losses that America suffered after 9/11 and the losses we could face in the future if we are not able to help build a stable and democratic Iraq, this is something we must do. We cannot fail in this endeavor. We need to move forward swiftly to make sure that the Iraqi people can build that stable, democratic country.

□ 2100

Mr. CHOCOLA. I thank the gentleman for his comments. As you mentioned, one of the highlights of this experience was the opportunity to share a meal with the fine men and women in uniform. We can sit here, and we can say how proud we are of them, but until you are actually there with them and seeing the tremendous work that they are doing, I do not know that we can appreciate their efforts and their competence.

During one of the meals, again I always ask, what do you want me to share with people when I go back home? We were in Babylon in this historic city where Saddam had built another palace to himself. A young soldier who had been very quiet during the meal, he looked up and he said, what I want the people at home to know is that the Iraqis that are shooting at us and setting off bombs, those aren't the Iraqi people I know. The Iraqi people I know are very appreciative that we are here. They thank me every day. I go out in the marketplace, and I don't feel threatened. That's what I want the people at home to know, is that the Iraqi people very much appreciate our efforts.

Then later, right after that meal, you will remember we went to a mass grave site. That was probably one of the most moving experiences that I had during the trip, where we visited this mass grave site where up to 15,000 people had been murdered, many of them buried alive. They told us about how that grave site was discovered and the conditions. Do you remember that? Do you want to share that story?

Mr. SHUSTER. Absolutely. That was one of the best stories that I have taken away from Iraq. Not only did we see firsthand the commitment and the bravery, the courage of our young men and women, but the decency of the American soldier. The story we were told was that when they found the mass grave site, the Iraqi people as they do to celebrate or in anger when they come together is they shoot their weapons off into the air. It is very dangerous because when you shoot a bullet up, it has to come down, and when you have several hundred people doing that, there were people being killed. The Marines told these folks that were going up to the mass grave site that they could not celebrate in that way. They were not allowed to shoot guns off into the air, so it was a very heated exchange. The Iraqis were angry because they could not do what they typically do.

So they went to the mass grave site, they collected the remains of many of their family members, and as they came back into the village, they came face to face with a patrol of Marines. It was a tense moment. Without somebody from high up, some bureaucrat in Washington or some general in the Pentagon or some general in the field, a young sergeant decided the best thing to do was to order his men to stand aside, take their helmets off and bow their heads to pay respect to the families, to the people that had perished and to honor them as they passed.

I truly look at that, when I think about the American soldier and we think of, as I said earlier, how courageous they are, truly, how compassionate they are. That is a demonstration of that. It is really a touching story. It makes me very, very proud to be an American, to know that we not only train fierce warriors, but compassionate soldiers, compassionate people.

Mr. CHOCOLA. Again, I thank the gentleman. I think you are right. I think that the secret to our success in Iraq is not just going to be firepower or dollars, it is going to be the content of the character of the men and women in uniform, and, certainly, we saw that they have tremendous character. They represent American ideals and values better than we could ever imagine. I think we certainly owe them a debt of gratitude for their efforts.

Mr. SHUSTER. I think it was General Sanchez that said to us that the way for us to succeed, to win this, to finally win this, is not going to be militarily, it is going to be through the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people, helping them to rebuild a country and giving them back their country.

As you mentioned earlier, the thing we do not hear about in the media, they say that there is no plan. As you mentioned and showed, one of the plans as I recall, we met with General Sanchez who is the head of operations in the Iraqi theater. Then we met with four of the five division generals, commanders in Iraq. Every time we sat down for a briefing with any one of them, they gave us a similar plan.

Even General Dempsey, who controls Baghdad, that is his area of control, he talked about when we were there at the end of August, they were already starting to make plans and starting to move toward taking our control, our base out of the center of Baghdad and moving it to the four corners of Baghdad. That was a month ago. I have not heard about that. I have not heard about it in the national media. I have heard about it in our briefings, that General Dempsey is starting to make those moves, so that we are looking into Baghdad, not looking out. They believe that that is going to be a better way for us to help the Iraqi people, so we are not sitting in the middle and the Iraqi people then can take control of the security of Baghdad.

So there is a plan. We know that, and we have seen that. That is why it is so important tonight for us here and to go back to our districts and talk about these plans, to talk about what we saw. I would encourage every Member of the House of Representatives, all 435 Members, to get on a plane, go to Iraq, see what is over there, because I think as you have pointed out tonight, they come back and tell a different story, or a full story of what is going on in Iraq. I would encourage all of the Members of the House to travel there and see it firsthand.

