

to one year, and extends authority to increase the award amounts based on federal national comparability increases in pay. Further, in an effort to encourage nurses who have already completed school to come work for VA, the bill would permanently authorize the Employee Debt Reduction Program, EDRP, extend to five the number of years that a VA employee might participate in the EDRP, and increase the gross award limit to any participant to \$44,000. The EDRP program allows VA to assist employees with the repayment of education debt, and it allows VA to compete with private sector health care systems that offer similar programs. Finally, this legislation creates the National VA Commission on Nursing, which will consist of experts in the nursing profession as well as economists and education professionals. The Commission will report findings and recommendations relating to nurse recruitment and retention and other nurse employment issues within two years.

The "Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Programs Enhancement Act of 2001" also contains elements of a bill, S. 1188, which I introduced earlier this year to provide priority access to VA care to poor veterans residing in relatively high cost areas like Philadelphia or Pittsburgh. Currently, VA provides priority access to care, and it waives co-payments, only for veterans whose incomes are below a nationally-determined annual amount. This "one-size-fits-all" formula does not take into account local variations in the cost of living. As a consequence, veterans in high-cost areas, typically urban areas, who are poor by most standards, do not qualify for priority access for VA care. And they must pay the full amount of co-payments charged to other, much better off, veterans. This legislation would relieve much of the burden of co-payments on, and raise the relative priority for VA health care of, these near-poor veterans.

The "Department of Veterans Affairs Health Care Programs Enhancement Act of 2001" also addresses other important health issues. It provides service-dogs, trained to accomplish tasks such as opening doors and retrieving clothing, to disabled veterans. It directs VA to focus its attention on the maintenance of special programs in each geographic region of the country, and it creates a program for chiropractic care in the VA. Finally, this legislation authorizes the construction of a power plant in Miami, FL, that was destroyed over one year ago by a fire that left two employees critically injured.

Finally, I note the enactment of the "Veterans' Survivor Benefits Improvements Act of 2001," Public Law 107-14, which was signed by the President on June 5, 2001. This legislation retro-

actively increased insurance benefits provided to, and guaranteed additional health care coverage for, the survivors of service members killed in the line of duty. This legislation also expanded health care coverage to the spouses of veterans who have permanent and total disabilities due to military service and to the spouses of veterans who have died as a result of wounds incurred in service. Further, this Act extended life insurance benefits to service members' spouses and children, and authorized, and directed, VA to conduct outreach efforts to contact these survivors, and other eligible dependents, to apprise them of the benefits to which they are entitled. Finally, the "Veterans' Survivor Benefits Improvements Act of 2001," made technical improvements to Montgomery GI Bill education benefits, and make other purely technical amendments to title 38, United States Code.

This first session of the 107th Congress has produced five outstanding bills benefitting veterans. The enhancements contained within them send an unmistakable message to Americans that this Nation values military service and honors those who risk their lives so that we may be free. I complement all those who worked so hard to make these legislative accomplishments a reality.

#### THE EQUAL PROTECTION OF VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 2001

Mr. TORRICELLI. Mr. President, when the Voting Rights Act was signed into law over 30 years ago, many thought it was the end of a long journey to recognize that the ideals on which this country was founded were more than just abstract notions. The Voting Rights Act and before it the 14th amendment were definitive expressions by our Nation's government that liberty and equality in theory is only as meaningful as liberty and equality in practice. As my colleague from Connecticut noted yesterday in this Chamber, Thomas Paine captured the essence of our Nation's democracy when he stated that the right to vote is "the primary right by which all other rights are protected."

The immediate consequence of the 2000 elections and its unsettling aftermath was a realization that even 30 years after the Voting Rights Act became law, the Nation's election system was not what people thought it was. The election brought to light many problems with the Nation's voting system, including the impact that outdated voting machines, undertrained poll workers, and poorly-designed ballots can have on an election.

