

Collins	Hoeven	Reed
Coons	Inhofe	Risch
Corker	Isakson	Roberts
Cornyn	Johnson	Rounds
Cotton	King	Rubio
Crapo	Lankford	Sasse
Cruz	Manchin	Schumer
Daines	McCain	Scott
Donnelly	McCaskill	Sessions
Enzi	McConnell	Shaheen
Ernst	Menendez	Shelby
Feinstein	Merkley	Sullivan
Fischer	Mikulski	Tillis
Flake	Moran	Toomey
Gardner	Murkowski	Vitter
Graham	Nelson	Warner
Grassley	Perdue	Whitehouse
Hatch	Peters	Wicker
Heitkamp	Portman	

NAYS—27

Baldwin	Heller	Paul
Blumenthal	Hirono	Reid
Booker	Kirk	Sanders
Boxer	Klobuchar	Schatz
Cantwell	Leahy	Stabenow
Durbin	Lee	Tester
Franken	Markey	Udall
Gillibrand	Murphy	Warren
Heinrich	Murray	Wyden

NOT VOTING—2

Kaine	Thune
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The motion was agreed to.

LEGISLATIVE BRANCH APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2017—MOTION TO PROCEED—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Florida.

Mr. NELSON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be given 1 minute so I can give a short speech.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NASA LEGISLATION

Mr. NELSON. Mr. President, we just passed a NASA bill in the Commerce Committee, and we are going to Mars. We are going to Mars in the decade of the 2030s with humans, and the bill sets the goal of having a colonization of other worlds. This is a new and exciting time in our Nation's space exploration program and particularly now with the human exploration program. I thought that would be good news for the Senate.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NOMINATION OF DOUGLAS WILSON

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Mr. President, I am on the floor today to raise my concern about another nominee who has been on hold in this body for months. I am sad to say that this has been an ongoing issue with the Senate. People have been nominated—good people who are very well qualified—and then their nomination doesn't get acted upon.

One of those people is Douglas Wilson, who has been nominated to serve

on the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy. This is probably a Commission that most people don't even know exists, and yet Mr. Wilson has been on hold since June 13, when his nomination was referred to the floor. He actually was nominated by the President in March.

He is eminently qualified. He is a noncontroversial nominee. The Republican Vice Chairman of the Commission, William Hybl, has urged the Senate to confirm Mr. Wilson, and yet his confirmation remains blocked for reasons that seem completely unrelated to the nominee or his qualifications.

I believe it is time for the Senate to confirm Mr. Wilson so that the Commission can be fully constituted to carry out its important mission. Surely, these days when there are so many hotspots around the world, when there is so much going on, it would be helpful to have the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy in place and fully staffed up to be able to help advise on so many of the conflicts that we see going on in the world.

Doug Wilson has had a distinguished career of more than three and a half decades in the public and private sector. After graduating from Stanford University and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Doug became a Foreign Service officer serving in posts throughout Europe and later with senior positions with the U.S. Information Agency. During the Clinton administration, he served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs under Secretary Cohen. Most recently, from 2010 to 2012, he was Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, serving as a principal adviser to the Secretary of Defense.

He is a three-time recipient of the Department of Defense Distinguished Public Service Award, the Pentagon's highest civilian honor. Since 2013, he has been a senior fellow and chair of the board of advisers at the Truman National Security Project. In 2009, he was the founding chair of the board of directors at Harvard's Public Diplomacy Collaborative. I think there is no question that Doug Wilson is extremely qualified. He has worked in a bipartisan way over the years.

I have had the great pleasure of knowing Doug for more than 30 years. When I first met him, he was a foreign policy adviser to then-Senator Gary Hart. He worked in that role again when Senator Hart ran for President in 1984.

The fact is that the work of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy has never been more important and urgent. One of the great foreign policy challenges of our day is countering the poisonous ideology of violent extremist groups. Another is countering Russian propaganda and Russian meddling in Europe and central Asia. The Commission plays an important role in helping our Nation address these challenges, and we need people with the right experience and the right

judgment to serve on that Commission—people like Doug Wilson.

I am disappointed that this nomination of someone so eminently qualified—someone who has support on both sides of the aisle and from the Republican Vice Chairman of that Commission, Mr. Hybl—continues to remain on hold before this body. I don't know why. For some reason someone has objected to this moving forward. We don't know who that is. We don't know what their objections are.

That is one of the challenges we have in this body that needs to change if government is going to operate the way the people of this country expect.

So I am going to keep coming to the floor. I am going to keep trying to move Doug Wilson's nomination, as I have since June. I am hopeful that at some point the majority will hear these concerns and agree that we should approve him and make sure that this Commission is fully functioning.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be recognized, and following my remarks, Senator CASEY from Pennsylvania be recognized, followed by Senator SANDERS from Vermont, followed by Senator WARREN from Massachusetts, and followed by Senator ALEXANDER from Tennessee.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—S. 1878

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, this is somewhat of an unorthodox way to ask for a UC, but we are going to go through a process this afternoon talking about a bill called the Pediatric Rare Disease Priority Review Voucher Act, which expires on September 30 of this year.

All of those names I just mentioned have a stake in this particular debate and I am going to lead it off. Then, I am actually going to refer to my colleague from Pennsylvania, Senator CASEY, my friend and coauthor of this legislation for the purposes of the UC motion, and then we will go from there.

Mr. President, I fell in love with my wife in 1968 and married her 48 years ago. We have had a great marriage. But in 2004, I fell in love with Alexa Rohrbach, the young lady to my left who you can see on the screen here.

Alexa had neuroblastoma, an incurable cancer of the brain. She came to Washington, DC, lobbying us to try to accelerate the research into rare diseases for children and to try to find cures for them. I got interested, and I went to the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, PA, where Senator CASEY is so active. I am active in children's health care in Atlanta, and I saw many of the breakthroughs for cancer and other diseases of children. BOB CASEY and I got very interested in seeing what we could do to further the development of new drugs coming into the

marketplace to save lives and make the quality of life better. Such was my desire to be, hopefully, the guy who prompted some researcher somewhere to develop a new program that would research neuroblastoma and would correct it so that Alexa Rohrbach could sit by me today.

Five years after I met her, Alexa Rohrbach died, but my passion for trying to meet the request that Alexa had lobbied for did not go away. It actually burned brighter. So Senator CASEY and I got together and developed the FDA Rare Pediatric Disease Priority Review Voucher Act, and passed it 5 years ago. That bill provided, as an incentive for companies to develop breakthrough drugs, a priority review voucher for future drugs that would incentivize them to work harder to develop new drugs. Such has been the case in a number of things that have happened, and I am very proud that took place.

But that program is expiring September 30. I want to see to it that it is extended. It is an incentive that incentivizes the right thing to happen for the right people for it to happen for, and it doesn't cost the taxpayer any money, but saves lives and it makes their quality of life better.

There will be objections that you will hear from Senator SANDERS and Senator WARREN and maybe others about this—that or the other, in terms of pharmaceutical companies or in terms of trying to do a package of bills together—but there is no reason whatsoever to object to a unanimous consent to adopt the extension for 5 years for this proven program.

Some of those who will object have written letters to the FDA encouraging programs like this to exist—one of them being Senator WARREN from Massachusetts, who on the April 15 of this year signed this letter to the FDA, urging the acceleration of development of a breakthrough drug for Duchenne disease. By the way, on Monday of this week the Sarepta Therapeutics company in Boston, MA, was approved by the FDA for the development of a new drug that is the first drug to treat Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a disease that affects 1 in 3,500 boys who are born, limits the quality of their life, and, in many cases, causes death. That process was developed through the work of a company. We want to make sure that companies are incentivized to make those types of breakthroughs again. There are so many companies where, if given the right incentive and the right opportunity, breakthroughs can be developed. Lives can be saved, and the quality of life can be better.

We will hear all kinds of arguments about pharmaceutical companies, and you will hear arguments about this, that, and the other. The facts of this matter are clear. This bill is an incentive that for 5 years has incentivized the development of new breakthrough drugs to cure diseases and ailments that affect children in America. It is an incentive that is right, it is not an incentive that is wrong, and it works.

Any objection to it for any reason whatsoever—such as that it ought to be included with another package of drugs or that because pharmaceutical companies develop breakthroughs, we shouldn't do it, is a bogus argument.

I will be glad to debate anybody, anyplace, anywhere if you are talking about a philosophical difference, but by golly, I will not debate them about delaying something that can expedite a cure being developed in the United States of America for a disease that kills children.

So when BOB CASEY and I ask for unanimous consent today to approve the bill, it is only approving an extension for 5 years of a bill that is in place and has worked. It doesn't cost the American taxpayer a dime but may save the life of an American taxpayer and their children. That is a good thing for us to be here for. That is the reason I am still here today at age 71. It is to see to it that I make some contribution to the furtherance of health and the quality of life for every child in America.

It is my hope that at some point in time in this debate before we get to the end of the year, those who have adversarial reasons to object to a unanimous consent for an extension of 5 years will come to the reality that we are doing the right thing for the right reasons. It is not partisan. It is not political. It is practical, and it is right.

