capacity comes from roughly 81,000 turbines installed across all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam.

In 2017, Iowa, Ohio, and California led the nation in new distributed wind capacity installed as a result of large-scale turbines installed by commercial and industrial facilities and electricity distribution utilities.

Thirty-five percent of distributed wind projects installed in 2017 were at homes, and 25 percent were agricultural installations.

U.S. manufacturers of small wind turbines and their supply chain vendors are located in 27 states.

Between 2015 and 2017, U.S.-based small wind turbine manufacturers accounted for more than $226 million in export sales.

The 2017 Offshore Wind Technologies Market Update, prepared by DOE's National Renewable Energy Laboratory, found the following:

The U.S. offshore wind industry recently took a leap forward as commercial-scale projects were competitively selected in Massachusetts (800 MW), Rhode Island (400 MW), and Connecticut (200 MW).

New York, New Jersey, and Maryland also have offshore wind projects in the development pipeline.

The U.S. offshore wind project pipeline has reached a total of 25,464 MW of capacity across 13 states, including the 30 MW Block Island Wind Farm commissioned in 2016.

In Europe—where most offshore wind development has occurred to date—recent offshore wind project auctions have continued the trend of developers committing to lower electricity prices for projects that will be operating in the 2020s.

New offshore wind turbines are being developed with 10–12 megawatts of capacity (compared to an average capacity of 2.3 MW for land-based turbines and 5.3 MW for offshore wind turbines installed in 2017). As a result, demand is increasing for specialized ships that will be able to install these very large turbines in U.S. waters.

About 60 percent of the U.S. offshore wind resource lies in deep waters. Developing a project in deep waters requires wind turbines on floating foundations.

In the U.S., floating offshore wind projects have been proposed off the coasts of Maine, California, and Hawaii.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Mr. President, amazingly, this report comes from the same Energy Department currently pushing coal bailout proposals, but that is what you get from helpless, weak leadership from this administration that will not face up either to the scientific reality of climate change or the economic reality of energy markets.

FERC, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, has just finalized a rule for energy storage that could spur as much as 50 gigawatts of additional energy storage across the United States, and that could be a conservative estimate if renewables prices keep along those trajectories we showed before. That FERC rule on energy storage, by the way, is unanimous and bipartisan. The ISO system operators, like ISO-New England, are doing their best to remove obstacles that had kept renewables from competing fairly in capacity auctions and dispatch decisions. This is saving consumers money.

It was reported by Utility Dive that during the July heat wave in New England, distributed solar, which can reduce demand during peaks, saved customers some $20 million.

This is reliable stuff out in Iowa, where Midwestern is the ISO. They figured out the algorithms to treat wind as reliable baseload power, and the FERC storage rule will further enable this transition.

As you can imagine, the fossil fuel industry is not letting this go without a fight. They are up to their usual political mischief to try to protect their $700 billion annual subsidy that they get from polluting for free. Their shady tactics are just as would be expected.

Start with the fossil fuel industry. They put in front of them the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers to screen what is really the dirty fossil fuel industry. Those two groups put in front of them some fake consumer group called the Consumer Energy Alliance, and that fake Consumer Energy Alliance put in front of it something called Kentuckians for Solar Fairness, all in an effort to fight rooftop solar for individuals in Kentucky. That is the kind of nonsense the fossil fuel industry gets up to to try to defend itself. But despite that, you can't stop progress. You can't deny costs. You can't win against energy that is cheaper, reliable, and carbon-free. It is time for us to wake up, throw our weight into clean energy, and move forward into the future, rather than let the fossil fuel industry condemn us to a dirty past.

With that I yield to my colleague, Senator SMITH.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Ms. SMITH. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to be allowed to continue with my remarks.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection.

Ms. SMITH. Mr. President, I rise today to join my colleague Senator WHITEHOUSE as he takes to the Senate floor to speak on climate change for the 219th time.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE is the Senate leader on climate change, and his foresight, actions, and determination on this issue are remarkable. I am very proud to join him today.

