



U.S. Senator

Jim Jeffords



Summer, 2000

United States Senate

Report on Health Care

Dear Fellow Vermonter:

It is with great honor that I represent Vermont as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). Improving the quality of and access to health care for Vermonters, and all Americans, has been one of my highest priorities. That is why I also serve on all the other Senate Committees that deal with health care issues: the Finance Committee, which oversees the Medicare and Medicaid programs, the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the Aging Committee. My position on these Committees gives Vermonters a national voice, and more importantly allows that voice to be heard. Since I have become Chairman more than 100 Vermonters have testified before the HELP Committee.

Last year saw several major victories in increasing Medicare funding for Vermont and passing the Work Incentives Improvement Act, which allows disabled individuals to go back to work while keeping their health benefits. Now I am fighting to craft a true Patients' Bill of Rights that will improve health care quality without driving up costs. I have been joined by other members of Congress in unveiling new bipartisan legislation to provide health insurance tax credits to the uninsured, and I am fighting for Medicare reform so that the program includes a comprehensive prescription drug benefit.

As we begin the new millennium, I am excited about moving forward together to help improve health care for Vermont and the nation.

Sincerely,

Jim

Jim Jeffords

Jeffords Working to Pass Patients' Bill of Rights

Last year, the Senate passed "The Patients' Bill of Rights." This legislation represents the most significant Congressional effort since 1974 to establish new managed care patient protections. It was based on legislation which Senator Jeffords introduced and which was approved by the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

The House passed its companion bill and a Senate/House conference committee has been appointed. As the Chairman of the Committee which has the primary jurisdiction over these issues, the Senator has been appointed as one of the 12 Senate conferees.

"The Patients' Bill of Rights" will provide managed care protections for the 98,000 Vermonters who are not covered by State protections and the right to an independent

external appeal for everyone who has employer-provided health insurance. It would also ban the use of predictive genetic information for insurance underwriting purposes and it allows for the full deduction of health insurance for the self-employed.



In spite of the political hurdles, Senator Jeffords believes that Congress can produce solid legislation that will result in a greatly improved health care system for Vermonters and all Americans. The opportunity exists to expand patient protections without significantly increasing premiums and adding to the number of uninsured. He remains hopeful that the conference committee will be

able to move forward and produce compromise legislation that can be passed by Congress and signed into law by the President.

## Making Prescription Drugs More Affordable and Accessible

Prescription medicines have revolutionized the treatment of certain diseases, but they are only effective if patients have access to the medicines that their doctors prescribe. The best medicines in the world will not help a person who can not afford them. And they can actually do more harm than good if taken with the improper dosage.

On May 9, Senator Jeffords introduced S. 2520, the Medicine Equity and Drug Safety (MEDS) Act, which will allow pharmacists and wholesalers to get the same Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved drugs sold at lower prices in other countries, and pass the savings on to consumers in the U.S. This bipartisan proposal builds on legislation Jeffords introduced last year that would allow imports from Canada for personal use, and borrows from another bill cosponsored by Congressman Sanders in the House that would allow reimportation of prescription drugs that were made in U.S. facilities.

The most important aspect of this bill is safety. The MEDS Act preserves the FDA's gold standard for safety

by letting the experts at FDA determine the best mechanism for allowing such imports.

The MEDS Act is not the only solution to the problem of high prescription drug costs. But the MEDS Act is a positive, bipartisan measure that can be implemented now to bring prescription drug prices down for all Americans.



*Jeffords is seen here with Kathy Korg, Deborah Moore, Anni Tennelo and Jan Petrilli from the Vermont Emergency Nurses Association.*

## Breast and Cervical Cancer Legislation Approved

On June 14, the Senate Finance Committee approved the "Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment Act" (S. 662). The legislation will ensure that women who have been diagnosed with breast or cervical cancer through a Federal screening program receive timely treatment. Senator Jeffords, a cosponsor of the legislation and a member of the Finance Committee, was delighted with the Committee's action.