I publicly want to thank Senator BOB CASEY from Pennsylvania for being my partner throughout this development, and I encourage every Member in the Chamber, when they have the opportunity, to vote for the health of our children, to vote for the extension of their lives, to vote for the development of new cures coming through and the research and development and incentives to cause that to happen.

With that said, I yield to Senator CASEY.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Pennsylvania.

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, I want to thank my colleague from Georgia for his good work to advance the process. I offer the following consent request:

I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 415, S. 1878; that the committee-reported substitute amendment be agreed to; that the bill, as amended, be read a third time and passed; and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table with no intervening action or debate.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. SANDERS. Reserving the right to object, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. SANDERS. Thank you, Mr. President.

Mr. President, it goes without saying, to pick up on Senator ISAKSON's point, that there is nobody in this body who does not want to see cures as

quickly as possible for the terrible diseases that are taking the lives of children in this country. That is not the debate. Nor I think is it the debate that we need research and development to get us a cure of cancer, to get us a cure of Alzheimer's disease, to get us a cure of diabetes, and so many other diseases that are shortening the lives of people in our country and around the world. We must work together to make that happen.

In my view, if we understand that it is imperative that we try to come up with cures to these terrible diseases, there is no debate, I would hope, that the U.S. Government and institutions like the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration must play, as they have historically done, a major role in finding cures for these diseases, easing suffering and expanding life expectancy. I don't think there are too many people here who would disagree with that.

But in order to do that, it is clear that we are going to require a well funded National Institutes of Health and a well-funded Food and Drug Administration. I must say, it is beyond my comprehension that year after year, my Republican colleagues appear to work overtime to provide tax breaks to billionaires yet refuse to adequately fund the NIH or the Food and Drug Administration. What set of priorities can anyone have that makes sense to anybody in this country that says: Yes, we are going to give tax breaks to billionaires and large corporations. But no, we are not going to adequately fund the major institutions in this country that are leading the effort to find cures of the terrible diseases that impact our children, our seniors, and everybody in this country.

I would hope that my Republican colleagues listen to the American people and get their priorities right. Poll after poll says no more tax breaks for the rich. Let's invest in health care. Let's invest in cures for the children's diseases that Senator ISAKSON talked about—cancer, Alzheimer's, and all the rest.

Second of all, just ironically and coincidentally, I just asked through my Web site for the American people to send me information on what is going on in their lives with regard to prescription drugs. Every so often, we do that. We sent out an email, and we do Facebook so they can tell me what is going on with regard to their life and prescription drugs. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the comments we received—and we received about 1,000 comments from people all over this country—are from people who are outraged by the high costs of prescription drugs in this country—a cost that is going up every single day.

People are walking into their pharmacies today and seeing the price of medicines that they have had for 20 years double, for no explanation other than the fact that the drug companies can do it and are doing it so they can make outrageous profits.

In this country, we pay the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. Senator ISAKSON talked about the terrible diseases facing our kids. He is right, but do you know that every year there are thousands of people in this country who are dying because they cannot afford to pay the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs, while last year the pharmaceutical industry made \$50 billion in profit? The top five companies made \$50 billion in profit.

One out of five people in this country, Senator ISAKSON, when they go to the doctor's office and they get a prescription, you know what, they can't afford to fill that prescription. Talk to the doctors in Georgia. Talk to the doctors in Tennessee. This is what they will tell you: We write the prescriptions, but working class people can't afford to fill them. We have received letters from oncologists all over this country who tell us their cancer patients cannot afford the outrageously high costs of the medicines people need to stay alive.

Maybe, just maybe, it might be time for the Senate to stand up to the pharmaceutical industry and all of their lobbyists here and all of their campaign contributions and say: We are going to stand with the American people who are sick and tired of being ripped off by the drug companies.

Let me read just a few—I am not going to read 1,000 letters, just a few—to give an indication of what is going on in America.

Mark from Plainville, CT, wrote to us and said that his drug for Crohn's disease went up from \$75 a month to \$700 a month. Is anyone here concerned about that? He is worried that he may die. This is what he writes to me:

I am no longer treating my Crohn's disease. I am in a lot of pain and will eventually develop colorectal cancer and die. I am 39 with a wife and two daughters. We simply cannot afford this medication any longer. I have had to leave my job and I am now trying to freelance from home with no success for 4 months. Our home is about to be foreclosed. Is that of interest to my Republican friends or is that not important?

Amanda from Bartlesville, OK, shared this story of her husband's gout medication:

He pays more than \$300 a month for a medicine that was \$4 in 2010.

Maybe someone can explain to me how a medicine that was \$4 in 2010 is \$300 a month now.

He is now disabled because he cannot afford the medicine he needs.

Heather in Taos, NM, cannot afford her EpiPen. We have heard a whole lot about the high price of EpiPens. She said:

I basically haven't had one in years that is not expired. Just hope I don't get stung or I will die.

John in Anchor Point, AK, cannot afford his insulin, which jumped from \$1,400 to \$1,600. He said:

I skip buying groceries when picking up meds. Went home and scraped by. Sold pos-

sessions to make ends meet so we can buy food.

Jerry from Lincoln, NE, cannot afford Gabapentin for shingles. It was \$35, and it is now \$75.

Trish from New Jersey stopped taking her breast cancer medication because it went from \$25 to \$225 for a 3-month supply. Is anyone concerned about that?

Of course we want new drugs to cure diseases, but those new drugs won't do anybody any good if people can't afford them.

We have seen scandal after scandal in the last few months and years. Gilead sold Sovaldi, a drug for hepatitis C, for \$1,000 a pill. Mylan raised EpiPen prices by 500 percent over the last several years, to more than \$600. Martin Shkreli raised the price of Daraprim, a lifesaving AIDS medication, by 5,000 percent. Are we concerned about that? I hope some of us are.

Above and beyond the fact that the pharmaceutical industry is ripping off the American people, the FDA itself tells us that this voucher approach doesn't work. The Government Accountability Office released a report in March that found that there is no evidence this program works to incentivize drug development. Not only does the program not work, it actually slows down the review time of drugs that are clinically important. When one of these vouchers is used, that means FDA staff must take time away from reviewing priority medication in order to review drugs that have bought a pass to the front of the line. By moving one drug faster, more important drugs may move slower.

What we do know is that these vouchers sell for hundreds of millions of dollars. One recent example from last year is that a drug company, United Therapeutic, sold a priority review voucher to another major drug company, AbbVie, for \$350 million.

While nearly one in five Americans cannot afford to fill their prescriptions, the top five drug companies made a combined \$50 billion in profits last year.

There are many reasons why we pay such outrageous prices, but one reason is we continue passing laws written by the pharmaceutical industry and their lobbyists year after year after year. I believe the American people should know that the pharmaceutical industry has spent more than \$3 billion on lobbying since 1998. How is that? Democracy at work. Drug companies charge us the highest prices in the world, and the pharmaceutical industry spent \$3 billion on lobbying. They are all over this place, high-priced lobbyists trying to get us to pass pharma legislation. Just last year the pharmaceutical industry spent \$250 million on lobbying and campaign contributions and employed some 1,400 lobbyists. Maybe the working families of this country need some protection against these lobbyists.

I certainly want to do everything I can to see that this country comes for-

ward with cures for children's diseases and diseases that impact so many Americans of all ages, but we are going to have to have the courage to start taking on the pharmaceutical industry and representing the American people. So I am offering an amendment, along with Senator WARREN, which I hope will pass, which will extend this program, which is going to expire at the end of September, to the end of the year. That will give us an additional 3 months to work together to come up with some serious legislation that addresses not only children's issues but the health care and needs of millions of Americans in general.

I look forward to working with my friends on the other side to come up with a good solution to protect the American people from the outrageously high cost of prescription drugs in this country.

Reserving the right to object, would the Senator modify his request to include the Sanders amendment which is at the desk?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection to the modification?

The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Reserving the right to object, as chairman of the Senate Health Committee, I will object, but I will work with the Senators from Pennsylvania, Georgia, Massachusetts, and Vermont to do what we need to do during the rest of the day so that the Senate will be able to adopt an extension of this important program to the end of the year, which I think we should be able to do.

I will reserve the remainder of my remarks until the Senator from Massachusetts has a chance to speak.

I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard to the modification.

Is there objection to the original request?

Mr. SANDERS. Yes, I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The Senator from Massachusetts.

Ms. WARREN. Mr. President, I rise in support of Senator SANDERS' objection and amendment. Massachusetts is home to many of the Nation's best scientists and most innovative biomedical companies. I believe we have a moral imperative to save money and save lives by expanding medical innovation in the United States.

I have been here for almost 4 years. I have spent nearly the entire time working both publicly and privately to try to fix the broken medical innovation system in this country. I will be blunt: It has been maddening because we know what we need to do to fix this problem. We know that medical cures come from taxpayer investments in basic research, followed by private industry making its investments to turn that research into viable treatments. Nobody in Congress seriously disputes that.