Climate change is a dire threat to our environment and to our children's future, and yet, if we rise to the challenge of responding to climate change, it will offer us major economic opportunity. The clean energy transition is already creating jobs, reducing the cost of generating electricity, clearing the air, and improving our health.

The old idea that responding to climate change comes at the expense of the American economy is outdated and inaccurate. The clean energy economy is the economy of the 21st century. We see this every day in Minnesota, which is a national leader in the clean energy transition.

The climate is rapidly changing, and these changes are caused by human activities that release greenhouse gases. I know this because it is what science shows us.

In Minnesota, we take special pride in the severity of our winters, but Minnesota winter temperatures have increased by 6 degrees since 1970. More than our pride is at stake. Agriculture and forest pests that were once held in check by severe winter cold are now thriving. Summer temperatures are on a pace to make Minnesota as warm as Kansas by the end of the century. Some models suggest that changing climate and spreading pests could eliminate Minnesota's iconic evergreen forests by 2100.

Urgent action is needed to limit further climate change. If we don't reduce greenhouse gas emissions to near zero by 2060, the world will cross a dangerous warming threshold—a threshold that the United States and other nations have pledged to avoid.

I am deeply worried about these threats, and so are our children, but I am also hopeful because I have seen how tapping into the abundant wind and sunshine is building a new energy economy that is clean, green, and full of opportunity.

Here is just one example. Shortly after becoming a Senator, I visited the Vetter family farm near Mankato, MN, and saw firsthand how renewable energy can provide new sources of income for farmers. The Vetters raise hogs, but they also farm the sun through a 14-acre community solar garden. The Vetters inspired me to become a champion for the energy title in the Senate farm bill, which provides Federal support for rural renewable energy projects.

Just 3 years ago, Minnesota wasn't much of a player in solar energy, despite the fact that we had nearly the same solar potential as Houston, TX. However, new State policy has led to strong growth and solar energy development. The State began a community solar garden program in 2013, and Minnesota now has enough solar energy to power nearly 120,000 homes. During the first quarter of 2018, Minnesota was fifth in the Nation for solar installations.

Now Minnesota is a model, but the Southeastern United States and almost all of the western half of the country has as much or more sunshine than Minnesota and lots of opportunity.

Minnesota is new to solar, but we have long been a national leader in wind energy. Today, nearly 20 percent of our electricity comes from wind turbines. Like solar, the fuel costs for an installed turbine are zero. So wind energy is sheltered from the ups and downs of fossil fuel prices. Wind energy is also a rural economic engine. A single industrial-sized turbine can bring a family farm $4,000 to $8,000 in lease revenue each year.

My State is home to the two largest wind and solar installation companies in the country—Mortenson Energy in the Twin Cities and Blattner Energy in rural Avon. Together, they have installed renewable energy capacity across the country equivalent to 100 coal plants.

Clean energy brings good jobs. For example, wind energy technician is one of the fastest growing jobs in the country, with an average salary of $54,000, and it doesn't require a 4-year college degree.

Jobs in Minnesota's clean energy sector are growing twice as fast as jobs in other parts of our State's economy. Employers report they are having trouble finding the skilled workers they need to fill these jobs. To address this problem, I have introduced legislation to help employers partner with high schools and community colleges so students can gain the skills they need to get these jobs.

Last year, renewable energy contributed 25 percent of the electricity generated in Minnesota. Nuclear power, which also does not release greenhouse gases, contributed an additional 23 percent. From a climate change perspective, Minnesota is already halfway to being a 100-percent clean energy State, and we are not slowing down. Xcel, our largest utility, is on track to deliver 60 percent renewable and 85 percent clean energy by 2030. Great River Energy, which serves many of our rural electric co-ops, is committed to 50 percent renewables by that same date. Why are they doing this? Well, it is not all about saving the planet. Wind energy has become the cheapest way to add new electricity to Minnesota's electric grid. Yes, Minnesota is windy, but so is every State in the middle of the country. And, as Senator WHITEHOUSE described, most coastal States have tremendous wind power potential through offshore wind farms.