Throughout the past year, Congress and the Nation have evaluated how best to ensure that future elections are ones in which Americans can have faith in the results. I have spent count-

less hours devoted to the subject. A year ago last week, Senator McCONNELL and I introduced one of the first bills seeking to improve election systems and procedures. Others soon followed with their own ideas about how to best bring about change to what we had learned was a clearly flawed system.

With so much at stake, the process has not been without disagreement and at times it seemed that little would be changed. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate, however, have finally made progress in crafting bipartisan legislation seeking to make elections more fair for all Americans. The House of Representatives has passed legislation supported by a majority of both parties. Yesterday, Senators DODD, McCONNELL, BOND, SCHUMER and I introduced bipartisan legislation to modernize the Nation's election procedures.

The Equal Protection of Voting Rights Act of 2001 represents a balance between establishing national standards for voting and giving States the flexibility to make improvements tailored to their State's needs. First, this bill creates a permanent Federal system of analysis and assistance. This legislation establishes an Election Administration Commission, consisting of two commissioners from each party who will serve 4-year terms. The commission will bring expertise to modernizing elections and provide States and localities with advice for their enhancing voting procedures. This permanent commission was the cornerstone of election reform legislation that Senator McCONNELL and I introduced over a year ago and I am extraordinarily pleased to see it included in this landmark legislation.

Second, this legislation establishes three minimum national requirements for voting procedures to ensure that voting across the Nation is uniform and nondiscriminatory. These minimum national standards include requiring States and localities across the Nation to utilize voting systems that enable voters to verify how they voted and ensure accessibility to language minorities and individuals with disabilities, requiring States and localities to provide for provisional balloting, and requiring States and localities to establish a statewide voter registration list with the names and addresses of eligible voters.

Perhaps most importantly, however, this legislation provides \$3 billion in Federal grants for States and localities to update voting systems, improve accessibility to polling places, and train poll workers, among other things. States and communities must show that they comply with the three national requirements to be eligible for the grants. An additional \$400 million is authorized for providing early funds so that States and localities can implement some improvements quickly; \$100

million of the bill's funding is directed to provide grants to make polling places physically accessible to those with disabilities. This funding ensures that for the first time in our Nation's history, the Federal Government will contribute our share to the cost of administering elections for Federal office.

I hope that this legislation completes our Nation's journey to ensuring that all eligible Americans are able to cast their vote fairly, accurately, and without interference. To some, this legislation may not be perfect, but I can assure my colleagues that it is the result of reasoned compromise and is a balanced response to all that our Nation has learned from the 2000 elections. I hope that when my colleagues and I return in January, we can work with the Senate leadership to ensure that bringing this legislation to the Senate floor is one of our top priorities.

#### EXPIRATION OF TRADE PROVISIONS

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, in the whirlwind of activity that always accompanies the end of a legislative session, many critical legislative decisions are made and critical legislation passes. Often it takes some time to tote up the wins and losses and arrive at a final evaluation of what has been achieved and what remains to be done.

Despite the efforts of those in the Senate, one of the losses for the session is the expiration of three key trade programs, the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), the Andean Trade Preferences Act (ATPA), and Trade Adjustment Assistance program.

What is surprising about the expiration of these programs is all three of them have nearly universal support. They expire not because of a legitimate difference in policies and not because the programs have served their purpose. They expire because of political maneuvering in the House.

In my view, it always reflects poorly on the Congress when needed programs expire due to political machinations or simply lack of attention. It sends poor signals to those that depend on these programs. In this case, the U.S. companies that import products under GSP and ATPA and the foreign countries we are attempting to aid through these programs can hardly avoid the impression that these programs are a low priority for Congress.

In the case of ATPA, there are those that believe that expiration will spur a rapid move to expand ATPA. I support an expansion of ATPA, but I believe such brinkmanship is far more likely to result in a long break in ATPA than it is a quick expansion.