Every single person I have talked to here says they support increasing funding for the National Institutes of

Health. Yet for over a decade Congress has decimated the NIH's budget. It has effectively been cut by nearly 25 percent. Those cuts are singlehandedly choking off support for the projects that could lead to the next major breakthrough against ALS, Alzheimer's cancer, and rare pediatric diseases. Those cuts are driving scientists out of the country or out of research entirely. Those cuts are discouraging a whole generation of brilliant young researchers who see no path to launch the work that could save millions of lives. Only in Washington can every single elected official say they are committed to fix something and then do nothing.

Newt Gingrich and I do not agree on much of anything, but we teamed up last year to plead with Congress to address this travesty. Newt Gingrich said: "To allow research funding to languish at a time of historic opportunity when you could be saving lives and saving money takes a special kind of stupidity that is reserved for this city." I agree.

For 2 years, Republicans in the Senate have claimed loudly that they want to do something about this. For a year they talked to Democrats about a comprehensive, bipartisan package that would include investments in NIH and FDA. Then one day they stopped talking and instead started pushing a bunch of small, piecemeal bills through the committee, all without a single dime of new money for medical research, and then declared themselves the conquering heroes of medical innovation.

Now, look, I support some of these bills. I helped write some of these bills. Others, like the Advancing Hope Act, I have serious concerns about. But without new funding for medical research, this bundle of bills will not move the needle on medical innovation. The Advancing Hope Act is an example. I support getting more transformative cures for pediatric rare diseases, but the Advancing Hope Act doesn't put a dime of additional money into medical research or approval—not one dime. This bill just hands drug companies vouchers so they can jump to the front of the line at the FDA. The drug companies love it. Most of them have turned around and sold off their vouchers, sometimes for hundreds of millions of dollars. But the FDA has said there is no evidence this program is effective at incentivizing drug development for rare pediatric diseases.

Who knows what breakthrough cancer or Alzheimer's treatment now takes longer to approve because some giant drug company uses a voucher to move something more lucrative but less important to the head of the line. I am not opposed to these vouchers under any circumstances, but without more, these vouchers cynically ask people with diabetes and people with breast cancer to fight the parents of children with rare pediatric diseases over who gets approved first.

I want cures, and to get them, we need to put more money into the NIH so that we can cure more diseases. We need to put more money into the FDA so they can approve everything that is worth approving as quickly as possible.

Senate Democrats have made their position clear. Whatever our views on these individual policies, we do not support moving piecemeal bills without a real, bipartisan agreement on new investments. Every Democrat on the HELP Committee has cosponsored a serious proposal to provide \$50 billion in new mandatory NIH and FDA funding. Republicans have put no proposal on the table—nothing. Chairman ALEXANDER said publicly that he understood the importance of getting this done, but it has been months and we have seen nothing.

The supporters of this expiring voucher program want to extend it to the end of December. I am willing to do that. I will join Senator SANDERS in that.

I believed Chairman ALEXANDER's promise to work in good faith on a bipartisan package that will actually fix medical innovation in this country. Despite months of silence, I still believe it. I want to give him every opportunity to keep that promise.

If Republicans want to ignore the real problems here and play political games instead, if they want to cynically use sick children and desperate moms in the runup to an election as a political football to avoid actually doing the right thing by these families, I cannot stop them, but I will not play along.

We are losing an entire generation of scientists and researchers because Congress will not face the hard fact that medical research takes money. We are forfeiting cures and treatments that could help people all across this country because Congress will not make the investments in basic research. We are losing our mothers, our fathers, our sons, and our daughters because Congress plays politics with people's lives. I will not play along, and I will do every single thing I can to get the funding we need to support real medical innovation in this country.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. First, Mr. President, I congratulate Senator CASEY and Senator ISAKSON for doing a terrific job of being excellent Senators and coming up with legislation a couple of years ago that has helped children.

We have now heard from the only two U.S. Senators in the whole body, so far, who have voted against this bill this year. We have 22 members on our HELP Committee—Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. We voted to extend this bill another few years because it has been so successful. The vote was 20 to 2.

You just heard from those very eloquent Senators. They don't like Republicans, they don't like drug companies,

they don't like billionaires, and they asked the question: Well, is anybody listening?

I am listening. Whom do we care about? Let's talk about these 7,800 children at St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis. These are children who are very sick. Many of them will die prematurely. Every single one of them has free care at St. Jude's Hospital thanks to the contributions of many people.

This is what the doctors at St. Jude's Hospital say about the proposal Senator ISAKSON and Senator CASEY have made that has been in the law since 2012 and received 20 votes in our committee against the two votes of the Senators who are on the floor.

St. Jude's doctors who are taking care of these very sick children say:

Priority vouchers (PRVs) provide a very powerful incentive to stimulate drug development in rare pediatric diseases.

Does anybody care about these children in Memphis—

These aren't some people in Washington, in bureaucracies. These are doctors caring for dying children.

The doctors continue:

These conditions often lack the market opportunity to attract significant investment, or may present other significant development obstacles and costs that may deter investment from biopharmaceutical companies.

We may not like drugmakers, but if we need new drugs for dying children, who is going to make the drugs if the drugmakers don't make them? Some bureaucrat in Washington? Some committee member of the Senate? No, no—someone who knows how to make drugs.

This proposal that has been on the books for 5 years says that we will provide an incentive to help these children. It has worked. We voted 20 to 2 in our committee—which is about equally composed of Democrats and Republicans—in favor of extending it. It is important for the American people to know that.

According to the doctors at St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis—remember, they have 7,800 very sick children they are caring for today. They say:

We have witnessed strong evidence that the programs are working.

The Isakson-Casey bill is working.

Continuing:

Support for the Voucher Program is key to facilitating access to new agents important to improving outcomes in pediatric cancers.

We have considered this the way U.S. Senators are supposed to. We brought it up in our committee. We debated it. We had amendments when they were offered. We voted on it, and we voted 20 to 2.

The House of Representatives has also considered this legislation. It has enacted this. This would be part of our 21st century cures legislation that we hope the entire Congress will approve before we leave at the end of the year, but the bill expires at the end of this month so we need an extension.

Every day we delay creates more uncertainty in the marketplace and

makes it less likely that some drugmaker is going to create a new drug to help these children. Now, we may not like drugmakers, some of us; we may not like markets, some of us; we may not like Republicans, some of us; we may not like billionaires, some of us, but if the drugmakers don't make the drugs to help these children, who will do it? When we have an entire committee that has worked through this, I think it is very unfortunate that we don't take the time to extend this for a period of time to create the kind of certainty we need.

On the 21st century cures legislation the Senator from Massachusetts, a diligent Senator and a good member of the committee, talked about, apparently, she is not paying much attention to the work we are doing on the bill. It has been my top priority. I have worked on it daily with Senator MURRAY, the ranking Democrat. I have worked with the President and with the Vice President. We have a bill that the President of the United States would like us to pass because it addresses precision medicine, his top priority.

This same bill addresses the Cancer MoonShot, the Vice President's top priority. The Speaker of the House of Representatives is turning somersaults to try to find a way for us to be able to find the money for that, as well as opioids and other important projects we would like to fund. The majority leader of the Senate has said that if we are able to agree on this bill, it will be the most important bill we will pass this year.

We are doing a very good job in our committee of getting to the point where we can actually turn something into law that the President, the Vice President, the Speaker of the House, and the majority leader would all like to see happen. I thank Senator CASEY and Senator ISAKSON for their help in doing this. My hope is that we can work together, finish our work on this, and pass it shortly after we come back in November.

My last point, regarding doing nothing on funding, is that I don't know what budgets people are reading. Let's stop and talk about this a little bit. Let's talk about the Food and Drug Administration.

According to Mercatus, in 2000, the FDA was funded at a little over \$1 billion. In 2015, that number is \$4 billion. We are about to look into a series of agreements next year, which we will have a chance to vote on, that will add billions of new funding to the FDA.

In our 21st century cures legislation, there are provisions to allow the Commissioner of the FDA to recruit and hire more of the talented experts he needs—another reason we need to pass that bipartisan legislation.

What about funding for research in the United States? According to the New England Journal of Medicine, today the United States—both through the government and through our phar-

maceutical companies—spends nearly as much on biomedical research as all of Europe, all of Japan, and all of China combined.

Let me say that again.

According to the New England Journal of Medicine, the United States of America—publicly and privately—spends nearly as much on biomedical research as all of Europe, all of Japan, and all of China, combined. In addition to that, I think the number is about \$32 billion that we now spend through the National Institutes of Health, mostly on biomedical research at major universities.

I try not to spend my time talking about Democrats. I notice my friends on the other side often say Republican, Republican, Republican. I get a little tired of that because we are working together to get something done, but we do have a Republican majority. Last year, it was under the Republican majority that we added \$2 billion to the National Institutes of Health.

Senator BLUNT led that, but I want to give credit to Senator MURRAY, who is the ranking Democrat on that committee, because without Senator MURRAY and Senator BLUNT, it wouldn't have happened. But give Senator BLUNT credit for it, he happens to be a Republican, if we are being partisan about it. How much money is that? That is \$20 billion over the next 10 years.