In 1990 Congress passed legislation establishing the Centers for Disease Control's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, which has provided screening services to more than one million low and moderate income women across the country. Women diagnosed with cancer under this program today must rely upon an informal system of donated care for treatment. The legislation approved by the Finance Committee ensures that the hardship of a cancer diagnosis is not compounded by any uncertainty in obtaining medical treatment. With early detection and treatment, women experience a survival rate close to 95 percent for stages I and II breast cancer.

The legislation approved by the Committee would permit states to cover eligible women under a new Medicaid category. States would have an incentive to provide this benefit because they would receive a generous Federal funding match that is higher than the traditional Medicaid funding match. In addition, the legislation ensures that no time lag exists between a diagnosis received through the screening program and treatment.

Similar legislation passed the House on May 9, by a vote of 420 to 1. Senator Jeffords has urged Senate leadership to bring the bipartisan legislation to a vote in the very near future.

## Jeffords Working to Strengthen Medicare and Rural Health



As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, Senator Jeffords is working this year to reform Medicare so that the program includes a comprehensive Medicare prescription drug benefit. It makes no sense to reimburse hospitals for surgery, but not provide coverage for the drugs that can prevent surgery. As a part of the budget bill, the Senator supported establishing a reserve fund of \$40 billion for a new Medicare drug benefit.

Last year Jeffords worked tirelessly on increasing Medicare reimbursement to Vermont. Medicare represents about \$300 million of the \$1.7 billion in health care dollars spent in our state. Vermont health care providers know that it pays less than the true cost of providing that care. He believes the Federal Government has a responsibility to improve the health and welfare of all Americans, especially seniors. That is why he has led the fight to prevent cuts to hospital, nursing homes, and home health care services.

With the enactment of last year's Medicare legislation, millions of additional dollars will be paid to Vermont's health care providers who serve those Vermonters — more than 85,000 — who are Medicare beneficiaries. Last year's law provides important relief for rural hospitals with fewer than 100 beds. Jeffords fought hard for this provision, since it will help out Vermont's community hospitals. He also succeeded, for the second year in a row, in staving off a 15 percent cut in Medicare payments to home health agencies.



## Jeffords Introduces Bipartisan Legislation to Help the Uninsured

Senator Jeffords introduced legislation March 29, that would provide relief for people who do not have health insurance and would help make coverage more affordable for millions more Americans. The legislation, the Health Coverage, Access, Relief, & Equity (CARE) Act, would provide a refundable tax credit or voucher towards the purchase of health insurance. The credit is targeted to low and moderate income people who are most in need of relief due to their lack of income, access to subsidized employer-based coverage, and ineligibility for public programs.

The legislation provides a credit of \$1,000 for the purchase of individual coverage to people with adjusted gross incomes of up to \$35,000, and it provides a \$2,000 credit for the purchase of family coverage for people with adjusted gross income of up to \$55,000. In addition, the credit is advanced to the health plan or insurer when premiums are due, rather than having to wait until the end of the tax year.

Led by Senator Jeffords, this effort marks the first major bipartisan, bicameral, market-based initiative on behalf of the uninsured since 1994. Each year the number of uninsured rises, and today there are over 44 million uninsured Americans. This number is unacceptable for a prosperous nation with a strong economy. Moreover, health premiums are on the rise again, with employers in Vermont seeing increases as high as 20-30 percent this year.

Once enacted, estimates indicate that approximately 9 million Americans will take advantage of the Health CARE credit. Of these, nearly 4 million would have been previously uninsured. While the Health CARE Act will not solve the entire problem, it is a big step forward for consumers. This legislation is the type of incremental health care reform that Congress is most likely to pass.

## The Older Americans Act Update

Senator Jeffords is deeply committed to strengthening vital programs for the elderly, including reauthorizing the Older Americans Act (OAA) during this Congressional session. The OAA provides grants to Vermont and its five local Area Agencies on Aging; funds that are essential for providing elder care services to Vermont seniors. The OAA also funds grants for research, training and demonstrations of innovative programs of elderly services, as well as senior meal sites, home-delivered meals, and senior centers. Finally, the OAA provides employment services so that elders can have jobs and continue to make important contributions to our community service programs.

