

where they work in virtually every profession, while often raising children and finding time to serve their communities in volunteer positions, which they do at a higher rate than the general population. The legislative success I have achieved on behalf of the Guard is the result of a partnership with the Vermont National Guard, and I am inspired by their guidance, their feedback, and their absolute devotion to service. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how much their service and sacrifices means to me and all Vermonters. They have inspired me throughout my career, and as I transition into retirement back home in Vermont, I feel reassured knowing our Guard will be there, ready to respond immediately to any danger or challenge, as they always have.

RANA AYYUB

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, we should all be alarmed by the increasing attacks against freedom of the press by governments around the world. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, in this year alone, at least 38 journalists have been killed, 294 have been imprisoned, and 64 are missing for simply doing their job, not to mention the countless others who faced intimidation, harassment, legal persecution, and threats. Today, I want to mention one.

Rana Ayyub is an award-winning Indian journalist who has courageously reported on religious violence, extrajudicial killings, and other matters of public interest in India. Her important work is driven by a sense of purpose and a love for her country and the ideals for which it stands. Yet she faces online harassment and trolling, death threats, and baseless government retaliation for her reporting. Despite the immense pressure to silence her by government officials who should be protecting her, she continues to expose the abuses of those in power.

Freedom of expression is the cornerstone of democracy. Without it, the fundamental differences between a democratic state and an authoritarian regime disappear. Throughout my 48 years in the Senate, I have often been reminded that we each have a responsibility to defend press freedom and amplify the work of journalists who shine a light on corruption, injustice, discrimination, and impunity. We must stand up for freedom of expression and the rights of journalists, so Rana Ayyub and her brave colleagues around the world can do their essential work without fear of retribution.

RECOGNIZING VERMONT'S CARING FOR VETERANS

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, Vermonters have a long history of distinguished service to the Nation of which I am proud. I am also proud that Vermonters have a reputation for distinguished service to those veterans

when they come home. I have been grateful in my 48 years to know so many Vermonters willing to help others and to be able to support their efforts from the U.S. Senate.

First and foremost, I am proud to represent the men and women of the White River Junction VA Medical Center and its associated community based outpatient clinics. Across Vermont, it is known that the best care veterans can get in the State comes from our dedicated VA employees. Earlier in my career, when a 25-percent funding cut was proposed which would have shuttered the White River Junction VA surgery units, I was proud to join Vermont veterans to fight to reinstate the funding. Today, my faith in our VA has proven right time and again, as it has become a model for the Nation. While national stories may swirl, Vermonters regularly tell me their preferred healthcare provider is the VA.

Right across the parking lot from the medical center is the National Center for PTSD, a world-class hub for research on the condition of and the treatment of PTSD. In 1984, I was happy to help establish by law such a center in the VA system and, in 1989, proud that White River Junction was selected to be the headquarters. It may seem hard to believe, but we had to fight for many years to preserve its funding so that researchers and clinicians alike could make use of its expertise to help veterans. We took a huge leap forward in 2013 in our ability to help when Dr. Matt Friedman came to me with the idea to establish a brain bank, so new, cutting-edge techniques could reveal more about how brain physiology affects and is affected by PTSD. I found the funds, and the research findings have already changed the perspective on PTSD.

It is not just Vermonters working for the Federal Government that care for our veterans, but a host of veterans themselves. The veterans service organizations in Vermont have been tireless advocates for veterans and worked in partnership with my dedicated staff when veterans had trouble accessing their benefits. Organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Association have shown the importance of veterans helping other veterans, and I have always encouraged it. In fact, in my first term, I helped establish the first vet center in Vermont in 1979, to provide readjustment counseling to veterans returning from Vietnam, often from other veterans, and I have been proud to support funding for the Vermont National Guard's successful Veterans and Family Outreach Program and Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Programs, which have become national models for reintegration of National Guard members returning home from deployment.