This year, the same committee, Senator BLUNT of Missouri and Senator MURRAY of Washington, added another \$2 billion for the National Institutes of Health. Over the next 10 years, that is \$20 billion more dollars. We are up to \$38 billion of new money for the National Institutes of Health over the next 10 years.

If anybody has been paying attention to anything I have said over the last 6 months or any of the discussions I have been having with the President, the Vice President, and the House of Representatives in our committee, we have been talking about \$6 billion, \$7 billion, or \$8 billion additional dollars for Cancer MoonShot, for precision medicine, for the BRAIN initiative, for regenerative medicine, and for a number of things that need to be done. This is the most exciting time in biomedical research we have had. What I just added up was \$20 billion, plus \$18 billion, plus \$6 billion or \$7 billion. That adds up to \$44-\$45 billion of new dollars for the National Institutes of Health over the next 10 years.

While it took bipartisan cooperation, let's say it: We do have a Republican majority in the U.S. Senate, and that is our agenda. That is what we want to do. We just don't talk about it in a partisan way because we usually get better cooperation and better results when we give credit to the other side, which I am pleased to do.

Maybe you don't like drug companies. Then who is going to make the drugs?

We are not talking about drug companies today. We are talking about

7,800 children who are very sick at St. Jude's Hospital and receiving free care. Their doctors have told us that if we don't pass the Isakson-Casey legislation for several more years, we are going to make it less likely that these children will live—less likely that they will live. That is what we are talking about.

We could have a big debate about drug companies. We can raise taxes on billionaires. We can talk about Republicans and Democrats. Let's do that another day. Let's get back to business. Let's do our quiet work in a bipartisan way, which is the way we try to do it in our committee and we have done it. We have had 45 hearings. Forty-one of them have been bipartisan hearings where we have agreed on the witnesses. We get more results than about anybody, but we don't get results by making speeches about each other and making speeches about subjects that aren't the real subject of the day. The real subject of the day is 7,800 very sick children at St. Jude's Hospital.

Their doctors are telling us that if we don't continue incentives that are already working, according to these doctors, if we don't provide more incentives to drugmakers to make the drugs for rare diseases that will keep these children alive, then we aren't doing our job.

I thank Senators ISAKSON and CASEY. By the end of the day, I hope we have accepted Senator SANDERS's motion to extend the program until the end of the year.

What I also hope is, when we come back in November, we will have an agreement—as we are perfectly capable of doing—that begins to move treatments and drugs through the FDA more rapidly so they can get into the medicine cabinets and the doctors' offices at a lower cost and more quickly; that we will have several more billion dollars of funding for the National Institutes of Health; that we will focus on the President's Precision Medicine Initiative with some of that money, on the Vice President's Cancer MoonShot with some of that money, on the BRAIN Initiative with some of that money; and that we will give each other a little bit of a pat on the backs for this past year, appropriating \$20 billion more over the next 10 years for NIH and putting another \$20 billion in appropriations bills this year.

I look forward to the end of the day, when hopefully Senator SANDERS' motion will be adopted and the Isakson-Casey program, which has worked so successfully for these children, will be extended for long enough to create enough certainty in the marketplace so drugmakers will make rare drugs to help these children live. Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, let me say to Chairman ALEXANDER, I certainly look forward to working with him over the next several months to

come up with a package that makes certain we do everything we can to cure childhood illnesses, which otherwise would be fatal, but that we also understand it is not just 7,800 beautiful kids in that hospital, but there are millions of people in this country who are suffering today because they cannot even afford the medicine that is on the market at the same time as five drug companies—it is not a question of disliking drug companies. It is a question of fact. Five drug companies made \$50 billion in profits last year, charging our people, by far, the highest prices in the world for medicine. One out of five Americans who are sick cannot afford the medicine they need.

An example, one small example, this is the chart of drug prices in the United States versus Canada, with EpiPen, which is on the front pages today. In the United States, it is \$620; in Canada, it is \$290.

Why are we paying twice as much for the same product as a country 50 miles away from where I live?

Crestor, for high cholesterol, is \$730 in the United States, \$160 in Canada. Premarin, for estrogen therapy, is \$421 in the United States, \$84 in Canada.

Look, I have been around the country in the last year, and there are few Americans—very few—who do not understand that the greed of the pharmaceutical industry is causing terrible health problems for millions of people. I read some examples. There are people who are dying because they can't afford the medicine they need. People are cutting their pills in half, which should not be done.

So I do look forward to working with Senator ALEXANDER in the next couple of months to see how we can, in fact, come up with legislation that begins to address one of the great health care crises facing this country, and that is the high cost of prescription drugs and the need to make medicine available to all of our people at an affordable price.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I see other Senators on the floor who wish to speak, and I will let them do that. Maybe Senator CASEY wishes to conclude.

I look forward to working with Senator SANDERS. He and I have some different points of view, which I guess is obvious, but we can talk about drug companies. We can talk about the fact that one drug company has spent \$3 billion since 1989 on Alzheimer's and is about to offer to the American people a way, for the first time really, to prevent the progression of Alzheimer's, we hope. This is public information currently in clinical trials. Another drug company is about to offer, hopefully, medicine that may actually help Alzheimer's before the symptoms are shown, which would be terrifically important in terms of the grief that we will avoid for Americans and the cost that terrible disease is causing. But that is \$3 billion spent without any

“profit” yet. That is what a marketplace allows. Now, in marketplaces there can be abuses. My point of view is that, generally, what you want to do is have the most amount of competition in the marketplace possible, and that is what we can talk about as we go forward.

I don't think we gain much when we give these speeches about Republicans and Democrats. I don't think people like to hear it; maybe they do. I don't give them, but I am doing it today just because I have heard so much of it from the other side. I don't like it, frankly; I don't like it at all. I mean, I never got a result by talking about my opponents' political party. I never moved an education bill through without giving credit to the other side, and a genuine amount of credit.

I didn't mention that the President himself, with whom I am working on 21st century cures, proposed in his budget to cut the National Institutes of Health by \$1 billion. I could come down here and say that. I could have gone to the committee hearing and said that. I never mentioned it in the hearing because my goal was not to embarrass the President or make a political point. My goal was to see if we could find some consensus to move ahead at the most exciting time of biomedical education. And 20 of the 22 of us voted for this bill.

So I would like to ratchet down the partisan rhetoric. If people want to point out the difficulties with drug companies and with the marketplace and with Republicans and billionaires, there is a time and place for that. But today we are talking about these children—the 7,800 children at St. Jude Hospital. Doctors have told us that if we extend the Isakson-Casey bill for a period of time to give enough certainty so that drug makers will make more drugs to deal with rare diseases, these children will live longer. And 20 of the 22 of us agreed with that, and we would like to see it move forward.

So I am delighted to work with the Senator from Vermont and the Senator from Massachusetts. I am glad we have a temporary solution that will take us through the end of the year, but that is not the best solution because it still provides a lot of uncertainty and will not do as good a job as the doctors say we should do.

I thank the Chair, and I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Pennsylvania.

Mr. CASEY. Mr. President, first of all, I want to thank my colleagues for being here today to debate these issues. I appreciate Senator ISAKSON's work with us—Senators SANDERS, WARREN, and ALEXANDER.

I think we agree on two things, believe it or not. No. 1, both sides of the aisle here want to make progress as it relates to curing rare pediatric diseases. That is No. 1. I think there is agreement on that. No. 2, there is agreement to extend the existing pro-

gram, which has already helped enormously to advance that first cause. We are in agreement to extend that until the end of the year. That is a bipartisan agreement. We will work out the details for that, and we will keep working on these issues when we get back.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Democrats control the next 30 minutes and the Republicans control the following 30 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA, STABBINGS

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I rise today to discuss the Central States Pension Fund crisis and a proposal to address that, but before I do, I want to take a moment to talk about the horrific events that unfolded in St. Cloud, MN, this past weekend.

The investigation is ongoing, but we know that last Saturday evening a man dressed in a security guard uniform took to the Crossroads Mall in St. Cloud, MN, and senselessly stabbed nine people. Fortunately, they have all been treated and discharged. This was a heinous attack, and I hope that all the victims and their families know that Minnesotans are thinking of them.

Mr. President, I also want to commend the actions of Jason Falconer, the off-duty police officer who bravely stopped the attacker before he could hurt anybody else. If it weren't for him, we could have seen many more injuries and even the loss of life.

I also want to thank the St. Cloud police force and the police chief, William Blair Anderson, who set an example of how to lead during a crisis. I also thank the first responders and the doctors and the nurses for taking care of the victims.

This event has shaken the city of St. Cloud and our entire State. Such senseless and hate-filled acts have no place in our society. Minnesota law enforcement and the FBI are investigating this event to see whether there were connections between the suspect and terrorist groups and what the motivations of the attacker were. We are going to get to the bottom of what happened.

CENTRAL STATES PENSION FUND

Now, Mr. President, I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues to highlight a very important issue, the multiemployer pension system, which is facing severe funding shortfalls, and what that means for hundreds of thousands of retirees who will get their pensions cut if these funds fail.

