

Van Hollen
Warner

Warnock
Warren

Whitehouse
Wyden

NAYS—46

Barrasso
Blackburn
Blunt
Boozman
Braun
Burr
Capito
Cassidy
Cornyn
Cotton
Cramer
Crapo
Cruz
Daines
Ernst
Fischer

Grassley
Hagerty
Hawley
Hoeven
Hyde-Smith
Inhofe
Johnson
Kennedy
Lankford
Lee
Lummis
Marshall
McConnell
Moran
Paul
Portman

Risch
Rounds
Rubio
Sasse
Scott (FL)
Scott (SC)
Shelby
Sullivan
Thune
Tillis
Toomey
Tuberville
Wicker
Young

NOT VOTING—1

Romney

The nomination was confirmed.

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

The Senator from Michigan.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate resume consideration of Executive Calendar No. 675, the nomination of Todd Harper, and that upon disposition of the Harper nomination, the Senate resume consideration of the Loyd nomination, as provided under the previous order.

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

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the nomination.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of Todd M. Harper, of Virginia, to be a Member of the National Credit Union Administration Board for a term expiring April 10, 2027 (Reappointment).

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Ms. STABENOW. For the information of Senators, at 4:30 p.m. today, the Senate will vote on confirmation of the Harper and Loyd nominations, in the order listed.

NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, in 1946, the National School Lunch Program was signed into law by President Truman—broadly supported in a bipartisan manner. And for 76 years, we have been providing food for our children's schools so they have every opportunity to learn and to be successful. Over the years, we have added school breakfast, and then summer meals, and other support.

At the beginning of COVID, we worked together on a bipartisan basis to make sure our children still had access to healthy meals, even though they weren't able to physically be in school. We have worked together to provide critical funding and flexibility until now. Our kids are counting on us to do this again.

In 22 days—22 days—healthy meals for many American children will stop if we can't get the bipartisan support necessary to extend the flexibilities and the funding that allows schools and summer programs to keep feeding our children healthy meals—22 days.

Again, critical funding will stop in 22 days. That is not very far. Summer programs need to be planning right now. And many children are already starting those summer programs. Critical funding is going to stop in 22 days, even though supply chains are still broken and costs are still rising.

In July 2020, with bipartisan changes we made in the middle of the pandemic, almost 6 million children received summer meals, and that was double the year before. This was a great thing for children and families across the country.

During the school year, the roughly 30 million children who participate in school meals knew that they could count on breakfast and lunch each day. They may not get supper, they may not get other food, but they could count on breakfast and lunch.

These are real kids, the same as my grandchildren and yours, and they need our continued support to be healthy and to be successful. That is what this is about. They want to spend their summers playing with their friends and their school days focusing on learning, not just trying to ignore a headache and a growling tummy.

There is a little boy in Coopersville, MI, who got summer meals for the first time because his school district could deliver to his neighborhood. If local sites can't open or flexibility doesn't happen, if these options end at the end of the month in just 22 days, 20 percent of the meal providers in Michigan will likely no longer be able to provide that healthy food in the summer.

Kids have always been able to count on healthy meals at school, but next year is going to bring new challenges for children, for families, for schools.

Take the little girl in Port Huron, MI, whose family is doing their very best to make ends meet as they recover from the pandemic. Over the past 2 years, she has been able to get school meals without her parents and her school having to worry about lots and lots of paperwork and redtape. But when the flexibilities end, schools will be right back at it, having mounds of paperwork for too many families, which, too often, result in kids who need help being missed or left hungry. Schools may also be forced to increase the price of meals for children, and that is going to be very difficult for many working families.

This lack of action is not only about our children, which, of course, that should be enough that this is about our children; but, too often, when we talk about the budgets and the programs, we lose sight of the people who are doing the work to feed our children, and they have to make the hard choices on how they are going to continue to do that.

For example, 357,000 students get their meals at a school in the Miami-Dade school district. It is the fourth largest school district in the country serving more than 35 million meals each year to young people. But because of the uncertainty in the supply chains, Miami-Dade has struggled to find a single distributor to serve their school district.