Mr. CHOCOLA. Again, I thank the gentleman. I share in his encouragement for all Members possible to go there and see for themselves what is happening and share those stories.

EXTENDING TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES BLOCK GRANT PROGRAM

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut (during special order of Mr. CHOCOLA). Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to take from the Speaker's table the bill (H.R. 3146) to extend the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant program, and certain tax and trade programs, and for other purposes, with a Senate amendment thereto, and concur in the Senate amendment.

The Clerk read the title of the bill.

The Clerk read the Senate amendment, as follows:

Senate amendment:

Page 10, after line 16, insert:

SEC. 402. EXTENSION OF PROVISION EQUALIZING URBAN AND RURAL STANDARDIZED MEDICARE INPATIENT HOSPITAL PAYMENTS.

(a) IN GENERAL.—Paragraphs (1) and (2) of section 402(b) of the Miscellaneous Appropriations Act, 2003 (Public Law 108–7; 117 Stat. 548) are each amended by striking ''September 30, 2003'' and insert ''March 31, 2004''.

(b) EFFECTIVE DATE.—

(1) IN GENERAL.—Subject to paragraph (2), the amendments made by subsection (a) shall take effect as if included in the enactment of the Miscellaneous Appropriations Act, 2003.

(2) AUTHORITY TO DELAY IMPLEMENTATION.—

(a) IN GENERAL.—If the Secretary of Health and Human Services (in this subsection referred to as the ''Secretary'') determines that it is not administratively feasible to implement the amendments made by subsection (a), notwithstanding such amendments and in order to comply with Congressional intent, the Secretary may delay the implementation of such amendments until such time as the Secretary determines to be appropriate, but in no case later than November 1, 2003.

(B) TEMPORARY ADJUSTMENT FOR REMAINDER OF FISCAL YEAR 2004 TO EFFECT FULL RATE CHANGE.—If the Secretary delays implementation of the amendments made by subsection (a) under subparagraph (A), the Secretary shall make such adjustment to the amount of payments affected by such delay, for the portion of fiscal year 2004 after the date of the delayed implementation, in such manner as the Secretary estimates will ensure that the total payments for inpatient hospital services so affected with respect to such fiscal year is the same as would have been made if this paragraph had not been enacted.

(C) NO EFFECT ON PAYMENTS FOR SUBSEQUENT PAYMENT PERIODS.—The application of subparagraphs (A) and (B) shall not affect payment rates and shall not be taken into account in calculating payment amounts for services furnished for periods after September 30, 2004.

(D) ADMINISTRATION OF PROVISIONS.—

(i) NO RULEMAKING OR NOTICE REQUIRED.—The Secretary may carry out the authority under this paragraph by program memorandum or otherwise and is not required to prescribe regulations or to provide notice in the Federal Register in order to carry out such authority.

(ii) LIMITATION OF REVIEW.—There shall be no administrative or judicial review under section 1869 or 1878 of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 1395ff and 1395oo), or otherwise of any delay or determination made by the Secretary under this paragraph or the application of the payment rates determined under this paragraph.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut (during the reading). Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate amendment be considered as read and printed in the RECORD.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mrs. MILLER of Michigan). Is there objection to the request of the gentlewoman from Connecticut?

There was no objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the initial request of the gentlewoman from Connecticut?

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, reserving the right to object, I do not intend to object, but under my reservation, I yield to the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. WU).

Mr. WU. I thank the gentleman from Maryland for yielding. Madam Speaker, I rise to express my grave concern with the potential termination of the successful Welfare Waiver Program in my State of Oregon because of Federal action or inaction. Today we are moving forward again on legislation to extend the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, Program through a period of time until we can do the full reauthorization. Also today in Oregon, a successful State-designed welfare-to-work program which has provided a gateway from welfare to work for thousands of Oregonians may expire through our action or inaction.

My State of Oregon currently operates its welfare program under a Federal waiver. In Oregon, the program is known as the Oregon option and in the last 6 years, it has seen caseload reduction rates above the national average. Our innovative program allows Oregon the flexibility to consider individuals on a case-by-case basis. Some folks simply need a little job training or job search skills and then they are ready to transition back into the workforce. Others need more extensive drug and alcohol treatments or basic education before they are able to hold down a job. This combination of rehabilitative services to the most needy and more education and job training activities for others has proved to be a great success. For 18 months, I have sought to protect and extend the successful State innovation. My friends and colleagues have acknowledged the success of the Oregon program and the importance of preserving individual State innovation. However, with the passage of today's extension, we find ourselves punishing, rather than rewarding, innovation.