Over the last year, a number of my colleagues came to the Senate floor to talk about protecting the pensions of the United Mine Workers of America, the miners who toiled for years in dark, dirty, and dangerous mines to power our country. I am pleased the



Committee on Finance has now taken action to begin moving a bill to address that issue.

But today we are here to talk about another group of retirees who face drastic pension cuts. The Central States Pension Fund provides pensions for 22,000 blue-collar workers in Minnesota and nearly 400,000 nationwide. However, it faces a funding shortfall that means those retirees, including elderly workers and widows and the disabled, could face draconian cuts in less than a decade if Congress fails to act.

Mr. President, those who work hard and are promised retirement security ought to be able to retire with dignity. That is a promise Congress made in 1974 when it enacted a law that guaranteed pensions would not be reduced, and that is what workers thought they could count on after years of hard work. But now that promise may be broken.

If we break that promise, workers like Ken Petersen of South St. Paul, MN, will face spending the rest of their lives in poverty. Ken spent 30 years driving trucks as a Teamster before he retired in 2003. If the Central States fund is allowed to fail, Ken and his wife's retirement plans will be shattered and they will face financial uncertainty for the rest of their lives.

It is wrong for us to abandon the blue-collar Americans who earned a modest retirement after a lifetime of work, and I am not going to stand idly by while those workers have their retirement and their dignity taken away from them.

My approach would be to close a tax loophole that no one defends. It is called carried interest and allows Wall Street bankers and private equity fund managers to pay lower tax rates than most of the Central States Pension Fund members who drive trucks for a living pay. Again, to be clear, no one defends this loophole—not Democrats, not Republicans, and neither of their Presidential candidates. And closing it is one way we could help make sure our retirees get the pensions they have earned.

According to the Joint Committee on Taxation, this loophole will cost taxpayers \$15.9 billion over the next 10 years. That is enough to make sure Central States' retirees are able to have a secure retirement, and I think is a much better use of that money than giving an indefensible tax break to a relatively small group of already very wealthy people.

Here is how carried interest works. When most workers, such as those in the Central States fund, earn a paycheck, their income is subject to tax at ordinary income tax rates. But private equity fund managers have been claiming their income is different simply because their job involves managing money. As a result, they pay taxes at the special low rate reserved for capital gains even if they are risking no money of their own. The same is true for managers of hedge funds if, say, a

stock their fund has held for a year—stock bought with their investors' money—is sold for a profit. The manager gets a percentage of the profit, but they pay capital gains on that income even though they didn't risk any of their money.

People who worked hard—like those truck drivers—were guaranteed their pensions would be there. It is up to us to keep faith with those people by closing this loophole. Again, no one defends this.

Let's not forget what happened on Wall Street less than a decade ago. Risky bets by hedge funds, private equity funds, and big banks caused the biggest financial crisis of our lifetimes. And when that happened, Congress bailed out the banks with \$700 billion of taxpayer money.

Today, those banks and private equity funds are back to business as usual, but retirees from funds like Central States, which was fully funded before the financial crisis, haven't received the same support. Instead, they are going to be facing devastating cuts at times in their lives when they can least afford them.

The hypocrisy is clear, but so far, my colleagues on the other side of the aisle haven't been willing to propose real solutions to fix the pension crisis. Instead, they are offering paper solutions that put the burden entirely on beneficiaries or simply kick the can down the road.

We need a real solution, and that is going to require us to take a good look at our priorities. Do we want to continue to subsidize Wall Street or do we want to help the hard-working men and women who dedicated their lives to driving our trucks, keeping us safe, and maintaining our roads?

I think we need to acknowledge that Federal funds are going to be needed to keep the promises made to our retirees. Our Tax Code is riddled with loopholes that could be closed to fix this problem, but let's start with the most obvious and absurd tax loophole. We should close the carried interest loophole that helps private equity fund managers and hedge fund managers, and invest that money in the hardworking Americans whose retirement is being threatened.

I yield to Senator KLOBUCHAR.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I rise today to also speak about the Central States Pension Fund, and I acknowledge my other colleagues speaking on it, Senator FRANKEN and Senator BROWN as well as Senator WYDEN. I appreciate your being here, as well as the ranking member on the Finance Committee.

ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA, STABBINGS

Mr. President, before I address that, I also want to address the horrific act of violence that occurred at the Crossroads Center mall in St. Cloud. This is a mall that I have been to many times. It is a thriving mall. A lot of people in that area go there, and, in fact, their

sense of safety was shattered that evening. There were 10 victims. At first they thought there were 9 victims, but a video showed there were 10. One is a pregnant woman who was nine months along. By some grace of God, no one was seriously injured, and no one died.

It was terror that I don't think any of us can imagine. People were there with their families shopping, and this happened. The first thing we know is that the mayor and the chief—Mayor Kleis, whom I have worked with for many years, a former Republican legislator who has been a very strong leader of this town, and Chief Anderson, who has been the chief there for many years—have shown that kind of strength in leaders that you would like. Immediately, they came out and explained to the community what happened and told them the honest truth—that they were still gathering the facts. They got the FBI involved, and this is being investigated as a potential act of terrorism. We still do not know all the facts. We hope to have them soon. Mostly, they were able to bring some calm to the community. They were shopping at the mall—I talked to the mayor last night—to show their citizens that they are not going to let this act of violence bring down their town.

We are well aware that ISIS sent out a statement claiming some responsibility. We do not know if that is true. We do know that the FBI is investigating any terrorist connections that this man has had, and we await the outcome of this investigation.

The one thing we do know is that due to the courageous actions of the off-duty officer, Jason Falconer, lives were saved. Because of the good work of the first responders and the reaction of those present at the mall, lives were saved and no one died. This particular officer was there off-duty and had the presence of mind to come to the rescue of all these people, and we thank him for that.

The last thing I would say about this is, talking to the mayor and having been in the community, I know how hard they have been working to bridge divides. There was a beautiful picture in the Star Tribune, and I am sure in the St. Cloud paper as well, about the rally of unity that they had in the community. They have now had two. One was in the college, and the Somali community spoke and strongly condemned this violence in a way that was very heartfelt.

This community is an important part of the fabric of life in our State and an important part of the fabric of life, as Senator FRANKEN knows, in St. Cloud. We will continue to work with them. We thank the mayor, the chief, Officer Falconer, and all those involved for their leadership.

CENTRAL STATES PENSION FUND

Mr. President, back to the issue of the Central States Pension Fund, I was pleased to see that the Finance Committee addressed some retirement and

pension issues today in their markup. We must also address the Central States Pension Fund. I believe that promises made are promises kept.

The promise made to the workers in the multiemployer pension plans like those in the Central States Pension Fund is simple; that is, the pension that they have earned through their decades of hard work will be there when they retire.

Saving for retirement is often described as a three-legged stool—Social Security on one leg, a pension on one leg, and personal savings on another. A stable and secure retirement relies on all three legs being strong, but some multiemployer pension plans are facing funding challenges that could weaken one of those legs.

Over 10 million Americans participate in a multiemployer pension plan and rely on these benefits for a safe and secure retirement. Multiemployer plans are set up as part of a collective bargaining agreement between workers and many employers generally in one industry.

The Central States Pension Fund is such a plan. It was established in 1955 to help truckers save for their retirement. Today, the Central States Pension Fund includes workers from the carhaul, tankhaul, pipeline, warehouse, construction, clerical, food processing, dairy, and trucking industries.

About 70 multiemployer pension plans are facing funding challenges and do not have sufficient plan assets to pay all of the benefits promised. The Multiemployer Pension Relief Act was added to the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015, in the House. I voted against the Multiemployer Pension Relief Act because I was concerned that this bill would lead to severe pension cuts for our retirees and, in fact, disproportionately impact certain workers in certain States, including Minnesota.

I believe we need to work together to find solutions that maintain the solvency of these multiemployer pension plans without severely penalizing current retirees, active employees, and beneficiaries. I, too, am in favor of closing the carried interest loophole, and I appreciate my colleague's work on this particular solution.

Hundreds of thousands of participants in the Central States Pension Fund still face the real possibility that their hard-earned pensions could be reduced. As I noted, they are mostly in the Midwest. That is why it is called the Central States plan. This affects workers and retirees from these States: nearly 34,000 workers and retirees in Ohio, nearly 31,000 in Michigan, over 21,000 in Minnesota, over 18,000 in Wisconsin, and nearly 1,500 in North Dakota. In fact, seven of the top States in the Central States are Midwestern States.

In September, 2015, Central States submitted a proposal to the Treasury to reduce pension benefits for workers and retirees. Treasury reviewed the

proposal, which would have resulted in benefit cuts for over 270,000 retirees and workers. In May, the workers and retirees narrowly avoided these cuts when the Treasury Department—after going around the country listening to the workers and looking at the plan—rejected the proposal because they felt it did not meet the test under the act.

That doesn't mean this is over. It is far from over. The Central States Pension Fund still faces insolvency by 2025. The current and future retirees could still face cuts. I voted against the act because I was concerned that under this act we might see exactly the kind of cuts that were proposed. What we saw were deep benefit cuts to our workers and retirees, and what we saw was that the size of the potential cuts for the workers, retirees, and beneficiaries was not fairly distributed.