This summer, the McKnight Foundation released a groundbreaking analysis of what decarbonizing Minnesota's economy would mean. If Minnesota continues to move away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy, we can achieve a dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. That would mean an electric mix that includes at least 91 percent clean energy. That would mean total energy bill savings of $600 to $1,200 per Minnesota household each year. It also would mean 20,000 more jobs in our State compared to a ''business as usual'' scenario, with continued reliance on fossil fuels.

Given all of the upsides, it is disheartening that the President continues to do everything in his power to slow down the clean energy transition. He would rather take us backward than have America remain a world leader pushing forward. He is pulling the United States out of the Paris climate agreement. He is taking steps to roll back auto fuel efficiency standards and trampling on the rights of States that want to maintain rigorous targets. He has tried repeatedly to keep uneconomic and polluting coal plants open—a move that, if successful, would cost American taxpayers and electric bill payers billions of dollars a year.

In a recent attack on clean energy, President Trump has proposed replacing the Clean Power Plan with an alternative that would actually increase greenhouse gas emissions and, by the administration's own calculation, cause up to 1,400 additional deaths per year due to air pollution. Just yesterday, the Trump administration proposed to weaken rules that limit the release of methane—a potent greenhouse gas.

Instead, the Federal Government can and should partner with States to encourage the spread of clean energy. The Federal Government should help States lead and not hold them back.

First, we should set national clean energy targets. These should be a floor, not a ceiling, setting States free to innovate and adopt the best way to meet energy emission reductions given their local resources, local economies, and local sensibilities.

Second, the Federal targets should be technology neutral. The goal is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In one place, this might mean wind power; in another, nuclear power. Some States have great hydropower resources, while others might choose to utilize carbon capture and storage upgrades to existing coal plants.

Third, we should work with States to enhance the interstate transmission system. I have talked a lot about what Minnesota is doing on clean energy. States like California and Hawaii and many others are certainly also leading the way. With transmission, the Texas grid expansion provides a potential national model. That expansion is helping bring clean electricity from the windy western part of Texas to the large cities in the east.

Fourth, the Federal Energy and Regulatory Commission must properly account for greenhouse gas emissions when it approves projects. It should allow States to value their nuclear plants as zero-emission sources. As the original fleet of nuclear plants retires, it is imperative that they be replaced with non-emitting power sources.

Last, the Federal government should expand support for cutting-edge energy research at our National Labs and at State universities. The Federal Government also needs to recognize that the discoveries in the lab only help if they are actually deployed. We must help States and utilities take risks on new, potentially game-changing technologies. To those ends, I recently introduced legislation to help fund both research and initial deployment of new energy storage technologies.

We have everything to lose if we fail to meet the challenge of climate change. We owe our children and the next generation a better alternative.

I again thank Senator WHITEHOUSE for his leadership on this issue and for inviting me to join him today.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, the Senate is a bit behind in terms of the schedule. I ask unanimous consent, as the ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee—we will be voting on Mr. Rettig here shortly—that I be allowed to speak for up to 15 minutes at the conclusion of my colleague Senator BENNET's remarks.

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

The Senator from Colorado.

Mr. BENNET. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to complete my remarks.

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

THE ECONOMY

Mr. BENNET. Mr. President, in recent weeks, President Trump has gone around the country touting the strength of the economy. He said:

> Our economy is the strongest it has ever been in the history of our country, and you just have to look at the numbers to know that.

The numbers do tell us that the economy is strong and getting stronger, and that is a good thing, but they also tell us that the economy has been strengthening since 2010—after President Obama acted to save us from another Great Depression and when some Members of Congress wouldn't lift a finger to help him.

During President Obama's term, even as the economic data showed more and more investment and more growth, the other side talked down the recovery because, even though it was good for America, it didn't help them win elections. As a candidate, this was Donald Trump's specialty. He was a master of this in September 2016—long into the recovery—when he said: ''This is the weakest so-called recovery since the Great Depression.'' The Great Depression wasn't a recovery; it was the Great Depression. We were coming out of the great recession.

He even questioned the government's monthly jobs report, at one point calling it ''total fiction.''

