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Senate

The Senate met at 3 p.m. and was called to order by the Honorable PETER WELCH, a Senator from the State of Vermont.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Most Holy and gracious God, who turns dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows, satisfy us with Your mercy, grace, and peace, that we may receive Your help for our time of need. Lift the light of Your countenance upon our lawmakers. Calm every troubled thought, and keep their feet on the path of peace. Lord, perfect Your strength in their weakness, and empower them to serve You in a way that honors Your Name. Guide their debates to expose truth, to produce creative compromise, and to bring solutions that will keep America strong. May they use their talents to renew peace in our Nation and world.

We pray in Your magnificent Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mrs. MURRAY).

The legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, March 5, 2024.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby

appoint the Honorable PETER WELCH, a Senator from the State of Vermont, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATTY MURRAY,
President pro tempore.

Mr. WELCH thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

MEASURE PLACED ON THE CALENDAR—S. 3853

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, I understand there is a bill at the desk due for a second reading.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will read the bill by title for the second time.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 3853) to extend the period for filing claims under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act and to provide for compensation under such Act for claims relating to Manhattan Project waste, and to improve compensation for workers involved in uranium mining.

Mr. SCHUMER. In order to place the bill on the calendar under the provisions of rule XIV, I would object to further proceeding.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Objection having been heard, the bill will be placed on the Calendar.

CHANGE HEALTHCARE CYBER ATTACK

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, today I come to the floor with good news. HHS and CMS has heeded my call from

last Friday to provide hospitals and providers immediate relief in the aftermath of the devastating cyber attack asking for ransom. The announcement by CMS today will get cash flowing to providers while our healthcare system works to get fully back online after this attack.

It is an extremely encouraging first step, but the systems of many of the providers are complicated and they are varied, so I urge CMS to be persistent and patient as they work to get all the providers on board; and I will work with CMS to make sure that happens.

As you know, across New York and across America, tens of thousands of hospitals, pharmacies, doctors' offices, and other healthcare providers are still reeling from one of the worst cyber attacks ever launched on our healthcare system.

The February 21 attack against Change Healthcare, which is responsible for processing billions of insurance and payment claims annually for healthcare providers, has thrown providers, including hospitals and pharmacies, into a crisis. For nearly 2 weeks, they have been unable to submit medical claims; and many providers are facing imminent insolvency as cash reserves are drying up.

Yesterday, I was in Ithaca and met with Rome Health and Cayuga Health who told me they are losing hundreds of thousands of dollars every single day with stacks of claims nearly two feet high that they can't file.

Americans, meanwhile, are struggling to refill prescriptions, having their care delayed or denied and are unable to use patient assistance programs they need to stay healthy. Our hospitals, particularly our smaller ones without a cushion of cash reserve, could have ended up laying off people and not providing services had CMS not stepped up to the plate. I am so glad they did.

Probably even worse, our small pharmacies who have no financial cushion

● This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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could have ended up shutting down and would have told millions of patients, millions of customers that they can't provide the medicines these customers need because they were not getting reimbursed.

This was a crisis, so last Friday, I called upon HHS and CMS to use their authority to accelerate payments to our hospitals and impacted providers. Hospitals and providers need help from the Federal Government so they can focus on their main mission as much as possible, which is providing care for their patients. I warned that the longer this crisis persists, the harder it will be for hospitals and other providers to stay open.

Today, I am pleased to see that HHS and CMS are heeding my call. This is a huge shot in the arm and will provide immediate relief to hospitals and providers, just like we saw during COVID. CMS had the ability to do this; and during COVID, when providers also were not being reimbursed, they filled the void. And I am glad they are doing it again.

What CMS has done is an encouraging first step, but the work cannot stop until every affected provider has the financial stability to weather this storm. We need CMS to cut through the redtape to make sure these advanced payments are done right. The systems of the different providers are varied. Some are very complicated. We need CMS to be both persistent and flexible.

And, of course, we have asked the FBI and other Justice Department Agencies to find out who these awful perpetrators of this ransomware were to put them out of business and see if they can seek punishment, depending on the country that these providers came from.

I thank the administration for its swift action, and I encourage it to do more. I will work daily with the administration and providers alike until the situation is resolved.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, now on government funding, well, it is the start of a busy and consequential week in Congress. Thursday evening, President Biden will deliver his annual State of the Union Address to the American people, where he will share the immense progress we have made as a country to bring down costs, strengthen our economy, and protect our country from threats around the world.