Retirees who are 80 and older and disabled individuals were protected. That was the right thing to do. For everyone else, the possible cuts would leave them with a pension that did not reward their years of work. While many faced cuts of 30 percent, 40 percent, or even 50 percent, I think people would be shocked to learn that over 44,000 people faced pension cuts of over 60 percent and nearly 2,500 people faced possible cuts of over 70 percent.

I do not believe that when my colleagues voted for this, they thought they were actually voting for 70-percent pension cuts, but that actually is the result of that proposed plan. While we understand that there may be changes and that there may be more cuts, or some cuts, there must be a better way to do this than what was proposed.

I heard from people across my State who were trying to figure out how they were going to make ends meet as they faced these drastic cuts. Michael from Shoreview wrote to me about how he was facing a possible cut of 40 percent. Thomas from Sandstone is 71 years old and, after paying into the Central States plan for 30 years, was facing a 60 percent cut. Steve from Maple Grove wrote me to let me know that he is 69 years old and is unable to return to work, but his pension would be cut by 37 percent.

Those are a few examples. Many of these people are in their 60s and 70s, and they should be able to secure in their retirement what they have worked for their entire lives. While we temporarily averted this with the proposal being rejected, we know it is not going to go away. The Central States Pension Fund filed its petition to reduce pension benefits. Since then, an additional eight plans have also filed petitions.

Congress needs to work together to find a bipartisan solution to help pensioners across Minnesota and our country—people who depend on their pensions being there for them in their golden years. We owe it to all Americans who played by the rules and worked hard throughout their lives for a secure pension.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, how much time remains on the Franken-Klobuchar request to speak on this issue?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Ten minutes remain.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I will be very brief. I know Senator BROWN feels very strongly about this, as well, so I am going to make a few remarks and leave time for him. I want to commend Senator FRANKEN and Senator KLOBUCHAR, who have talked to me about this issue many times.

Today in the Finance Committee, with a significant bipartisan vote, we were able to pass the miners legislation to address the health care and retirement needs of those miners. As my two colleagues have pointed out, at its heart, this is the same emergency. Today it is the mine workers. Tomorrow it could be the truckers. The next day it could be the construction workers and the woodworkers in my part of the United States. As my colleagues have said, the reason that is the case is that for generations of Americans, getting a good-paying job came with a simple bargain: You worked hard, you earned a wage and benefits, and those benefits wouldn't be taken away.

Today, bit by bit, that bargain is crumbling. There are two points that I would touch on so that Senator BROWN can have some time, if his schedule permits. I think Senator KLOBUCHAR has made a very good point about how important it is that Congress address this issue because, with respect to troubled systems like Central States, Congress is partially responsible for creating the problem.

As Senator KLOBUCHAR noted, 2 years ago Congress passed a bill—a bill that I was very much opposed to—the Multiemployer Pension Reform Act. It was slipped into a must-pass government funding package, and it gave a green light to slashing benefits in a lot of struggling multiemployer plans. In effect, for a generation of workers, it said: Sorry, times have changed. The benefits that you earned are no longer going to be protected, and the weight of this economic transformation in America is going to fall on you.

It wasn't fair and it wasn't practical. I certainly share the view of my colleagues who said it was a good thing Treasury rejected the proposal that would have cut benefits earlier this year. Obviously we are going to have to take more steps to shore up the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, which is a financial lifeline for 10 million workers, and we are going to have to look at a variety of approaches.

I very much share the views Senator FRANKEN spoke about, which Senator KLOBUCHAR supports as well, when he talked about this rotting economic carcass known as the Federal Tax Code and how unfair it is to working families. My colleagues have just pointed out one example.



Let me say that at the heart of the bipartisan tax reform proposals I have written over the last decade is my sense that we now have a tax code that really represents a tale of two systems. If you are influential and well connected, you can pretty much decide what kinds of taxes you are going to pay and when you are going to pay them. A fortunate few basically have that kind of opportunity. But the people my colleagues have been talking about—for example, truckers—don't have a tax code like that. Once or twice a month, those truckers have taxes extracted from their paychecks. They see it on their paychecks. There are no loopholes or anything that states about whether it is carried interest or derivatives or half a dozen other things; they just have their taxes extracted and there are no writeoffs or any kind of figuring out what you are going to pay and when you are going to pay it. It comes right off your paycheck.

We have a lot of heavy lifting to do. Today, it seems to me that Congress began the task. I can tell my colleagues that there is so much work to do to modernize these pension and retirement systems.

Chairman HATCH agreed to a proposal that I made today to allow people to contribute to their IRAs after they are 70½ years old. That proposal was adopted, as Senator FRANKEN may know, sometime in the early 1960s. I won't pretend to be anywhere near as humorous as my colleagues, but I finally said—I thanked Chairman HATCH for adopting my proposal that let's people over 70½ contribute to their IRAs because people are living longer and feeling better. It doesn't seem that it makes much sense to have so many Senators and working Americans younger than the retirement laws that were adopted for a different time.

We have a lot to do. First and foremost, we have to shore up Central States. We will be looking at a variety of approaches on how to do that, and, as both of my colleagues have said, a fundamental part of what we are going to have to do is fix this broken tax system.

When I start talking about the Tax Code as a rotting economic carcass, my wife always says: Will you just stop there, dear, because you are frightening the children? We have small children. The reality is, this Tax Code is infected with loopholes and the inversion virus. It just goes on and on.

As my colleagues have said, it is not right for working families—particularly those who are depending on Central States pensions—to sort of hang in suspended animation, hoping that somehow there is going to be a piece of legislation that will pass through here so that they will get something resembling what they were promised—a dignified retirement based on the pension they earned.

I commend my colleagues for doing this. This comes at the end of the day

where at least we began the long push to pension reform with a successful bipartisan effort on miners, but, as my colleagues have said, this work has just begun.

I thank Senator FRANKEN and Senator KLOBUCHAR for their commitment and their eloquence.

I yield the floor.

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for up to 10 minutes as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BROWN. Mr. President, it has now been 4 months since the U.S. Treasury did the right thing and rejected the Central States Teamsters pension fund plan to cut the premiums they had earned through a lifetime of hard work. That was a win for all of us who urged Treasury to reject these cuts. Most importantly, it was a win for the thousands of retirees who worked so hard to protect what they had earned. However, that win did not solve the underlying issue. It was not even close to the end of this fight. It was the first necessary step. The Central States Pension Fund is still in the red and on a path where in a few short years it will be unable to pay out the benefits it owes to our retirees.

If a pension fund is in bad shape, it is our job to fix it, not to break promises to Americans who have worked their whole lives to earn those pensions. This is retirement security these Teamsters have worked for, fought for, and sacrificed raises for.

I remind my colleagues—especially those who spend much of their effort here fighting organized drives for unions, oppose any effort to strengthen unions, and attempt to pass legislation to weaken unions—that at the negotiating table time and time again since the Wagner Act passed 75 years ago, workers have given up wages in order to fund pensions and health care in their later years. That is good for them, it is good for their families, it is good for their communities, and it is good for our society because it means they are prepared in their older years and won't rely on the State to keep them going. Of course, they still get Social Security and all of that, but they are prepared because they have given up wages today for benefits in the future. We should applaud them instead of criticizing the UAW, the Teamsters, and the steelworkers for their "legacy costs."

These are pensions that they gave up health care packages for and were

promised they would earn over a lifetime of hard work. Just ask Rita Lewis. She is a friend of mine from Westchester, OH, in southwest Ohio. She knows a thing or two about hard work. Her husband Butch worked as a trucker for 40 years with the promise that the pension he earned would be there to care for his family after he retired. When the pension came under threat, he worked to protect it for himself, his beloved Rita, and hundreds of thousands of other Teamsters. Rita has been left to continue Butch's fight alone. He passed away on New Year's Eve due to a stroke, which some have attributed, at least in part, to the stress he faced in fighting for his Teamster brothers and sisters in support of their pensions.

Butch told us that the cuts being forced on retirees amount to a war against the middle class and the American dream, and he was right. That war has already claimed enough victims.

We used to have a compact in this country that promised that if you work hard, play by the rules, and do what people expect you to do, you will be able to spend time with your grandchildren and not worry about how to make ends meet. Workers have more than held up their end of the bargain. It is time for both parties to come together and hold up our end before we leave town.

This Senate, as we have heard repeatedly, has not done its job. Under Leader MCCONNELL, this Senate has been in session less than any Senate in the last 60-plus years. It is simply not doing its job. We are not doing what we should on Zika. We are not doing what we should on the coal miners' pension. We are not doing what we should on Central States. We are not doing what we should to confirm a Supreme Court Justice. It will be the longest time since the Civil War that a Supreme Court spot has been vacant.

We owe it to our constituents on this one and on others not to leave town but to support a bipartisan, long-term solution to protect the benefits they earned and they were promised. This fix needs to be sustainable from now into the future, not the piecemeal plan that addresses problems with current policy but does nothing to solve the underlying issues.

Our Teamsters and their families need the peace of mind to know this nightmare is finally behind them. We need a plan that is bipartisan so we can get this done.