''Nobody has jobs. . . . It is not a real economy. It is a phony set of numbers. They cooked the books,'' he said of the government's report. ''Don't believe those phony numbers when you hear 4.9 percent or 5 percent unemployment. The number's probably 28, 29, as high as 35. In fact, I even heard recently 42 percent.'' He campaigned on that.

Now that he is President, Donald Trump's attitude has changed. This month he said that we have the strongest economy in the history of our Nation. It turns out that he loves those jobs reports that he criticized so readily under President Obama:

> JUST OUT: 3.9% Unemployment. 4% is Broken! In the meantime, WITCH HUNT!

If you only read the President's twitter feed—which I don't recommend—you could be forgiven for believing that the economy was collapsing under President Obama but is now roaring back under his administration. As usual, the truth is not nearly as partisan.

If we ignore the hyperbole and exaggeration and review the actual history, the trends are clear. The economy was shrinking and shedding jobs when President Obama took office. He stepped in and made difficult decisions, and soon after, the economy began growing, adding jobs and gaining strength. And it has continued under President Trump, I am pleased to say.

Let's look at the record.

Last week, President Trump celebrated the almost 4 million jobs created since the election. In the first year and a half of President Trump, the economy created an average of 189,000 jobs a month. That is good. Compare that to the last year and a half under President Obama when the economy created 208,000 jobs a month. Unfortunately, we have lost some ground since the Obama administration, but we are still making progress. This chart demonstrates that.

This chart also demonstrates that despite President Trump's deficit-busting tax cuts and higher spending, job growth has actually slowed under his administration. The same is true for wages. I don't take any pleasure in this, but, as you can see here, average hourly earnings grew at a rate of 1.3 percent during the course of President Obama's last 18 months; they grew by 1.1 percent during President Trump's first 18 months. That growth has slowed.

Last week, President Trump also said that we have more people working today than at any point ever in history. That is true, but it has been true since May of 2014. In fact, the private sector has added jobs for 102 months straight—the longest streak on record, and 80 percent of that streak was during the Obama administration.

As in other parts of his life, when it comes to jobs, President Trump is once again coasting on his inheritance.

President Trump said:

> Economic growth last quarter was 4.2 percent, and as you people know, it was headed down, big. And it was a low number. A very low number. It would have been, in my opinion, it would have been less than zero. It was heading to negative numbers.

First, the economy did grow by 4.2 percent last quarter, but it grew by the same rate for several quarters in 2015 and 2016 under President Obama.

There is not a single economist who thought we were ''heading to negative numbers'' at the end of the Obama administration. In fact, when asked, a surrogate for this administration couldn't name a single economist to back up the President's claim.

Most recently, on Monday, President Trump tweeted:

The GDP Rate (4.2%) is higher than the Unemployment Rate (3.9%) for the first time in over 100 years!

Even FOX News had to call him out on that one. They pointed out that since 1948, GDP growth has been higher than the unemployment rate 63 different times. This is not the first time; it has happened 63 times.

The one thing that actually has happened for the first time during the course of this administration is that it is the first time in American history that the unemployment rate is falling and our deficit is going up. That has never happened before. It is hard to do that. The level of irresponsibility required to have an outcome where your unemployment is falling and your deficit is rising is unheard of in American history.

The Congressional Budget Office just announced that the government spent $895 billion more than it took in over the past 11 months. That is a 33-percent increase in our deficit from last year. It is a 53-percent increase in our deficit since the last year of the Obama administration just 2 years ago. And by the way, we still have a month to go in this year. So the deficit has increased under this Republican President, this Republican Senate, this Republican House majority, by more than half since President Obama left office.

By the way, and parenthetically, the last time unemployment was 3.9 percent was the year 2000, when we had a projected surplus of $5.6 trillion. That was at the end of the Clinton administration.

This is all a far cry from candidate Donald Trump's promise to eliminate our debt over a period of 8 years or his promise to provide great healthcare for a fraction of the price, whereby everyone will be taken care of better than they are taken care of now, or his promise to build the greatest infrastructure on the planet Earth—the roads and railways and airports of tomorrow. I haven't seen any tweets about that lately.

I will give him this: President Trump promised he would be the greatest jobs President God ever created. Do you know what? He has been the greatest jobs President God ever created since Barack Obama was President of the United States.