I ask the gentlewoman from Connecticut to assist the citizens of Oregon and the Nation in this matter, and I am seeking it here tonight.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, I yield to the gentlewoman from Connecticut.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. I thank the gentleman for yielding. I certainly appreciate my colleague from Oregon's concern with his State's inventive approach and successful program in support of women on welfare, individuals on welfare seeking the independence of returning to the workforce. I am pleased that the next round of welfare reform will allow a great deal more flexibility in State programs.

As the gentleman is aware, a number of State waiver programs have expired in recent years. In June 2003, Oregon Senators were informed by Secretary Thompson that, despite the expiration of Oregon's waiver that month, Oregon was not in danger of failing to satisfy work rate requirements in the future. The reason is because Oregon's caseload reduction credits totally wipe out any effective work rate requirement in the State.

Here is how Secretary Thompson put it:

''Oregon is not in violation and, based on Oregon's history, is not expected to be in violation, and, therefore, Oregon will not be subject to penalties for the next 3 months or until reauthorization. Even without its waiver, Oregon's program would have met its all-family work participation requirement in 2002 because it effectively had no participation requirement. Should reauthorization not occur prior to the end of the fiscal year and current law be extended again, I would remain confident, based on the facts that I have before me, that Oregon could continue to operate its program without becoming subject to participation rate penalties.''

As the gentleman knows, the House-passed welfare reauthorization bill, H.R. 4, includes provisions that would allow States to apply for new waivers of the TANF program. That reflects additional flexibility for States and is a positive step. I will fight in conference for enhanced waiver authority for States in conference with the Senate.

Mr. WU. If the gentleman will yield further, I would make inquiry of the gentlewoman from Connecticut, I would like to make two inquiries, and let me do them separately. Oregon has had a terrible unemployment situation. Out of the last 24 months, we have topped the Nation in unemployment 17 out of those 24 months. We have oscillated between 8.1 percent unemployment and 8.8 percent unemployment. I believe we are currently at a seasonally-adjusted 8.5 percent unemployment rate.

My first inquiry of the gentlewoman from Connecticut is that the factual predicate, upon which the Secretary's letter is written, is based on weighted averages of caseload reduction. Given the terrible situation that our State of Oregon is in, it may take some time for this Congress to reauthorize TANF. If it does take a substantial amount of time, there may come a time that, given our unemployment rate, our caseload reduction may no longer be able to meet some of the current statutory requirements. Is it the gentlewoman's intention to work on a bipartisan basis to encourage the Secretary and the administration to continue to extend those State waivers which are being informally extended currently by the Secretary?

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. It is simply my belief that within the time frame of this extension, we will be able to permanently reauthorize the welfare program and add to it the more flexible provisions that are in the underlying bill with some interest that the Senate has expressed in additional waivers.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, under my reservation, let me just compliment the gentleman from Oregon for raising this issue. There are States that have operated under waiver authority that has expired. I can assure you, although we have not been able to work out a bipartisan bill, there is bipartisan agreement to maintain the flexibility of the States under the waiver authority. I know that there are efforts to extend it and expand it, but at least there is agreement that we want to maintain at least where the States are today in their ability to use authority to tailor programs for their individual State needs. That is a bipartisan understanding, and I believe, also, there is a lot of support in the other body.

I thank the gentleman for raising these issues, because I think they are very important as we move forward in the debate, not only to Oregon but to other States. I know the gentleman is fighting very hard for his own State. We appreciate that very much. We certainly do not want to see a diminished ability of your State to perform its services.

Mr. WU. I thank the gentleman from Maryland. I will take the gentlewoman's response as we certainly aspire to extend this to the full reauthorization within the limits of this extension, but that on a best efforts basis, should we not be able to do that within this period of time, which I believe is March of 2004, that we will endeavor together to continue on this informal basis to extend the waivers under which Oregon and other States have operated.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. It will certainly be an issue that we will discuss together before the expiration if we think reauthorization cannot be finalized.