I was encouraged this morning when we held a markup on a plan to deal with the mine workers' pension, which is also under threat. We have had some good bipartisan work to find possible solutions to this crisis. We need the same spirit of cooperation on behalf of our Teamsters.

My wife and I live in Cleveland, OH, in ZIP Code 44105. The ZIP Code where my wife and I live, in 2007, had more foreclosures in the first half in 2007 than any ZIP Code in the United

States. I drive through this neighborhood and there are still far too many homes boarded up, still far too many families dislocated, still far too many children just pulled from one school district to another.

The pages sitting here—I assume most of them have pretty stable lives, where they are able to go to school year after year with the same friends, same classrooms, same schools, same teachers, but think about it. What we all do on this floor we are all paid well for. We have good benefits. For some reason, we don't think other Americans should have the same health care benefits we do, and that is a whole other issue. We don't think enough about people who struggle, who might have their house foreclosed on, who might have been evicted. We don't think about those kids who go from one school district to another. We don't think about these Teamsters families. You are 65 years old and you are retiring. You have planned your life in a way that your Social Security—\$1,100, \$1,200 \$1,300 a month—your retirement pension from the Teamsters, from Central State, you have calculated that. You know you are not going to be rich, but you are going to be comfortable enough, and you start having sleepless nights thinking about what is going to happen to your pension.

Lincoln used to say he wanted to get out of the White House. Staff said: Stay here. Win the war. Free the slaves. Lincoln said: No, I have to get out of the White House and get my public opinion baths. Pope Francis exhorted his parish priests to go out and smell like the flock, with all the Biblical connotations of that.

In this body, we don't think very much. We don't go enough to a labor hall or to a church basement or to a veterans hall and just sit there and listen to people's problems.

The person who sat at this desk right before I did was Jay Rockefeller, the Senator from West Virginia. He used to go out by himself with no media and spend 2½ hours speaking to the miners in West Virginia. He said: I learned to listen to them with soft nods and soft eyes, to really listen and look in their eyes and pay attention to what their lives were like. He was a Rockefeller and had no financial struggles, but he recognized he needed to talk to people who did.

That is whom I want my colleagues to think about, not to go to another fundraiser at a fancy restaurant or spend their time at a country club in Dallas or wherever they live but instead start thinking about what these Teamsters' lives are like, when they expected this pension and are not getting it. Think about these widows of mine workers, understanding that mine workers are more likely to die younger from illness or from dangerous work or from injury than most workers in this country and certainly younger than Senators. Think about those mine

workers' widows who might lose their pensions because the Republican leader in this body doesn't like unions and he doesn't like the mine workers and he has blocked us from doing this. This is not personal. I was just on the stage with Senator McCONNELL. He is a nice man. I like him, but he is not doing his job. The Senate is not doing its job to take care of these workers who have huge numbers of veterans among the Teamsters, a lot more than there are veterans in the U.S. Senate.

We have a lot of work to do, and we shouldn't be leaving here without doing our jobs.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LEE). Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### NOMINATION OF MERRICK GARLAND

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, it has been 189 days since President Obama nominated a distinguished jurist, Merrick Garland, to the U.S. Supreme Court.

I know there are a lot of issues on people's minds every day because they are working hard and taking the kids to school and putting food on the table and all of the hard work that goes on every day for families, and sometimes talking about the Supreme Court may seem a little abstract to people. I want to speak a little bit about why Americans should care, beyond the fact that we all care about the fact that we have three branches of government under our Constitution, and we need them all fully functioning.

That was the point of our Founding Fathers, to make sure we had three functioning branches, and right now we have one that is not fully functioning. In fact, when they sit, starting October 3, there is going to be a vacant chair because we will not have fulfilled the responsibility of the U.S. Senate of confirming someone for that ninth seat.

Why does that matter to people? Well, over our lifetimes, great debates have gone on about quality education and equal access to schools regardless of where a child lives. It is very important not only for children and for families but for an economy that can function and a country that can function.

Very important decisions have been made that affect every neighborhood in America, every family in America. We have seen issues related to equality in the workplace and in housing and access to credit, if you want to buy a house or you want to start a business. We have seen a whole range of issues that directly affect all of us. Frankly, the third branch of government, as we know, is a check on us, a check on Congress, and on the Presidency to make sure we have the watchdog looking at what we are doing from the lens of the

U.S. Constitution and our Bill of Rights, and making sure we are all living up to that document that is the cornerstone of our country.

So the Supreme Court matters. What happens matters.

Years ago, in 1937—I don't think any of us were here; if we were, we weren't very old at that time—but there was a case called *West Coast Hotel v. Parrish*. It happened in 1937. Elsie Parrish worked as a maid in Washington State and she sued to be paid the \$14.50 a week she was owed under the Washington State law. Her case made it all the way to the Supreme Court, and it was settled in a 5-to-4 decision. Obviously, it was a very close vote, and without that majority, we wouldn't have a minimum wage today. That was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in a 5-to-4 decision.

Today we all understand that everybody who works hard every day ought to be able to be above the poverty line. I certainly believe that, and we certainly have much to do to make sure our minimum wage keeps up, but if we didn't have that case, people would have a much lower standard of living. We wouldn't necessarily have a minimum wage that sets a floor for everyone's wages in America, as well as addresses equal pay as it relates to wages across the country.

There are so many ways in which the Court impacts our lives. We have had multiple health care decisions, certainly, as it relates to the Affordable Care Act and whether we will have competitive health exchanges so people can purchase insurance at lower rates, and whether we are all in this together so that if we all have insurance, then we are able to have important policies fulfilled, such as no preexisting conditions, so that if you have cancer or your child has diabetes or you have had a heart attack or some other chronic disease, you can purchase health insurance. This is all tied up in implications from Court decisions that relate to health care, and multiple other decisions that relate to health care, and whether 20 million people who now have health care in our country would be having health care if it were not for a Supreme Court decision or decisions as it relates to health care policy.

So workers and families across America need nine Supreme Court Justices. We need to make sure that when October 3 comes along and the picture is taken of the U.S. Supreme Court, there is not a vacant seat here.

We have heard Justice Kagan, for example, who said: A tie does nobody any good. Presumably, we are here for a reason. They are there to resolve cases that need deciding and answer hotly contested issues that need resolving. They can't do that with a tie vote.

The fact is, unfortunately, the Republican majority is refusing to even give Judge Garland a hearing despite the fact that he has been praised over the years by Members on both sides of the aisle for his integrity and his commitment to the judiciary. It makes one

wonder why it is that this seat is being left open. There can be really only one conclusion, and that is that the seat is being left open for the Republican nominee, even though Republican colleagues are stepping away at every turn from the comments made by the nominee and distancing themselves. They are basically saying: We think the Republican nominee should make that appointment. Even though he has no respect for the judiciary, they believe he should be appointing the new Supreme Court Justice. That can be the only conclusion as to why we would see the majority waiting right now. I realize it makes no sense. We will see the third branch of government effectively go for a year, maybe more, without being able to fully function because of people not being willing to do their job because they are waiting to have Mr. Trump fill that seat. I find that embarrassing and extremely concerning for all of us.

It is time for Senate Republicans to do their job. It is very simple. We all have a job to do. None of us would be able to just tell our employer that a major part of our job is something that we just don't feel like doing for a year, so we are not going to do it. We could say that, but when I talk to people about that, they say: Yeah, chances are I would be fired. I certainly wouldn't be paid if I didn't do my job. Yet here, despite our constitutional responsibility to fill that spot, the Senate Republican majority is not doing its job.

Doing our job doesn't mean we have to vote yes. We can vote yes; we can vote no. You can vote yes or no in a hearing, yes or no on the floor. But we have a constitutional responsibility to consider a nominee from the President, to meet with him, to consider his record, to ask questions, to have a hearing, to have a vote, and then people can vote yes or no. You can vote yes or no, but we do have an obligation to vote.

From my perspective, there is no way I can explain to people back home in Michigan why that seat has been left open for any valid reason, unfortunately, other than politics, and that is just not good enough when it comes to fulfilling our job and making sure the third branch of government can fully do its job.

Mr. President, I am calling on the Republicans to hold a hearing. We still have time to hold a hearing, and we can hold a vote before we leave. This is a choice by the majority—a conscious choice—but there is time to hold a hearing and there is time to have a vote so that when October 1 comes, there will be the full nine U.S. Supreme Court Justices sitting, ready to do their job.

Do your job. That is what we need to have happen.

Thank you, Mr. President.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA PROGRAM

Mrs. SHAHEEN. Mr. President, I have come to the floor today to once again urge that we extend the Special Immigrant Visa Program for Afghan interpreters who put their lives on the line while serving alongside Americans in Afghanistan. Unless we act, Congress is going to let this program lapse in just a matter of months. We will abandon thousands of Afghans who helped our men and women on the ground during the long conflict in Afghanistan. It is no exaggeration to say that this is a matter of life and death. Afghan interpreters who served the U.S. mission are being systematically hunted down by the Taliban, and we must not abandon them.