I want to finish by suggesting that instead of trafficking in complete falsehoods and untruths and exaggerations about what he has saved us from and how phenomenally well he is doing while he is creating these enormous deficits as our economy grows, the American people would be a lot better served by a conversation about the much deeper challenges we face—for example, why wages have decoupled from productivity, why incomes have not kept pace with cost, why automation and global competition have put tremendous pressure on workers and wages and what we are going to do about it, why inequality continues to rise and economic mobility in the United States continues to fall below that of European countries. That is what we should be talking about. Ignoring these issues doesn't make them disappear.

Reality is out there in States like Colorado and all across our country, and our lack of mobility and our extraordinary inequality is bearing down on us. Even if the President chooses to ignore it, for the sake of our children, we cannot.

I yield the floor.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, American taxpayers are facing an uncertain time. After rushing to pass an enormously complex, budget-busting tax bill late last year, Republicans in Congress have set the table for the upcoming tax season to be a time of serious confusion for the public. At the center of this sits the IRS, which is in the midst of trying to modernize its systems, effectively perform its tax collection functions, and implement this boondoggle of a tax law. Today the Senate considers a nominee to head the IRS. While I strongly disagree with most of the tax policy decisions that this administration has made, I am supporting this nominee because the IRS deserves to have dedicated leadership at the top.

There is little debate over Mr. Rettig's qualifications for this position. By all accounts, he has extensive tax law experience and has worked closely with the IRS in advisory roles over the years. Perhaps, most importantly, he would ensure that the IRS has full-time leadership in place, which stands in stark contrast to how the administration has chosen to run the agency to date. Rather than putting an Acting Commissioner in place who would serve exclusively in that role, the administration chose instead to have a political appointee in the Department of Treasury split his time between his policy role in the Department and the critical role of leading the IRS. There is no doubt that this does a disservice to American taxpayers. It also raises questions about the political independence of the IRS.

I appreciate that many Senators will be opposing this nomination because of the egregious decision made by the administration in July to end the reporting of so-called ''dark money'' donors to the IRS. In a time when Russia has been shown to use these types of organizations to funnel money as part of an effort to influence our elections, ending the reporting of donor information raises serious questions about who this administration is aiming to protect. I was proud to join a letter led by Senators KLOBUCHAR and WYDEN urging the Department of Treasury to reinstate the reporting requirements.

At the same time, we have seen the impact that the lack of dedicated leadership and the disastrous budget cuts adopted over the years by Republicans has had at the IRS. Its website crashed on tax day, crippling the ability of millions of Americans to file their taxes on time. Rural Americans are struggling to get the help they need to file their taxes. It still needs to provide guidance to taxpayers on how the Republican tax law will impact them. Without a full-time leader in place, I worry that the IRS will be rudderless at the top. Ultimately, such an outcome would be unfair to hard-working Vermonters who just want to pay their taxes as quickly and easily as possible.

As vice chairman of the Appropriations Committee, I will continue to fight for the funding the IRS needs to meet the many challenges it faces and repair the damage caused by years of budget neglect. I will also be supporting the nominee today, despite my unequivocal opposition to the IRS dark money decision, so that the agency has the leadership it needs as well.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, the Senate is considering tonight the nomination of Charles Rettig to lead the Internal Revenue Service. Let's be clear. This is not a typical IRS Commissioner debate.

Over the last several months, the Trump administration has weaponized the Tax Code to punish its political adversaries and benefit shadowy, far-right groups that seek to buy American elections. Two months ago, just hours after Maria Butina was outed as an alleged Russian spy who sought to influence our elections, the Trump administration announced a new rule, opening the floodgates to more dark money and foreign money in American politics. Dark money groups used to be required to disclose their donors to the IRS. With this new Trump rule, they will not be required to disclose at all.

To my colleagues, here is what this all means. Over the next 2 months, while political ads flood the airwaves, millions of Americans are going to wonder how much of this stuff is paid for by law-breaking foreigners and special interests. Because of the new rule, the Internal Revenue Service and law enforcement are going to be in the dark as well. There are a few reasons this new rule is unjustifiable and undemocratic.