While this contract has since been addressed, many districts have not been so lucky, because if we go back to low reimbursements in the fall, they are finding they can't find vendors, providers, that will bid for those contracts.

Issues are popping up all over the country. In Fort Worth, TX, kids have increasingly limited options for food. Again, supply chains have broken down; food supply chains have broken down. The school district is reporting over 400 options out of stock, things as simple as orange juice or chicken wings.

In a Cleveland school nutrition program, they have got 67 open positions they are trying to fill, which is the other issue right now coming out of the pandemic as we look at our labor shortage.

Outside Portland, OR, school food staff are going to grocery stores to get the food and supplies they need when their distributor cancels their order, and they are paying up to 10 times more doing that in a retail store.

Starting this month, kids will have fewer options for healthy milk and other dairy products when the main dairy serving Northern Virginia schools is going out of business. There are a lot of challenges.

When Senator MCCONNELL, Leader MCCONNELL, said he didn't want to extend the funding and flexibilities because the pandemic is over—the effects of the pandemic are not over, nor is the pandemic. We are managing it better. Thank you to the President's leadership and all of our hard work to make sure we have the vaccines, and the testing, and the therapeutic medicines, and so on, but the supply chains that broke down when you shut down an entire economy—not just an American economy, by the way, but global economy. These are still trying to be fixed in so many different ways to try to get things up and going, which, of course, has led to the increased cost in inflation.

So we are in a situation where our schools, going into next year—not only this summer but next year—are going to have a very, very difficult time making sure they can provide healthy meals to our children, and there is no excuse for that to be happening if we come together and act.

The fact is, we are seeing shortages across the board. Healthy options are hard to find, and there are delays for new equipment so schools could safely store prepared food. What happens when school food staff are faced with challenges like this? Kids don't eat;

that is what happens. And that is not OK.

Nationwide, 90 percent of our schools and summer programs count on the funding and flexibility that is currently in place—90 percent of our schools. All of this in red, 90 percent—over 90 percent—count on the flexibilities, they count on the funding that we put in place during the pandemic that is still needed because of the challenges going on. This is who is counting on us to act to be able to help them feed children.

Starting July 1, 22 days from now, that is going to stop for many schools. I have been told that if we don't act, one-third of our schools will be in such a dire situation that they may not be able to continue the National School Lunch Program at all. Let me repeat that. One-third of our schools may not be able to provide healthy meals to our most at-risk children through the school lunch program at all if we don't come together and do something to help them. And we know what to do. We just need the bipartisan support to do it. This is a shocking failure of our country's responsibility to provide for our children and set them up for success.

Throughout the pandemic, Democrats and Republicans have come together to make sure that schools and summer meal programs have the tools they need to feed hungry kids. We need Republicans to join us again. We are working to return to normal, but we aren't there yet. It is so urgent that we pass my Support Kids Not Red Tape Act right now. I am extremely grateful that we have every Democratic Member of the U.S. Senate and Independent Members and two of our Republican colleagues leading the way: Senator MURKOWSKI and Senator COLLINS. It is a bipartisan, broadly supported way to make sure our kids aren't going hungry. But time is running out, and we only need eight more Republican colleagues to join us. We have 52; we need 8. We need eight more Republican colleagues to join us to be able to provide support for our children and support for our schools throughout the next year as we are working our way through all of these supply chain issues and so on that are getting in the way.

Our kids are counting on us. Twenty-two days—twenty-two days—that is what we are talking about. We have got 22 days before all of the support, all of the funding to be able to make sure that as many children are getting healthy food in the summer as possible, the children who need it—and in the schools that we have a school lunch program and that we are able to provide healthy meals so that kids can focus on learning, they can focus on being kids, they can focus on being successful—not just how they are going to manage their hunger through another day.

Twenty-two days, Mr. President. Our kids are counting on us. We need to act.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. WHITEHOUSE). The Senator from Vermont.

HONORING OUR PACT ACT OF 2021

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I rise today in strong support of the PACT legislation that we are now considering.

