□ 2045

They also deserve to receive the benefits and the health care that they need and have earned.

We are all aware of the crisis facing VA health care. Veterans are waiting unconscionable lengths of time for appointments. The President's now out-of-date Web site claims his fiscal year 2004 budget, the year we are in, which Congress increased by $1.3 billion last year, would enable the VA to eliminate the waiting lists by the summer of 2004, this summer. Well, that is not the truth. That is not going to happen. Instead, VA hospitals are struggling to meet increasing demand; and year after year, my colleagues and I have to fight to increase the underfunded VA budget.

Veterans in rural States, such as Maine, face all of these problems, amplified by the fact that they may have to travel hundreds of miles to the nearest VA health facility.

Maine's single VA hospital, Togus, is located 100 miles from our southern border and 300 miles from our northern border. As anyone familiar with the cold and snowy winters will tell you, those kinds of distances are difficult, not to mention dangerous, to travel in the winter.

The VA has established access guidelines which provide that a veteran should be able to access primary care within 30 miles or 30 minutes from their homes in urban areas, and 60 miles or 60 minutes in rural areas. Only 59 percent of Maine veterans enrolled in the VA health care system meet those guidelines, and that means that more than 16,000 Maine veterans live outside the access standards, not to mention the veterans who have not even enrolled to get VA health care. Perhaps one of the reasons they do not seek VA health care is because they are so far away.

The VA's guidelines for access to inpatient hospital services provide that a veteran should live within 2 hours of inpatient services. Only 52 percent of Maine veterans meet this guideline.

Let me give you an example of what this all means in my State. Veterans in Maine, veterans have to travel to get specialized care, often to a Boston VA hospital; and if a veteran lives in the northern part of the State, say Caribou or Fort Kent, he probably cannot make a bus trip to Boston in one day. He will have to stay overnight in Bangor or Portland and take the rest of the ride the next day. On the third day, the veteran may finally have his appointment, and then either start back that day or the next day.

So you can see to get specialized care in Boston, a veteran from northern Maine may take 3 to 5 days to go down and get that care. Of course, a relative or friend may make the drive, and it might happen in 2 days or 2½ days instead of 3 to 5; but the problem is, how many people can afford to do that, how many people have the help they need?

We need to enable veterans living in the most rural parts of our country to benefit from the same accessibility to services that veterans in more urban areas enjoy. In Maine, the VA staff did town hall meetings throughout the State to develop a market plan for the VA CARES process, and this plan recommended five new community-based outpatient clinics in rural areas to improve access, in addition to collaborating with the State's successful telemedicine program and to the continued use of contract care.

I urge my colleagues to take to heart these difficulties faced by veterans in rural areas. Expanding access to care, particularly in these rural areas, must be a focal point of our efforts to reduce the huge backlog of veterans waiting for health care.

As we consider the fiscal year 2005 budget and when we review the final CARES national plan, we must not let down our Nation's veterans. First, they deserve the highest quality of care, but we also must ensure that the VA health system provides access to that care for all veterans.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BURGESS). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. BURTON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BURTON of Indiana addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

WASHINGTON WASTE WATCHERS REPORT ON TRANSPORTATION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. HENSARLING) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. HENSARLING. Mr. Speaker, I rise today as cofounder of the Washington Waste Watchers, a Republican working group dedicated to bringing the disinfectant of sunshine into the shadowy corners of the wasteful Washington bureaucracy.

As we speak, Congress is engaged in a debate over spending and the Federal budget. With a historically large deficit, Democrats are advocating that our answer is to raise taxes on American families. Democrats demand that we roll back tax relief, the tax relief that is responsible for the strong growth in our economy, the tax relief that is bringing down unemployment, the tax relief that amounts to only 1 percent, 1 percent, of the $28.3 trillion, 10-year spending plan that we passed last year.

In other words, Mr. Speaker, 99 percent of the challenge in dealing with our Federal deficit is on the spending side. Clearly we have a spending problem, not a taxing problem in America; and I, for one, say when it comes to Federal spending, it is time to take out the trash. It is time to go after the costly waste, fraud and abuse that permeates every nook and cranny of the Federal Government.

Mr. Speaker, this body will soon take up the issue of transportation funding. Transportation is important. It is important to our economy; it is important to jobs. But before we sign a huge check drawn on the bank account of American families, should we not do everything that we can to ensure that every dime of transportation funding goes to roads, and not rip-offs?

Let me give you just a few examples. The Department of Transportation has historically squandered the hard-earned money of American families. Roughly two-thirds of Boston's ''Big Dig'' central artery is funded by Federal tax dollars. This has been called the greatest public works scandal of modern times.

This federally funded project has repeatedly exceeded cost estimates and lagged behind schedule. Is that not a surprise? But in the year 2000, the project was already five times more expensive than planned, $11 billion over budget. An investigation revealed that project managers consistently were dishonest in their reporting of the project. $11 billion of bloated budgets and mismanagement, and yet Democrats want to raise our taxes to pay for more of this?

Today the Federal Government is picking up 80 percent of the cost for a $1.4 million project to upgrade just three bus shelters in upstate New York. For more than $1 million of American taxpayers' hard-earned money, these bus shelters are going to be equipped with ''radiant heating systems'' and a layout ''designed to appeal to passengers' sense of security.'' Even some of the beneficiaries of these new mansion-like bus shelters had concerns with its cost. One of the residents said, It just seems like a whole lot of money to me. Maybe they could just put some glass doors up.

American families are lucky if they can afford $150,000 for a home, and the Federal Government is going to use their money to pay over $370,000 apiece for bus shelters? And yet Democrats want to raise our taxes to pay for more of this?