First, it had no debate in the Finance Committee, where we have jurisdiction over the Tax Code. It had no debate on the Senate floor. I do recall my Republican colleagues bemoaning what they considered to be anti-conservative political interference by the Internal Revenue Service even when none was found. Now, with a Republican administration in office, they are changing the tax rules to allow for more political interference by creative outside groups and foreigners.

Second, the timing of this announcement could not have more clearly underscored the rotten corruption at the heart of this policy. The new dark money rule was announced on a Monday night—the same day it was revealed that Maria Butina had been indicted for using the National Rifle Association as a conduit to influence our democracy with personal and financial ties. Another administration, in seeing that kind of news come down, might have said: Hey, we ought to hold off on making drastic changes. It might have said: Let's put a little more space between the indictment of an alleged Russian spy and the rollout of our dark money rule that would make the spy's job even easier—not this Trump administration. It was undeterred. It, obviously, decided it could not wait to get this new rule on the books to make it easier for foreign actors and special interests to hide in the shadows while their dollars influence our elections.

The tax rules and election laws in America, with respect to who has to disclose political spending, are already badly broken, especially after Citizens United. Now the administration is taking an enormous problem and making it much worse. The Trump dark money rule is only going to mean that individual Americans will have even less faith that they will be in control of our democracy. This takes us even further from the true meaning of one person, one vote. It puts even more power and more influence in the hands of the special interests.

The fact is, the arguments for this change do not add up. I have heard members of the Trump administration say, including the Treasury Secretary, that none of this information was public before, so there is no reason to collect it; that there is just no big deal here.

To my colleagues, the overwhelming majority of Americans want more disclosure, not less. The administration, in effect, admits it was not using the information political donors used to have to turn over. It sounds to me like the Trump argument for this dark money rule goes pretty much like this: We were not going to enforce the campaign spending laws anyway, so we decided not to bother collecting the special interest information at all.

That is going to be cold comfort to the millions of Americans who are going to get clobbered by enormously funded political ads for the next 2 months before our election.

The bottom line is, the Trump dark money rule is anti-law enforcement, anti-democratic, and anti-disclosure. It puts a blindfold on law enforcement at the exact moment Congress ought to be coming up with new approaches to shed more sunlight on political spending and defend American democracy from foreign influence.

The Finance Committee's vote on Mr. Rettig's nomination was, coincidentally, scheduled to take place during the same week the rule came down. Obviously, this issue was a focal point in the discussion. I raised the issue during the markup. Mr. Rettig had an opportunity to tell the committee he would try to fix it. He did not. He wouldn't even acknowledge the serious problem here for the cause of transparency and openness in our government.

In my view, this rule ought to be put up to the same standard of scrutiny the majority has applied to several other rules that were put in place by the previous administration. The Senate ought to use the powers granted to it by the Congressional Review Act, and it ought to vote on whether this rule should stand. Yet now the Trump administration is taking unprecedented steps to hide its dark money policy from that kind of scrutiny. Trump officials are keeping their rule off the official books for as long as they can to prevent the Senate from holding their dark money rule to the same standard that had been applied to the Obama administration.

When it publishes the rule in the Federal Register or it confirms that it will not be published there but will be published elsewhere, the rule becomes eligible for a challenge under the Congressional Review Act. So far, the Trump administration hasn't taken either step, even though I asked for a response 3 weeks ago. As a result, in the Senate, we have been unable to get a straight answer as to when it is coming or whether it plans to publish the congressional review issue at all. It looks to me like the administration has a policy on its hands that it knows is corrupt, that it knows is undemocratic, so it is playing hide the ball. The more the public hears about the dark money rule, the less it likes it, and we are going to keep talking about it.

I close with one last point, in that there is a lot about the Trump tax policy to be concerned about this evening. Senator MENENDEZ talked about how blue States, like Oregon, California, New Jersey, and others, were hit with a gut punch. Capping the State and local tax deductions to target people in those States reveals the rotten core of the Trump tax policy. Tonight, as we consider the Rettig nomination, I don't know of anything more corrupt in front of this body than to make it even harder for the American people to know where dark money—foreign money—is coming from.