□ 2115

Mr. WU. Madam Speaker, if I may make my second inquiry of the gentlewoman from Connecticut, I would like to inquire of the gentlewoman as to her intent to assist Oregon and other States with an extension specifically for States on welfare waivers in the

TANF reauthorization bill as it is currently being considered before this Congress and this body and the other body.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, before I yield to the gentlewoman from Connecticut, it has been the position at least of this body by its formal actions to expand the authority to what is known as a superwaiver. That is controversial, and I am not sure there is certainly not an agreement on a bipartisan basis for a superwaiver; however, the superwaiver sort of consumes the individual State waivers. It is certainly the position of the majority of this House on both sides of the aisle that the States have at least the waiver authorities that they had under the expiring TANF laws. I will be glad to yield to the gentlewoman from Connecticut, but I am not certain that there is an agreement right now as to individual State waivers as compared to broader authority. I can tell the position that I would like to see is individual States, but I understand there is no consensus yet on that issue.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. Madam Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. CARDIN. Further reserving the right to object, I yield to the gentlewoman from Connecticut.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. Madam Speaker, I agree with the gentleman from Maryland. There is a lot of interest in the States having flexibility to tailor their programs to their own specific needs, but exactly the structure of that authority is a matter of disagreement at this time; and we will look to see how the Senate resolves those issues and then in conference find an agreement that we think will meet the needs of the majority of the States.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, I appreciate what the gentlewoman said. I think it is, in fairness to the gentleman from Oregon, certainly our desire to make sure the States maintain the type of authority Oregon has been able to use to create creative programs, and I really do thank the gentleman for bringing this to our attention. It is a very important issue to our States.

Mr. WU. Madam Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. CARDIN. Further reserving the right to object, I yield to the gentleman from Oregon.

Mr. WU. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding.

I would like to inquire one more time of the gentlewoman from Connecticut as to her intention to work in this body in conference and with the Senate with respect to specific State waiver authority as we go forward with this reauthorization.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, I think the gentlewoman has already answered that. Further reserving the right to object, I yield to the gentlewoman from Connecticut again if she wants to further clarify it.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. Madam Speaker, I would indicate to the gentleman that the bill that passed the House has a very broad waiver of authority in it. There are some that think it is too broad and would like narrower waiver authority. We will see what the Senate has done, and then we will see if the conference committee can come to a conclusion about the structure of the waiver authority in the future. But there was a waiver authority in the last welfare bill. I think there is universal agreement that States need flexibility to structure their programs to meet the specific needs and circumstances of their own people, and so this will be a significant issue that will be addressed.

I cannot tell the gentleman at this point whether there will be precisely the narrow State waiver authority there is under current law, but I would also remind the gentleman that that waiver authority under current law has a defect. The waivers expire and are not reauthorizable. Under current law, they have to reapply for them. So under current law there is a problem about how do we move the successful waivered program into the mainstream, and I think that is an issue that the conference needs to resolve as well because my State also has a waiver that has expired as well as the same kind of unemployment rate, unfortunately, that Oregon has.

So there will be a number of people in conference concerned about this issue, but I certainly cannot assure the gentleman that there will be exactly the same kind of state-based waiver authority in the reauthorization that there has been in the past bill. There is a lot more interest amongst many in a broader waiver authority that encompasses a greater variety of bills so that they could better integrate broad services for people coming off welfare. So it is a long debate. We are not going to resolve it here, but I do appreciate the gentleman from Oregon bringing to this floor his concern about his State's rights to tailor its welfare program to meet the needs of its people. In the end that is really what makes a Federal program successful or not successful is that local control and local power, and I agree with the gentleman that that is terribly important to the quality of Federal programs and their success.

Mr. WU. Madam Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. CARDIN. Further reserving the right to object, I yield to the gentleman from Oregon.

Mr. WU. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding.

The language of this body is beautiful for its specificity and nonspecificity, and I fully appreciate that. I certainly do not expect a solution to the problems of this particular reauthorization this evening. I would like to simply note that under the plenary authority that Congress has over many issues, including this one, that it is within the ability of Congress in this bill to extend expired waivers, and I would just like to log that as a point of departure for States like Connecticut and Oregon, the waivers for which have expired; and if there is a will, there will be a way.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, further reserving my right to object, just to respond to the gentleman, I agree completely with what he has said, and it has been the position of some of us to do the extension of individual States that had it prior to the expiration of the bill. There has been a consensus, as I have indicated before, to give States at least that flexibility; and the majority has decided to go beyond that with the superwaiver in this body. So the gentleman's point is very well stated, which I happen to personally agree with; and I appreciate his bringing it to our attention.

Mr. WU. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman and I thank the gentlewoman.

THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES,
Washington, DC, June 24, 2003.

Hon. RON WYDEN,
U.S. Senate,
Washington, DC.

DEAR SENATOR WYDEN: Oregon has been operating its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program under a waiver since 1996 and this waiver is due to expire at the end of this month. I thank you for raising with the Administration your concerns about your State's TANF program and its waiver, and I admire the tremendous efforts you have been making on Oregon's behalf to see that your State has the ability to operate the best TANF program it can. I believe that Oregon will be able to maintain its current program through the end of this fiscal year, and ask you to continue working with me to complete reauthorization legislation that will improve TANF for families across the nation.

The rigorous evaluation of your Portland program has documented some of the most impressive impacts on increased earnings, improved job quality and reductions in welfare dependency of any program that has ever been evaluated. This impressive record of accomplishment is one of which you can be proud.

I know that your efforts in support of Oregon's program are grounded in the lessons you have learned from the evaluation of your State's success and these lessons will be important in informing the debate on issues that will be considered in TANF reauthorization. Your commitment and leadership on these issues continues to benefit the people of Oregon.

Oregon's TANF program operates with a waiver granted under the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. When AFDC was converted into TANF as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), the new law enabled States such as Oregon that had previously approved waiver programs to continue operating those waivers. However, there is no provision in law that would permit the Administration to extend such waivers, as it was anticipated that these programs would eventually align themselves with the larger TANF reforms upon completion of their waivers. Therefore, extending existing waivers would require changing current law.

TANF is currently authorized only through the end of this month, and legislation is before the Senate that would temporarily extend the program through September, 2003,

the end of FY 2003. The Administration strongly supports passage of this emergency measure to keep the current program operating, and enable Congress to complete work on reauthorization. Without this measure, Oregon would be denied access to over $40 million in TANF funding scheduled to be made available for the fourth quarter next week.

I understand Oregon will maintain its current program while Congress completes work on reauthorization. Oregon is not in violation and based on Oregon's history is not expected to be in violation and therefore Oregon will not be subject to penalties for the next three months or until reauthorization.

Let me explain. Oregon's current TANF program has many elements, most of which are accommodated under TANF and are permissible under current law. However, I understand the State is concerned about its ability to continue operating two particular policies when its waiver expires. Oregon's waiver allows the State to count toward its required work participation rate certain types of activities, such as participation in substance abuse treatment and extended education and training, which would not otherwise be countable under TANF. Your State's waiver also permits counting of certain adults who are participating but have not attained at least 30 hours of participation per week, which is also required under TANF law.

Importantly, even without its waiver, TANF would not prohibit Oregon from engaging clients in the activities they currently do, nor does it prohibit the State from assigning hours for particular clients at levels below the current-law standard. These issues are relevant in that States must meet minimum participation rates. However, according to Oregon's current data, the State would be likely to meet its required participation in FY 2003, even though Oregon's ability to count certain activities and clients under its waiver will end at the end of this month.

Oregon achieved a participation rate for all its families of 61.1% in FY 2002. It would have achieved only an 8.0% all-family rate if it had operated the same way, but counted participation without its current waiver. However, because Oregon achieved such a dramatic reduction in TANF caseload over the past several years, it enjoys a caseload reduction credit that reduced its effective all-family participation rate requirement to 0% in FY 2002. Thus, even without its waiver, Oregon's program would have met its all-family participation requirement in FY 2002 because it effectively had no participation requirement.

Oregon's caseload reduction credit in FY 2001 was 56.2%, and in FY 2002 was 58.3%. I would anticipate that this would not change considerably in FY 2003, and because the required all-family rate for FY 2003 remained at only 50%, the State is very likely facing no participation requirement for the current year as well. Furthermore, work participation rates are measured on a full year basis, meaning that for FY 2003 Oregon's rate would be an average of what it achieved throughout the year. Given Oregon's extremely high participation rates under its waiver, and the fact it will have operated under the waiver for three of the four quarters of FY 2003, it should achieve a very high rate even if the final quarter is calculated without the waiver.

Oregon also must meet a separate participation rate for its 2-parent families. With its waiver, the State achieved a 53.8% 2-parent rate in FY 2002, but due to the caseload reduction credit it earned, only needed to meet a 31.7% standard. Again, given the State's likely high 2-parent participation for the first three quarters of FY 2003, it should meet this standard as well.