Another investigation revealed that 29 Federal contracts worth roughly $62 million were paid without any knowledge of whether they were even legally authorized. $62 million that was not legally authorized, and yet Democrats want to raise our taxes to pay for more of this?

Mr. Speaker, these are just a few examples of the rampant waste, fraud and abuse and duplication in just one Federal agency. After you begin to look closely, you will discover that in many Federal programs, routinely they will squander 10, 20, even 30 percent of their taxpayer-funded budgets, and have for years.

There are many ways that we can save money in Washington without cutting any needed services and without raising taxes on our hard-working families, as Democrats seek to do. Because when it comes to spending, Mr.

Speaker, and Federal programs, it is not how much money you spend that counts; it is how Washington spends the money.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Utah (Mr. MATHESON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. MATHESON addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. DREIER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. DREIER addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EMANUEL) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. EMANUEL addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. GINGREY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. GINGREY addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Dakota (Mr. POMEROY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. POMEROY addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Utah (Mr. BISHOP) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BISHOP of Utah addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING PRESIDENT JEAN-BERTRAND ARISTIDE OF HAITI

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. CONYERS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CONYERS. Mr. Speaker, I would like to bring to my colleagues' attention the circumstances surrounding President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti, whose circumstances are somewhat in doubt tonight. I have spent a fair amount of time calling a number of people to find out whether President Aristide and his wife, Mildred Aristide, are in safe circumstances; and I have this report to make to my colleagues tonight.

We have called the offices of the Assistant Secretary of State, Mr. Noriega; the Secretary of State, Mr. Powell; the Security Council Chief, Ms. Rice; the President of the United States, Mr. Bush; the President of the Central Republic of Africa; the ambassador to the United States of the Central Republic of Africa; the Secretary of Defense, Mr. Rumsfeld; and the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mr. George Tenet.

I was able to reach General Craddock, who works as an assistant to Secretary Rumsfeld, who asked that we send a communication so that they could begin trying to help us determine the whereabouts, and, more importantly, the safety of the circumstances surrounding President Aristide. We sent the following letter, which I include for the RECORD.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
Washington, DC, March 10, 2004.

Hon. DONALD RUMSFELD,
c/o General Craddock,
U.S. Secretary of Defense, Washington, DC.

DEAR GENERAL CRADDOCK. This letter is written notification in response to a telephone inquiry on today's date of the location of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. This evening the inquiry was conducted by a member of my staff, Bernard Graham, and yourself.

As per your conversation, please advise me as soon as possible as to the whereabouts of President Aristide. My staffer has informed me that you will start to retrieve this information tonight through proper channels.

This matter is of utmost importance to me and I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

JOHN CONYERS, Jr.,
Member of Congress.

In addition, I was able to reach Mr. Brian Newbert, the watch officer at the State Department, who was very co-operative, who was calling Bangui, the capital of the Central Republic of Africa, in an attempt to locate President and Mrs. Aristide. He was not able to do it. There is an 11-hour time difference. But he told me that he would continue this search in the morning.

Now, this problem has arisen because in last week's testimony before a subcommittee of the Committee on International Relations we were told by Assistant Secretary Noriega that it was true that a U.S. aircraft, or an aircraft controlled by the United States, had taken the President and his wife to the Central Republic of Africa. We asked him how were they doing, and he said that he did not know, because the United States Government's responsibility ended with him delivering President Aristide to this francophone country of 3.5 million people in the center of the continent of Africa, and that he had no further responsibility in connection with this.

This was a slightly shocking statement to the people that were in the hearing room, because it would have seemed that we might want to know what was happening to him from that point on.

We have a very sensitive and very serious matter here, and I hope that I will continue to enjoy the cooperation of the various heads of the agencies as we attempt to reach and make contact with President Aristide.

□ 2100

His country was overrun by rebels. He was forced to leave the country. He left under United States auspices and control, and it seems to me that the most elementary act of courtesy would be for us to make sure that he and his wife, which we pray are alive and in good condition and safe, are that. But it is very disturbing to me to report to my colleagues tonight that not only have I not been able to reach anyone that has been in contact with him, but we do not know anybody that has.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. PEARCE). Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. MCCOTTER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. MCCOTTER addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

WASHINGTON WASTE WATCHERS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. MARIO DIAZ-BALART) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MARIO DIAZ-BALART of Florida. Mr. Speaker, as a member of the Washington Waste Watchers, and I just listened to one of my esteemed colleagues from Texas speak about instances of waste in Federal Government and why some of us have such a hard time understanding and believing why it is so easy for our good friends, the Democrats, to constantly ask for massive tax increases while we see the waste that goes on in the Federal Government.

I just would like to read portions of a memo from the Inspector General of the Department of Energy dated March 2003. It is an audit report regarding the transfer of excess personal property from the Nevada test site to the community reuse organization. Mr. Speaker, during the 1990s, as a result of changes in program direction of the Department, the Department of Energy downsized or reconfigured a number of different facilities, including this State of Nevada test site. To mitigate any economic damages or impacts, Congress then authorized the Department to transfer excess personal property and provide aid to these local civic development organizations that are commonly known as CROs.

These transfers, and that is what the memo says, these transfers were based on the express understanding that the property was to be excess to department needs, obviously, and also the memo then further states, despite the realization that the transfers might be made at less than fair market value, the Department was to receive, obviously, the Department was to receive reasonable consideration from these CROs for said personal property.

Mr. Speaker, I want to kind of talk about some of the results, though, of the audit. The audit disclosed that Nevada's personal property transfers