For that reason, I urge my colleagues to oppose the Rettig nomination. He was asked to acknowledge that this is a serious problem. He wouldn't go there. He was asked to describe what he would do to correct the problem. He wouldn't go there. This is as corrupt as anything I know of before the U.S. Senate, and I will be working with my colleagues to fix this dark money crisis and undo the damage the Trump tax law has brought on, and I will be opposing the Rettig nomination.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, thank you so much to my colleague from Oregon for his remarks on taking on the systematic corruption of dark money as it relates to this nomination.

Mr. MERKLEY. I yield the floor.

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. TILLIS). Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Charles P. Rettig, of California, to be Commissioner of Internal Revenue for the term expiring November 12, 2022.

Mitch McConnell, Joni Ernst, John Boozman, Shelley Moore Capito, Johnny Isakson, David Perdue, Roger F. Wicker, John Hoeven, John Cornyn, Mike Rounds, Orrin G. Hatch, Roy Blunt, John Barrasso, Deb Fischer, Rob Portman, Thom Tillis, Tom Cotton.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Charles P. Rettig, of California, to be Commissioner of Internal Revenue for the term expiring November 12, 2022, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Georgia (Mr. ISAKSON) and the Senator from Pennsylvania (Mr. TOOMEY).

Further, if present and voting the Senator from Pennsylvania (Mr. TOOMEY) would have voted ''yea.''

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from Florida Mr. NELSON) is necessarily absent.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 63, nays 34, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 205 Ex.]

YEAS—63

Alexander	Ernst	Manchin
Barrasso	Fischer	McCaskill
Bennet	Flake	McConnell
Blunt	Gardner	Moran
Boozman	Graham	Murkowski
Brown	Grassley	Murphy
Burr	Hassan	Paul
Capito	Hatch	Perdue
Casey	Heitkamp	Portman
Cassidy	Heller	Risch
Collins	Hoeven	Roberts
Corker	Hyde-Smith	Rounds
Cornyn	Inhofe	Rubio
Cortez Masto	Johnson	Sasse
Cotton	Jones	Schatz
Crapo	Kennedy	Scott
Cruz	Kyl	Shaheen
Daines	Lankford	
Donnelly	Leahy	
Enzi	Lee	

Shelby	Thune	Wicker
Sullivan	Tillis	Young

NAYS—34

Baldwin	Heinrich	Schumer
Blumenthal	Hirono	Smith
Booker	Kaine	Stabenow
Cantwell	King	Tester
Cardin	Klobuchar	Udall
Carper	Markey	Van Hollen
Coons	Menendez	Warner
Duckworth	Merkley	Warren
Durbin	Murray	Whitehouse
Feinstein	Peters	Wyden
Gillibrand	Reed	
Harris	Sanders	

NOT VOTING—3

Isakson	Nelson	Toomey

The PRESIDING OFFICER. On this vote, the yeas are 63, the nays are 34.

The motion is agreed to.

The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the remaining votes in this series be 10 minutes in length.

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

VOTE ON RETTIG NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, all post-cloture time has expired.

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Rettig nomination?

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. President, I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from North Carolina (Mr. BURR) and the Senator from Georgia (Mr. ISAKSON).

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from Florida (Mr. NELSON) is necessarily absent.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The result was announced—yeas 64, nays 33, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 206 Ex.]

YEAS—64

Alexander	Flake	Murkowski
Barrasso	Gardner	Murphy
Bennet	Graham	Paul
Blunt	Grassley	Perdue
Boozman	Hassan	Portman
Brown	Hatch	Risch
Capito	Heitkamp	Roberts
Cardin	Heller	Rounds
Casey	Hoeven	Rubio
Cassidy	Hyde-Smith	Sasse
Collins	Inhofe	Schatz
Corker	Johnson	Scott
Cornyn	Jones	Shaheen
Cortez Masto	Kennedy	Shelby
Cotton	Kyl	Sullivan
Crapo	Lankford	Thune
Cruz	Leahy	Tillis
Daines	Lee	Toomey
Donnelly	Manchin	Wicker
Enzi	McCaskill	Young
Ernst	McConnell	
Fischer	Moran	