As a former chair and longtime member of the Senate Veterans' Committee, one of my highest priorities is to make certain that every veteran in this country, people who have put their lives on the line to defend us, get the quality healthcare and benefits that they have deserved.

This is an important piece of legislation, and I want to congratulate Senator TESTER, chair of the committee, and Ranking Member MORAN for their hard work on this. This legislation will improve healthcare, research, and resources for veterans who were exposed to deadly toxic substances and environmental hazards, including open-air burn pits, during their military service. This legislation will finally recognize and treat toxic exposure as a cost of war for the millions of veterans Congress has ignored for far too long. And we do that by adding 23 burn pit and toxic exposure-related conditions to the VA's list of service presumptions. This will mean that some 3.5 million veterans will now be eligible for VA healthcare, and that is very, very important.

It goes without saying that in the wealthiest country on Earth, where we spend more on defense than the next 11 nations combined, no veteran should be without the healthcare that they are, in my view, entitled to. I understand there is not the political support for this in Congress right now, but I happen to believe that in a world in which nation after nation guarantees healthcare to all of their people as a right—in fact, we are the only major country on Earth not to do that—that the very least we could do is to make certain that every man and woman who has put the uniform of the United States of America on, put their lives on the line, are, in fact, entitled to healthcare because they served our country. That is my view. This bill does not do that, but this bill does at least enroll 3.5 million more people for VA healthcare, and it is a step forward.

In terms of this bill, clearly, it is unacceptable that we have exposed our military members to toxic burn pits and other dangerous substances on the battlefield. For decades, the Pentagon has utilized open-air burn pits to dispose of a wide variety of waste, including medical, human, and hazardous waste.

Way back in 2009, when he led the U.S. Central Command, GEN David Petraeus sounded the alarm “about the effects of burn pits and airborne toxins on our servicemembers and civilians.” Despite those concerns, DOD continued to expose U.S. forces to burn pits, leaving the VA with the responsibility of

dealing with the consequences of these dangerous and deadly actions.

So the bottom line is, I am deeply supportive of this legislation. It is a step forward. But we can significantly improve this bill, and that is why I have introduced four amendments to this important bill that I hope will be supported by the Senate.

First, this first amendment that I have offered will expand permanent access to VA healthcare to members of the National Guard and Reserve who are not otherwise eligible. Right now, National Guard men and women who are activated on Presidential orders are eligible for VA healthcare, and that is good, but that turns out to be only a very small percentage of people who are in the National Guard and Reserve. And I happen to believe that if you are in the National Guard or Reserve and you could be called up at any moment to put your life on the line, I think you should be entitled to VA healthcare. And that is what that amendment does.

The second amendment deals with—what can I say—a pathetic and laughable bureaucratic nightmare that currently exists in the VA. And Rube Goldberg would have a hard time coming up with a system like this. This is really quite amazing. And that is, within the VA bureaucracy, which is itself difficult to overcome for many veterans, you have a system which now has over 3,000 income eligibility standards based on ZIP Codes.

So a veteran out there watching this says: You know, I would like to apply for VA healthcare. I served my country honorably. How do I do it?

Well, it turns out that, depending on your income and depending on the ZIP Code that you live in, you may or may not be eligible for VA healthcare. So, in other words, in Vermont you can have one veteran with an income of X living across the street from another veteran who has an income of Y, \$3,000 more or less. One veteran will be eligible for VA healthcare; another will not. In a large State like California, you have literally hundreds of different income eligibility standards that veterans are going to have to overcome.

So if people go to a service officer in the VFW or the American Legion and ask: Am I eligible, it takes a lot of research to determine whether you are eligible. Look at the eligibility standards for San Francisco versus Los Angeles, for example. There are many, many thousands of dollars in differential. So you could be eligible in San Francisco—rather, eligible in Los Angeles and not in San Francisco. It really makes no sense. It is a nightmare.

This amendment simplifies it. It simply says that every State in the country takes the highest level of income eligibility and that is the standard. So you will have 50 standards rather than 3,000 standards, and I think that will make it a lot easier for veterans to access VA healthcare.

My third amendment is a pretty simple one. It says that the VA should