Along with healthcare, veterans in Vermont and across the Nation receive

compensation for injuries and illnesses associated with their military service. It has always been important to me that claims made by veterans are adjudicated fairly and timely. That is why I partnered with the Veterans Benefits Administration to ensure that the VA maintained and staffed veterans service center on the White River Junction Medical Center campus, and I was proud to cut the ribbon on that office in 2015.

Compensation and healthcare for veterans affected by toxic exposure has been a priority of mine for decades. This last year, Vermont veterans and their families led local and national movements to support the PACT Act and change the way that the VA deals with presumption of toxic exposure, which I am proud that the omnibus appropriations funds appropriately. From Atomic veterans to Agent Orange to Camp Lejeune, I have been proud to stand alongside generations of veterans demanding the Nation keep its promises, and I am grateful that this year we have made structural changes that should make a future fight for benefits easier.

As I leave office, it is because of veterans themselves that I am reassured. Whether working at the VA or National Center for PTSD, for an organization dedicated to veterans, or in the community as volunteers, veterans—especially Vermont veterans—are the key to caring for each other, and I have been proud to have done what I can from the floor of the Senate for the last 48 years.

CASEWORK

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, I want to speak briefly now about the tens of thousands of Vermonters served by my casework staff over my time in office. It has always been a priority of mine to make sure that my constituents could call my office if they were having difficulties with Federal Agencies and reach a knowledgeable and sympathetic caseworker to help them cut through redtape. When I first opened my Vermont office, people told me that if I gave out my office phone number, I would get inundated by phone calls. And I told them that I was elected to serve Vermonters. Since 1995, we have closed 25,000 cases, and countless more were closed in the day before digital records.

I deeply believe in the ability of government to help people who are struggling. However, I am not blind to the fact that the dual imperatives of efficiency and customer service mean that even the most well-intentioned government bureaucracies can be difficult to navigate at times.

The particular challenge of the Federal Government is its almost unimaginable scale relative to the individual people that it serves. Imagine that in 2022 an average of 66 million Americans per month will receive a Social Security benefit, totaling over \$1 trillion in

benefits paid during the year. Imagine further that the Social Security Administration spends about a half a percentage point of those trillion dollars to administer all of those benefits. Our dedicated Federal civil servants are the best in the world, but individual Americans still at times fall through the cracks due to their unique circumstances and are unable to get what they need. Frustration and disillusionment can follow, and this is corrosive to faith in government and ultimately to democracy itself.

Combating these feelings of disempowerment was the challenge and mission of the casework staff in my Vermont offices. They were not able to solve every problem put in front of them, but they always did their best. For 48 years, they talked with any constituent who called my office with an issue regarding a Federal agency, regardless of wealth, power, or political affiliation. They helped Vermonters resolve immigration issues, get their passports, process their Social Security Disability Insurance applications, get needed care from the Veteran's Administration. When they spotted systemic failures, they worked with my staff in Washington to write legislation in order to make things work better in the future.

My staff and I helped constituents with issues writ large and small because what seems trivial to one person can be incredibly important to another. Hearing from Vermonters every day helped me do a better job in Washington. Just as importantly, my staff always let Vermonters know that they mattered.

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, throughout my time in the Senate, I have been proud to champion policies and programs that encourage community and economic development. The two go hand-in-hand. Vibrant communities attract investment and economic success supports community life.

Our sense of community and our pride in our communities defines Vermont. As a Vermonter, I have supported programs that invest in the physical infrastructure our communities need to thrive—from water and wastewater systems, roads, bridges and sidewalks, to the clean-up of brownfields.

Burlington's Church Street Marketplace is a model nationwide for how to build a lively, attractive downtown that will attract visitors while also serving local residents. I was proud to secure funding for its creation.

But the ties and connections which create community do not come just from buildings and sidewalks. They come from a shared history and the knowledge that we have a shared future. That is one of the things I learned from my dear friend, the late Paul Bruhn, for whom the Paul Bruhn His-

toric Revitalization Program is named. The program is used across the country to not simply preserve historic buildings, but to give them new life as housing, business incubators, or community centers which preserve our history as we build our future.