NAYS—33

Baldwin	Booker	Carper
Blumenthal	Cantwell	Coons
Duckworth	Klobuchar	Smith
Durbin	Markey	Stabenow
Feinstein	Menendez	Tester
Gillibrand	Merkley	Udall
Harris	Murray	Van Hollen
Heinrich	Peters	Warner
Hirono	Reed	Warren
Kaine	Sanders	Whitehouse
King	Schumer	Wyden

NOT VOTING—3

Burr	Isakson	Nelson

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the motion to reconsider is considered made and laid upon table, and the President will be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

ENERGY AND WATER, LEGISLATIVE BRANCH, AND MILITARY CONSTRUCTION AND VETERANS AFFAIRS APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2019—CONFERENCE REPORT

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume legislative session in consideration of the conference report to accompany H.R. 5895. The cloture motion is withdrawn.

There will now be 10 minutes of debate, equally divided in the usual form.

The Senator from Alabama.

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. President, I will try to be brief. It is getting late.

A few months ago, I came to the floor and urged my colleagues to set aside partisan disputes so that we could focus on our most basic constitutional responsibility: funding the government in a deliberate and timely manner.

Most observers deemed the prospect dubious at best. Who could blame them? Like so much in Washington, the appropriations process was broken, but at the urging of Leaders MCCONNELL and SCHUMER and with the help of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle—Vice Chairman LEAHY, in particular—we began to put the pieces back together.

Steadily, methodically, we passed 9 of the 12 annual appropriations bills in the Senate by overwhelming bipartisan margins. Today, I am pleased to present my colleagues with the first dividends of their cooperation.

The conference report before the Senate tonight contains the 2019 appropriations bills for Energy and Water Development, Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, and the Legislative Branch. It contains very critical funding to help transition our veterans to the new healthcare program they deserve and have earned under the VA Mission Act. It funds nearly 200 construction projects that are very important to America's military. It does a lot of other things, but I can say that this is an important package, and it is very important in what this package does not contain. It contains no poison pills—none of the partisan riders that have taken down appropriations bills in recent years in this package. As a result, the conference report looks a lot like the package that passed the Senate a few months ago by a vote of 86 to 5.

We have a long way to go, but we are getting there with this first batch of appropriations bills. I want to take a second and thank the leaders of both sides, Vice Chairman LEAHY, the members of the Appropriations Committee, and all of my colleagues for their cooperation in this effort. I look forward to continuing to work together and urge you to vote for the conference report.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I want to speak briefly on this.

Today, the Senate will consider final passage of the ''Minibus #1'' conference report. This package contains the Legislative Branch, Energy and Water Development, and Military Construction and Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies Appropriations Bills.

I agree with what Vice Chairman SHELBY has said. When we first considered this package in June, we held our first real debate on the Senate floor on an appropriations bill in many years. We had eight rollcall votes on amendments. We adopted a managers' package that Senator SHELBY and I submitted. It contained 32 more—a step toward returning to regular order.

Today, we are going to take another step. This is not exactly the bill I would have written. I think it is safe to say it is not exactly the bill Chairman SHELBY would have written. We know you have to have compromise. You have to work things out. I also knew I could rely on his word, and he could rely on my word. That is why we are here today voting on this bipartisan package.

The Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill includes significant new investments in mental health and opioid abuse treatment. We are not just talking about things we would like to do to address opioid abuse; we are actually including it in a bill. It invests $1 billion in new funding over fiscal year 2017 levels for mental healthcare programs and suicide prevention and $454 million over fiscal year 2017 for opioid treatment and prevention.

This bill also provides resources important to Vermonters. It increases funding for long-term, noninstitutional care programs like the Veterans Independence Program in Vermont, which partners with community providers to support veterans who prefer to continue living in their own homes, avoiding costly nursing home care and offering better quality of life. It provides funding for homeless veterans programs, such as the Grant and Per Diem program that offers supportive transitional housing to homeless veterans, and it includes a $40 million increase for Supportive Services for Veteran Families to help veterans and their