Fortunately, in the case of both GSP and ATPA it is possible to extend these tariff benefits retroactively. If the U.S. importers are able to shift funds and

wait, there is a good chance they will ultimately receive the promised benefits from these programs.

Sadly, this is not the case with the expiration of the Trade Adjustment Assistance program. This program provides income support and training benefits to workers who have lost their jobs due to trade. It provides them the opportunity to train for a new job and rebuild their lives. Given that they are unemployed, they are generally not in a position to absorb a three month or a six month break in benefits.

I understand that the Department of Labor plans to advise the state agencies that work with them to administer TAA plan to advise those agencies to keep paying benefits because they expect the program to be reauthorized. The Department of Labor's advise is sound; indeed, I hope to win passage for a considerable expansion of TAA.

Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that state agencies will keep operating based upon this federal promise and borrow money from other programs to support TAA. In fact, in at least 5 states, state law prohibits such fund shifting.

This raises the prospect that some of the 35,000 TAA recipients around the United States will receive a very nasty Christmas present—the unexpected halt of the benefits on which they depend to rebuild their lives and support their families.

Mr. President, I believe Congress is sometimes criticized unfairly. Sometimes, however, the rush of events diverts attention from some of the glaring errors we make.

The stubborn obstinance of some of the other body to extend TAA is, in my view, a shameful example of playing politics with the interest of those citizens that can least afford it. I hope this example is not lost on journalists, editorial writers, and, ultimately, voters. Someone should be held accountable.

#### LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT ACT OF 2001

Mr. SMITH of Oregon. Mr. President, I rise today to speak about hate crimes legislation I introduced with Senator KENNEDY in March of this year. The Local Law Enforcement Act of 2001 would add new categories to current hate crimes legislation sending a signal that violence of any kind is unacceptable in our society.

I would like to describe a terrible crime that occurred in May 1995 in West Palm Beach, FL. A gay man was robbed and brutally murdered. The attacker, Ronald Knight, 27, was convicted of first-degree murder, armed robbery, and a hate crime in connection with the incident.

I believe that government's first duty is to defend its citizens, to defend them against the harms that come out of hate. The Local Law Enforcement En-

hancement Act of 2001 is now a symbol that can become substance. I believe that by passing this legislation, we can change hearts and minds as well.

#### THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION

Mr. CLELAND. Mr. President, I rise today to discuss legislation that establishes the National Museum of African American History and Culture Presidential Commission. On Monday, December 17, 2001, the Senate passed, with my support, H.R. 3442 which establishes the National Museum of African American History and Culture Presidential Commission. The Presidential Commission will develop and recommend a legislative plan of action for creating a national museum on the National Mall that recognizes the unique historical and cultural legacy of African Americans. The U.S. House of Representatives passed the legislation, introduced by Representative JOHN LEWIS, on December 11, 2001 by voice vote.

The African American legacy is one of gradual steps that have moved this group of Americans from slavery to full partnership in our society and culture. African Americans have played a central part in the development of our country's democratic institutions and our commitment to individual freedom and equal rights. Despite this history, there is currently no national museum located in Washington, D.C. on the National Mall devoted to telling the African American story. I believe this museum is the next stage in recognizing the burdens born by African Americans and celebrating their unique contributions to our nation.

Many notable African Americans have made contributions in the areas of science, medicine, the arts and humanities, sports, music and dance. It is right to honor this legacy on a national level. I believe that by establishing this museum this nation will be able to finally honor the legacy of African Americans properly. By placing this museum on the National Mall, we will finally place the history of African Americans in a national light, where it belongs.

The legislation creates a 23 member commission made up of individuals who specialize in African American history, education and museum professionals. The commission has nine months to present its recommendations to the President and Congress regarding an action plan for creating a national museum honoring African Americans. The Commission will decide the structure and make-up of the museum, devise a governing board for the museum, and among other action items, will decide whether to place the museum within the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building, which is the