Community development block grants and the HOME program are also used throughout the country to build needed housing, which we know touches on nearly every challenge we face from workforce development to substance use. That is why when the previous administration wanted to cut funding for these programs, I fought to retain that funding.

Roughly half of all Americans work for a small business, which is why I had also strongly advocated for the Small Business Administration and defended it whenever an administration decided, wrongly, that it should be cut. It is also why I pushed for funding for the Small Business Development Centers to provide free technical assistance to small businesses and help them attract capital.

In Vermont, I secured funding for the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and the Vermont Center for Emerging Technologies to provide needed capital for new businesses. I also supported innovative job training centers such as the Advanced Manufacturing Center at Vermont Technical College and the Burlington's Aviation Technical Center to be sure these new businesses have the skilled workers they need to succeed.

I have always been a proud champion and advocate for Vermont's State-run and privately run airport. For decades, the Burlington International Airport has served as Vermont's window to the world and an essential economic engine that the broader economic development community across the State depends on.

I also brought Federal funds to build and strengthen the infrastructure that connects Vermont's businesses and communities to the rest of the world such as airports, rail lines, and the ports of entry along the border we share with Quebec.

One of the reasons people come to Vermont to visit or to live is the State's physical beauty. Whether you prefer to walk through a historic village green or to ski down a mountain, Vermont offers the chance to get outside and enjoy beautiful weather.

I used Vermont's town forests as a model for the Community Forest and Open Space Program, which protects open spaces while creating places across the country for people to walk, hunt, and cycle right in their community. I sought to protect and expand Vermont's fisheries, trails, and forests because public spaces are integral to our individual and collective well-being while also supporting economic development.

When it comes to building strong communities and strong economies, there isn't a silver bullet. Instead,

there are a great many pieces, each of which varies slightly from place to place. I am proud to have helped towns and cities in Vermont and across the country and the businesses located there get what they needed from their government to improve the lives of their residents.

LAKE CHAMPLAIN

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, thank you for the opportunity to say a few words about why protecting and restoring Lake Champlain has been so important to me throughout my years in the U.S. Senate.

Lake Champlain, shared by Vermont, New York, and Quebec is a gem. It is one of the largest and cleanest lakes in the United States, ringed by the Adirondack Mountains on the west and the Green Mountains on the east. Marcelle and I visited Lake Champlain together before we were married and have returned there often to walk her shores, swim, and scuba dive. The lake is at the center of the culture and economy for much of Vermont.

I took office just 2 years after the 1972 passage of the Clean Water Act, and Lake Champlain was in decline. Sea lamprey were devastating the fishery of the lake, municipal waste water was barely treated before discharge, and we were just beginning to understand the problems caused by stormwater runoff. I immediately began working on funding for Lake Champlain cleanup and am proud that at least \$360 million has been directed through annual appropriations to protect the lake as the result of my efforts. My leadership of the Senate Appropriations Committee has helped in this work, with about \$50 million in FY2022 funding going for Lake Champlain.

I leave office secure in the knowledge that although I will no longer be directing Federal funds, I have been able to authorize several programs that are now well established and will continue the work to protect the waters and wildlife of Lake Champlain and support the communities which line its shores for years to come. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Lake Champlain Sea Grant Program became possible when I arranged for Champlain to be declared a Great Lake. While the declaration was brief, the Sea Grant Program is now well established, funded at more than \$1 million each year and has made a tremendous difference for a multitude of Lake Champlain programs.

I led legislation in 1991 and reauthorizing bills in 2002 and 2022 to establish and grow the EPA Lake Champlain Basin Program. The LCBP brings together Vermont, New York, Quebec, and all relevant Federal Agencies, with a budget in FY23 of \$33 million to lead the protection and restoration of Lake Champlain. And I am so proud that the FY23 omnibus includes the \$35 million reauthorization of the LCBP for the next 5 years.