Based upon this, I am confident that Oregon can continue to operate its current TANF program through the end of this fiscal year without concerns about becoming subject to penalties for meeting its participation requirements. Should reauthorization not occur prior to the end of the fiscal year and current law be extended again, I would remain confident based on the facts that I have before me that Oregon could continue to operate its program without becoming subject to participation rate penalties.

TANF is a great program, and with your help we can make it work even better in the future. TANF provides States tremendous flexibility to fund and operate work and job preparation activities, and to provide supportive services and benefits so clients can find work, support themselves and build a better life for their families. I know you share my interest in seeing the program reauthorized as quickly as possible, and seeing that important improvements are made to enable States to engage all cases in meaningful and helpful activities so they can move into work quickly and successfully. Reauthorization is crucial for Oregon. As you know, the President's reauthorization proposal includes changes that would enable States to count various barrier removal activities toward their participation rates, as Oregon is doing now. It would also eliminate the separate 2-parent participation rate.

I appreciate the impressive work you are doing for the State of Oregon, and particularly your attention to this critical program that has become so important to helping our neediest families build better lives. The State of Oregon has done a wonderful job with its TANF program over the years, and we will continue to work with you on reauthorization legislation to see that we build the best program for Oregon and all of America.

The Office of Management and Budget advises that it has no objection to this letter from the standpoint of the Administration's program.

Sincerely,

TOMMY G. THOMPSON.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, this is very important legislation. It extends the TANF programs and related programs for the next 6 months so that we can try to work out a long-term, multiyear extension of the TANF programs and related programs. I thank the gentlewoman for bringing this legislation forward.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. Madam Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. CARDIN. I yield to the gentlewoman from Connecticut.

Mrs. JOHNSON of Connecticut. Madam Speaker, this legislation is nearly identical to H.R. 3146, a bill the House unanimously approved last week. The only change is the addition of a 6-month extension of expiring Medicare payment provisions affecting hospitals in small cities and rural areas. These provisions need to be passed today and signed into law immediately to ensure the continued smooth operation of programs affecting health, welfare, and commerce throughout the country. I urge the support of this body.

Mr. BEREUTER. Madam Speaker, this Member wishes to add his strong support for H.R. 3146 and would like to commend the distinguished gentleman from California [Mr. THOMAS], the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, for introducing this important legislation and for his efforts to extend the authorization for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, as well as related welfare reform initiatives, such as the mandatory child care program, the abstinence education program, and the transitional medical assistance program. Moreover, this Member would like to thank Chairman THOMAS for including language in H.R. 3146 to address Medicare payment disparities between rural and urban hospitals.

The Rural Health Care Coalition, which this Member currently leads as the Interim Co-Chairman, has been diligently working to bring equity to the rural health care delivery system. One of the Coalition's key priorities has been to address hospital payment disparities to ensure that facilities in rural areas and small cities can stay in business and continue serving patients who need care.

Medicare pays for inpatient services in large urban areas using a standardized amount that is 1.6 percent larger than the standardized amount used to reimburse hospitals in other areas (both rural areas and small urban areas). The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2003 (Public Law No. 108–7) provided a six-month base payment increase for rural and small urban hospitals from April 1, 2003 to September 30, 2003. Specifically, this measure raised the inpatient base rate for hospitals in rural and urban areas to the level of the rate for those in large urban areas.

The bill before us today will extend this payment increase until March 31, 2004. Such action is cruical—especially for cash-strapped rural facilities which are near the breaking point and in need of urgent aid. This policy will help maintain access to care in rural and less populated urban areas of the country by better aligning hospitals' payments to their average costs. The estimated impact of eliminating the base rate differential for six more months will result in $3.8 million for Nebraska hospitals, according to the Nebraska Hospital Association. This Member will continue to work on initiatives to bring even greater Medicare equity to Nebraska this year.

In closing, this Member urges his colleagues to support H.R. 3146. Reducing the difference in Medicare reimbursement levels between rural and urban hospitals is critical. Rural hospitals receive less Federal funding than hospitals in urban areas for providing the same services. This legislation will keep base payments at the same level as those in urban areas for six more months.

Mr. CARDIN. Madam Speaker, I withdraw my reservation of objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mrs. MILLER of Michigan). Is there objection to the initial request of the gentlewoman from Connecticut?

There was no objection.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

THE REAL STORY OF IRAQ

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The gentleman from Indiana (Mr. CHOCOLA) has 19 minutes remaining in his Special Order.

Mr. CHOCOLA. Madam Speaker, so far we have heard from three Members