On Friday, Congress will face another funding deadline, whereupon the government will start shutting down unless both Chambers work quickly, decisively, and with bipartisan cooperation. On that front, we are, thankfully, off to a very, very good start. Sunday evening, negotiators reached a long-sought, bipartisan and bicameral funding deal on the first six appropriations bills. And we did it—we passed these

bills—without devastating cuts or poison pill riders pushed by the MAGA right.

It has not been easy to complete the appropriations process in a divided government, but after a lot of persistence, we now have six bills that will preserve significant investments for American families, for moms and children, for America's clean energy, for America's veterans, and more.

It took a lot of work to make it happen. Appropriators worked through the entire weekend, so did my staff—so did I, in fact—and we have been working on this every day for months.

The important thing now is for both Chambers to move quickly. The House is set to take up these appropriations bills tomorrow, where, hopefully, they will pass. And as soon as the House sends the appropriations bills over to the Senate, I will put these bills on the floor so we can have them on President Biden's desk before Friday's deadline.

But the clock is ticking, and because of the State of the Union on Thursday, we need to cooperate to move extra fast to get these bills through. Between now and Friday, the watchwords for the Senate will be "cooperation" and "speed."

Now, let me take a moment to highlight some of the ways these appropriations bills will make a difference for the American people. This appropriations process—or this appropriations agreement—is a success in at least two ways: One, we protected almost all of the good investments for the American people and, two, we resisted practically all of the nasty riders from the MAGA right.

To moms and kids who rely on nutrition programs, you will be taken care of. Despite immense opposition from the other side, this agreement fully funds the WIC Program, meaning no mom or kid will be denied the nutrition assistance they qualify for. It is exceedingly good news that, in divided government, we were able to keep WIC whole, and I thank Senator MURRAY for her good, hard work on this issue, as well as Congress Member DELAURO.

Through this agreement, we will also protect funding to help Americans, especially rural Americans, to keep a roof over their head and afford the rent. We will increase funding for programs that support our veterans' health and wellbeing.

Child nutrition, including school lunch programs, school breakfast programs, and summer EBT programs remain fully funded. That means we will be able to provide nearly 5 billion school lunches and 2½ billion breakfasts to kids across America next year.

America's roads, bridges, and highways will get the funds they need for repairs and updates. We will be able to hire more air traffic controllers, food inspectors, and rail safety inspectors to keep Americans safe.

We will preserve pay raises for our Federal firefighters, and we will strengthen funding for cutting-edge scientific research.

I am also happy that we prevented the hard right from tainting these appropriations bills with devastating cuts and highly partisan policy riders.

Again, we fought hard to protect funding to build more affordable housing and provide nutrition assistance to low-income Americans, and we defeated the hard right's attempts to add even more restrictions to women's healthcare.

And even though the hard right tried repeatedly to undermine Democrats' clean energy agenda, we preserved practically all the progress we have made to fight climate change, while protecting critical jobs at the EPA.

So I am very glad and proud we have been able to reach such a strong agreement under divided government.

I thank Speaker JOHNSON, Leader JEFFRIES, Leader MCCONNELL, Appropriations Committee Chair PATTY MURRAY and Vice Chair SUSAN COLLINS, and all the staff who have dedicated so much work to get us to this point.

This agreement gives us much needed momentum to finish the next package of spending bills by the March 22 deadline. Once again, it will only be bipartisanship—only bipartisanship—that will get us across the finish line, as has proven in the past. We will keep working—keep working—until we finish the job.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, now on over-the-counter birth control, as hard-right Republicans continue their all-out assault on reproductive rights, the American people just received some very big news: The first-ever over-the-counter birth control pill is headed to stores later this month.

The introduction of a safe, effective, over-the-counter birth control pill is a promising step toward improving access to contraception. The pill, Opill, will be available very soon at major stores and pharmacies and online, for anyone to buy without needing a prescription. It will be a new avenue for Americans to access reproductive care, so critical today as reproductive care comes under greater attack by the hard right.

Hard-right Republicans have shown they have no restraint when it comes to ripping away reproductive rights after the disastrous Dobbs decision. Whether it is pushing for a national abortion ban, as the hard right has been doing for decades; or blocking promotions of hundreds of military officers in protest of women in the military getting access to reproductive care, as one Republican Senator did repeatedly last year; or even threatening access to in vitro fertilization, as the Republican majority Alabama Supreme Court did, followed by Senate Republicans blocking legislation to protect IVF last week, Republicans have made it beyond clear they have not yielded one bit in their radical anti-women, anti-choice agenda.