

12/21/2007 This Week in Congress

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December 21, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you and your family have a Merry Christmas and a safe and happy New Year. During the holiday season, I ask that we take time to remember our soldiers that are serving both here in the U.S. and abroad. I am thankful for their service to our country and am praying for their safe return. Here at home, I will be joining University of Kansas football fans in cheering the Jayhawks to victory in the Orange Bowl, which will take place in Miami on January 3. My next newsletter will be sent on Monday, January 7.

Winter Storm Update, Funding for Greensburg

The extent of the damage from the severe winter storms that hit Kansas this month is becoming more evident as the days go by. A preliminary damage assessment from the state's 23 rural electric cooperatives revealed this week that damage from the ice and snow may total more than \$137 million. This is a staggering number. While President Bush has declared an emergency for the State of Kansas and made federal funds available, more assistance may be required. I will work with local, state and federal officials to see that Kansans get back on their feet as soon as possible.

Also this week, Congress approved legislation to free up funds from the Department of Labor to be used in Greensburg and the surrounding area. Earlier this year, Greensburg was awarded a \$20 million grant to hire workers for local jobs, but congressional approval was needed to fix a provision to allow for the hiring of civil servants. I am glad that this funding will finally be available for use in Greensburg and the surrounding area. The use of this grant will help provide local folks a place to work while assisting the rebuilding process. The ability to employ people and help them earn a paycheck is an important part of building up the local economy.

Historical Changes Approved for Veterans Mileage Reimbursement Rate

This week, Congress approved historic changes to the mileage reimbursement rate for veterans traveling to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities. The increase from 11 cents to 28.5 cents per mile was included in the final passage of legislation that funds the VA for 2008. I have been working on this issue since first coming to Congress and was successful in adding the amendment to raise the rate increase during House consideration of the bill in June. This is the first increase in the mileage reimbursement rate for veterans since 1978.

Qualifying veterans are currently compensated at the rate of 11 cents per mile for routine medical visits and 17 cents per mile for disability rating examinations. While this rate has not been changed in the last 30 years, federal employees continue to see an increase in mileage reimbursement rates as gas prices rise.

We have made great strides in improving health care services and access for veterans in Kansas. But those services are of no use if veterans cannot afford the trip. Veterans in rural areas face longer driving times and with today's high gas prices, many are not able to cover the cost of visiting the doctor. I applaud my colleagues for recognizing the need for this long overdue increase. The final passage of this rate increase is one more step that helps fulfill our promise to take care of our veterans. [Click here to hear me talk about this issue.](#)

Social Security Administration Receives Funding to Tackle Backlog

Congress approved legislation this week to give the Social Security Administration (SSA) a needed funding increase to help it reduce a backlog of disability claims that have unfortunately left some Kansans waiting for more than a year on a decision.

The number of Americans waiting for their Social Security Disability claim to be heard has doubled since 2001. Because of injury or illness, many of these folks are unable to work and have to wait months or longer without income until the SSA finally hears their case. It is unacceptable that anyone would be put in this situation.

I sat down with the head of the SSA in November and visited with him about the actions his agency plans to take to reduce the backlog. Commissioner Michael Astrue has a plan in place that will decrease the amount of time Kansans wait for their case to be heard. The money Congress provided this week will allow that plan to be put in action. I will continue to monitor Commissioner Astrue's progress in eliminating the disability backlog.

Additional Troops to be Located at Fort Riley

Fort Riley and the surrounding communities received an early Christmas present this week with the announcement from the Army that additional troops will be stationed at Fort Riley as part of the Army's Grow the Force Initiative. The troops that have moved to the area in recent years have created economic growth that will continue with the addition of more soldiers. Our state's military installations already contribute more than \$2 billion to the Kansas economy each year.

In October, I joined the other members of the Kansas congressional delegation in contacting Army Chief of Staff General George Casey in support of additional troops being hosted at Fort Riley. This week's announcement that 1,300 new soldiers will be stationed at the base in coming years speaks highly of the surrounding communities' strong support and the quality of the Fort Riley installation.

Fixing Reimbursement Rates for Kansas Doctors and Hospitals

It is critical to have a fair Medicare reimbursement for physicians, especially in Kansas where many doctors serve large numbers of senior patients. Reimbursement rates must keep up with the cost of providing care. Because of a flawed formula, doctors were facing a 10 percent cut in Medicare payments for care they provide. On Wednesday, the House voted to suspend this cut and instead provide a 0.5 percent increase for physicians for the first six months of 2008. While I would prefer to have a more permanent solution to fixing the flawed Medicare formula, I am happy that an immediate fix has been agreed upon. Without this, many doctors would face the decision of turning away seniors on Medicare. I will continue to work next year to stave off any payment cuts and advocate for a permanent fix to the Medicare formula.

The bill also included provisions that benefit hospitals. Important to Kansas, the legislation extended the five percent bonus for doctors practicing in an area with few other physicians. This will help keep doctors in our rural hospitals. In addition, the bill provides for continued reimbursement of small hospitals for performing laboratory tests. Making sure Kansans have access to care is one of my top priorities. I am pleased this bill takes steps toward making sure rural hospitals stay open.