The United States promised to protect these Afghans, who served our mission with great loyalty and at such enormous risk. It would be a stain on America's national honor to break this promise. It would also carry profound strategic costs. U.S. forces and diplomats have always relied on local people to help us accomplish our mission. We continue to need this assistance in Afghanistan. We need the support in other places in the future. So we have to ask why anyone would agree to help the United States if we abandon those who have assisted us in the past. That is exactly why the former commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, GEN David Petraeus, and his predecessor, GEN Stanley McChrystal, have pleaded with Congress to extend the Afghan SIV Program.

In a recent letter to Congress, more than 30 prominent generals, including Gen. John Allen, the former commander in Afghanistan; GEN George Casey, the former commander in Iraq; and two former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, GEN Richard Myers and GEN Hugh Shelton, also urged the Congress to extend the program.

In addition, our soldiers and marines are very interested in protecting the interpreters who served with them in Afghanistan. Many of them owe their lives to the interpreters who went into combat with them.

In recent years, I have gotten to know former Army CPT Michael Breen. He is a Granite Stater who served with the infantry in Iraq and led paratroopers in Afghanistan. He speaks with admiration about one interpreter in particular, an Iraqi woman in her early twenties named Wissam. On one occasion, Captain Breen and his soldiers were at a small forward operating base in Iraq. A man approached them, frantically pointing to his watch and indicating an explosion with his hands. The Americans didn't speak Arabic, so they couldn't tell if the man was trying to warn them or threaten them.

Wissam hurried toward Captain Breen to assist. Wissam was beloved by her American comrades, always cheerful and always willing to help. She listened to the man and said that he was warning of an IED on the main road.

Captain Breen later said: "A trusted interpreter can be the difference between a successful patrol and a body bag." He noted that every night he and his fellow soldiers would hunker down in their heavily guarded perimeter, but Wissam would leave the compound and go home. One evening after she left the American compound, three gunmen ambushed her car. She was killed—one more interpreter who paid the ultimate price for serving the American mission.

Captain Breen later said: One day there will be a granite monument with the names of all the American servicemen who died in Iraq and Afghanistan. Wissam deserves to have her name on that monument because she took great risks and gave her life while serving the United States.

As many of our colleagues know, the SIV Program allows Afghans who supported our mission and faced grave threats as a result to seek refuge in America. To be eligible, new applicants must demonstrate at least 2 years of faithful and valuable service on the ground with Americans. To receive a visa, they must also clear a rigorous screening process that includes an independent verification of their service and then an intensive interagency security review.

A typical example is an Afghan interpreter who served with U.S. forces from 2008 to 2015. Because he is in danger, I am not going to use his name. Last December, he was gravely wounded in an IED attack that robbed him of one eye and it destroyed his vision in the other. He applied for a special immigrant visa after being wounded, and he is in the early stages of the interagency vetting process. But unless Congress acts, there may not be a visa available for him once he completes that vetting.

We know that the service of these individuals has been critical to our successes in Afghanistan. In some cases recipients of special immigrant visas have continued to serve the U.S. mission after arriving in this country. One promptly enlisted in the U.S. Armed Forces and later worked as a cultural adviser to the military. Another graduated from Indiana University and Georgetown. He has worked as an instructor at the Defense Language Institute. A third, who worked as a senior adviser in the U.S. Embassy, now serves on the board of a nonprofit, working to promote a safe and stable Afghanistan.

These many contributions help explain why senior U.S. commanders and diplomats have urged Congress to extend the Afghan SIV program. Appearing last week at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Army Chief of Staff GEN Mark Milley added strong support. Speaking of Afghan interpreters he said: "Those are brave men

and women who have fought along our side and there are American men and women in uniform who are alive today because a lot of those Afghans put their lives on the line.”

At that same hearing, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert Neller also stressed the importance of the program and the need for Congress to extend it. Their view is shared by our senior diplomats.

Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who served in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2012 recently wrote:

Taking care of those who took care of us is not just an act of basic decency; it is also in our national interest. American credibility matters. Abandoning these allies would tarnish our reputation.

Well, I agree. Indeed, I think there is overwhelming bipartisan support in both houses of Congress for extending the Afghan SIV program. Yet, because of the opposition of a handful of Members, Congress, by default, could allow this program to expire in a matter of months. This would put in jeopardy the lives of thousands of Afghans who have served alongside our fighting forces.

Make no mistake, it would also jeopardize our reputation as a country that keeps its promises and stands by those who assist our missions. In past years, Senators have overwhelmingly supported the authorization of additional special immigrant visas for Afghan interpreters.

On both sides of the aisle, we have agreed that it is important to make good on our promise to these Afghan allies. But sadly, this year has been different. Several Members have objected. It is evident to me that the anti-immigration passions that have been stoked during this Presidential campaign by Donald Trump have contributed to this impasse.

The irresponsible rhetoric about immigrants is offensive to American values and it ignores what makes America great. Across nearly four centuries, immigrants have brought their energy and talents to our country, building the most successful and dynamic economy on Earth.

Our Nation has always been welcoming to immigrants. In fact, all of us here are immigrants, unless we are Native Americans. We should be especially welcoming to those who served alongside American soldiers and marines in combat and have been so essential to carrying out our mission in Afghanistan.

The Iraq and Afghan Veterans of America and other organizations representing hundreds of thousands of veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces recently addressed a letter to Members of Congress. In that letter, they respectfully but forcefully urged Congress to reauthorize the special immigrant visa program.

I want to quote from this letter, because I think it reflects the words of these American veterans:

Military service instills in a person certain values: Loyalty. Duty. Respect. Honor. In-

tegrity. . . . Breaking our word directly violates these values. Many of us can point to a moment when one of our foreign allies saved our lives—often by taking up arms against our common enemies. . . . Since our first days in boot camp, we accepted and practiced the value: “leave no one behind.” Keep our word. Don’t leave anyone behind.

If we fail to extend the SIV program, Congress will have one more opportunity and only one more opportunity this year. That opportunity will come in the session following the election.

We must seize this opportunity to do the right thing for our country and for the Afghan interpreters whose lives are at risk. We would never leave an American warrior behind on the battlefield. Likewise, we must not leave behind the Afghan interpreters who served side by side with our warriors and diplomats. We made a solemn promise to these brave people. I am going to do everything I can to ensure that we keep this promise.

I urge my colleagues, when Congress returns in November, to join me on a bipartisan basis for a program that has had bipartisan support. We can extend the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program. We must do that. It is in our national security interests to keep this promise that we have made.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. TILLIS). Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. LEE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### DIXON POLICE DEPARTMENT SAFE PASSAGE INITIATIVE

Mr. DURBIN. In the last 2 years, I have spoken with so many Illinoisans about the heroin and prescription opioid epidemic. I have heard many different perspectives, including those from law enforcement, health care providers, criminal justice systems, the pharmaceutical industry, Federal oversight agencies, parents, loved ones, and recovering addicts.

I have learned that there is no town too small and no suburb too wealthy to avoid this crisis of addiction and overdose. Opioids and heroin are affecting communities all across the country.

Last November, I travelled to Dixon, IL, to learn about their work to combat the scourge of prescription opioid misuse. That is where I met chief of po-

lice Danny Langloss of the Dixon Police Department, who is leading an innovative effort with the Lee County Sheriff’s Department to address this problem.

Chief Langloss told me that the town had experienced a spike in opioid overdose deaths, which was quite uncommon for the area. As a result, the Dixon Police Department launched a new plan, one that was unconventional for law enforcement, but had proven to be effective in other parts of the country.

They started the Safe Passage Initiative, a program that promotes treatment alternatives to arrest and incarceration. The police department put the word out that, if residents suffering from addiction came forward for help and turned in their drug paraphernalia, they would be assisted in finding addiction treatment rather than being arrested, so long as they did not have outstanding warrants. This program is a model for other communities. It embodies the public health approach to this epidemic that views substance abuse as a disease and not purely a criminal matter.

Well, what has happened? Immediately after the announcement, the police department had dozens of residents come forward, asking for help. They were provided with social services and rehabilitation options. Since the program’s initiation, the Dixon Police Department has helped to place more than 100 individuals into treatment. This is quite the cause for celebration, especially in a small, rural community where it can be incredibly difficult to find open treatment slots. Months later, many of these local residents are now clean and on the path toward recovery.

What else has happened? Crime is down, and the jail cells are not nearly as full as they once were. Rather than arresting addicts for petty crimes that feed their addictions, they are being steered towards long-term help.

Today I would like to celebrate the 1-year anniversary of this program and commend the Dixon Police Department, Chief Danny Langloss, and their partners in the treatment and advocacy community who have helped to make this program a success. The program has now expanded to multiple neighboring counties, including Whiteside County and Livingston County. When we talk about this opioid epidemic and the need for all stakeholders to step up and do their part, the Safe Passage Initiative is a worthy effort that is helping to turn the tide.

Today there is a network of more than 145 police departments and 300 treatment centers that are taking this commonsense approach to addressing the opioid crisis.

It is true that real barriers remain. I know that the Dixon Police Department struggles at times to find available beds for individuals that come forward to their program. And that is why