Senator Jeffords is working hard to see that OAA continues delivery of a wide range of social and nutritional services for older persons and employment programs, and is strengthened to include the National Family Caregiver Support Program. At his urging, the Senate Appropriations Committee boosted funding for home-delivered meals by \$35 million.

The Senator has met personally with Mr. Horace Deets, Executive Director of the AARP, to enlist the support and assistance of the national aging network in reauthorizing the OAA. He hopes the reauthorization will incorporate some of the innovative programs that are being developed in Vermont that encourage the growth of congregate meal programs, and will develop a strong bill that will best serve the needs of the recipients, our nation's elderly.

## Senate Approves Jeffords' AIDS Services Bill

On June 6, 2000, the Senate passed Senator Jeffords' legislation to reauthorize and improve the Ryan White Care Program. Ten years ago Congress enacted the Ryan White CARE Act, named for a teenager from Indiana who died in 1990 from complications due to AIDS, to provide for the care and treatment of people living with HIV and AIDS.

Senator Jeffords chaired a HELP Committee hearing on March 2, 2000, to examine the need to extend the Ryan White CARE Act. Dr. Chris Grace of the UVM College of Medicine testified and emphasized how vital the Ryan White CARE Program is to providing health services to rural Vermonters. Dr. Grace is the director of Vermont's Comprehensive Care Clinic, which is considered one of the nation's model rural HIV clinic systems.

Jeffords' legislation includes several provisions developed on the basis of advice from the Vermont HIV/AIDS community. The bill also includes new preferences for grants targeted at providing care services in rural areas. A key provision of the bill will boost Vermont's minimum state-grant funding under the program from \$250,000 per year to \$500,000 per year, which will allow the state to help people with HIV and AIDS access the essential care and treatments necessary to manage their HIV infection and to maintain their health.



Senator Jeffords is seen here with Dr. Chris Grace of the UVM College of Medicine at the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee hearing on the Ryan White CARE Act.



## National Multiple Sclerosis Society Names Jeffords 1999 Senator of the Year

On March 28, 2000, The National Multiple Sclerosis Society honored Vermont Senator Jeffords as its 1999 Senator of the Year award winner. The Senator was unanimously selected by the Society's national board for his authoring of the Work Incentives Improvement Act (WIIA) of 1999 and for playing a key role in securing its passage in the Senate.

"It is with great pleasure that we recognize Senator Jeffords with this prestigious award. His dedication to ensuring the passage of WIIA has benefitted not only the third of a million Americans with MS, but all people who are struggling with chronic disabilities nationwide," said Susan Sanabria, Vice President of Advocacy Programs for the National MS Society.

## Veterans' Health Update

Senator Jim Jeffords served this country as an Officer in the United States Navy from 1956 through 1959. This formative experience helped develop his deeply held belief that the men and women injured in service to our country deserve the very best in medical care. This is why he fought with the Vermont delegation to secure additional funding in the form of the Rural Health Initiative when the White River VA was in danger of losing its surgical program. This program will bring the \$7.25 million each year for the three years needed to keep the White River Junction Veterans Hospital open and thriving.

As a senior member of the Veterans Committee of the U.S. Senate, he continues to fight for increases in the overall funding for veterans health care programs and health care initiatives such as Hepatitis C screening and long term care programs. He is also working on developing a new approach to compensation for Vietnam War Veterans based on an "in country" definition. This would help guarantee that the long term health consequences of serving in Vietnam would be clearly covered by the VA.

## Working for Mental Health Parity

Four years ago, an important step was taken with the passage of the Mental Health Parity Act. Although far from requiring full protection, this landmark measure puts health insurance coverage for mental illness on an equal footing with coverage for other physical illnesses. However, absent additional Congressional action, even these requirements are due to expire September 30, 2001.

Senator Jeffords chaired a HELP Committee hearing on May 18, 2000 to examine the implementation of the current law. It was clear to all at the hearing that Congress needs to do more to mainstream mental health care. Dr. Ken Liberto of the Vermont Association of Mental Health testified and recommended Vermont's comprehensive parity law as a possible model for Federal legislation.

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