Asking Congressional Leaders to Extend Renewable Energy Tax Incentives

We must focus on advancing renewable energy so we may decrease our dependence on foreign oil. One way to do this is through tax credits for those who invest in renewable sources of energy. Tax incentives for wind and solar energy were created in energy legislation in 2005. These incentives are expiring at the end of next year. This week, I asked leaders in Congress to create a package to extend these renewable tax credits into the future. It is critical that congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle come together and create a bill that benefits the American people. I am also a sponsor of two pieces of legislation that support wind and solar energy. H.R. 550 would extend the solar tax credit through 2016. H.R. 1772, the Rural Wind Energy Development Act, encourages the development of wind technology.

Patching the Alternative Minimum Tax

On Wednesday, I joined fellow Representatives in voting for a one year patch to the Alternative Minimum Tax or AMT. This temporary fix was necessary to ensure that middle-class Kansans would not be subjected to higher income taxes when their income levels remain unchanged.

Originally enacted in 1969, the AMT was designed to make sure the wealthy paid their fair share of taxes. However, the original law was not indexed for inflation causing more Americans to fall under the tax each year. By patching the AMT, more Kansans will avoid this tax until a permanent solution can be found.

Funding to Fight Meth, Protect Law Enforcement and Expand Telehealth Services

Congress passed legislation this week to fund several federal agencies. Included in legislation that funds the Department of Justice for 2008 was funding for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) to target the importation of

methamphetamine and purchase protective vests. The KBI will receive funding for training and equipment at the Rural Kansas Methamphetamine Program and for ballistic vests to replace outdated gear currently used by KBI personnel. Any resources we can provide to enhance the safety of law enforcement officers and to combat this dangerous drug is money well spent.

Also included in legislation this week was funding for Kansas University Medical Center (KUMC) to expand telemedicine and telehealth services. Thanks in part to this federal funding, doctors at KUMC will be able to see cancer patients in western Kansas from the Medical Center. With a camera and microphone, medical doctors and others are able to see patients in various locations across the state, without having to travel. This benefits both doctors and patients and is another example of how, through technology and innovation, we can find new ways to provide important services in rural areas. The funding could also help the KU Medical Center achieve designation as a National Cancer Institute.

Positive Developments for Agriculture Disaster Relief

After struggling through five and six years of drought and last year's strong winter storms, Congress passed agriculture disaster relief this past May. Now, after several months, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has announced that this relief will finally be delivered to many farmers and ranchers in Kansas.

USDA has also responded to some of my concerns with how it is administering the Livestock Compensation Program - a component of the disaster relief. Producers operating feedyards and conducting cattle operations in multiple counties have been denied access to the program. When meeting with Acting Secretary Chuck Connor this fall, I stressed that this was not the intent of Congress and expressed my willingness to work with USDA to make the program available to those and other cattle producers. USDA is now allowing producers with cattle in multiple counties to sign up for the program. Producers who have been previously denied may wish to return to their Farm Service Agency office.

Another positive development occurred this week when Congress passed legislation that will provide an additional \$630 million to extend disaster relief to spring crops affected by the floods in southeast Kansas. The disaster assistance originally passed by Congress was only available for livestock losses that occurred before February 28, 2007, and for losses that occurred to crops planted before February 28, 2007. The qualification deadline is now extended for agriculture disaster assistance to the producers affected by flooding.

Talking Tankers with Boeing Representatives

I met with representatives from Boeing this week in my Washington, D.C., office to receive an update on Boeing's bid to build the new refueling tanker for the U.S. Air Force. It is crucial that we replace our aging tanker fleet and I am convinced Boeing's KC-767 platform is the best choice for our war fighters, American taxpayers and our state. The Air Force is nearing the completion of the competition to build the tanker and a decision is expected in February. Boeing's selection would mean hundreds of additional employees for Boeing in Wichita and additional work for area suppliers.

Honoring Greg Lundstrom's Service at Lindsborg Community Hospital

I joined friends, family and colleagues of Greg Lundstrom today at Lindsborg Community Hospital to celebrate Greg's retirement as hospital administrator. Since 1991, Greg has served the citizens of Lindsborg with dedication and a commitment to improve health care. He has been a leader in the Kansas Hospital Association and a long time, staunch advocate for Kansas hospitals and their patients. He has also become a great friend. Community hospitals and rural health clinics, such as the one Greg oversaw in Lindsborg, are important to Kansans across our state as they provide needed services to residents where they live. I wish Greg and his wife, Susan, the best as they begin a well-deserved break.

Listening Tour to Continue Next Week

My Big First Listening Tour will continue next week with stops in Cloud, Clay, Meade and Rooks Counties. The following week, I will be in Pawnee County. The stops are scheduled as follows:

Thursday, December 27

Cloud County Tour Stop, Concordia

Time: 12:00-1:00 p.m.

Location: Lions Club, Cloud County Community College, 2221 Campus Dr.

Clay County Tour Stop, Clifton

Time: 1:45-2:45 p.m.

Location: First National Bank, Board Room, 103 E. Parallel St.

Friday, December 28

Meade County Tour Stop, Meade

Time: 10:45-11:45 a.m.

Location: Meade District Hospital, Rosson Room, 510 E. Carthage

Saturday, December 29

Rooks County Tour Stop, Damar

Time: 9:00-10:00 a.m.

Location: St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Parrish Hall, 107 N. Oak

Wednesday, January 2

Pawnee County Tour Stop, Larned

Time: 12:00-1:00 p.m.

Location: Lions Club, St. Joseph's Memorial Hospital, Brenner Room, 923 Carroll Ave.

[Click here to stay up-to-date on other stops being scheduled.](#)

Very truly yours,

Jerry