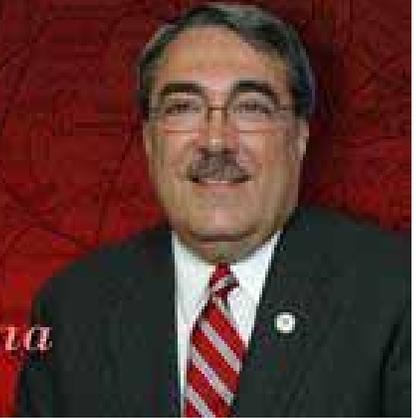




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House Moves to Fill Gaps in Veterans' Benefits

The House approved three measures aimed at filling the gaps in veterans' benefits programs, including one that would address the problems of homeless veterans.

With bi-partisan support, the House approved the Veterans' Health Care Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 2874, which increases care for homeless and low-income veterans. It authorizes a new grant program for therapeutic readjustment counseling for veterans of conflicts after the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

The bill authorizes financial assistance for "very low-income veterans" who live in permanent housing, authorizing \$25 million per fiscal year for the program. Another provision authorizes a transportation grants program "to provide innovative transportation options to veterans in remote rural areas. The legislation authorizes \$3 million per year from fiscal year 2008 through 2012.

The legislation also shortens – from 60 days to 30 days – the time that homeless veterans must be enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical care program before they are eligible to receive dental care.



The House also approved the Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 1315, which makes adaptive housing assistance available to disabled service members staying in a house owned by a family member.

The legislation extends the benefit to service members before their discharge, altering the current law which only allows adaptive housing assistance after discharge. Those eligible could receive up to \$14,000 to make modifications to family homes. The legislation also includes a provision that creates a scholarship for students pursuing careers in rehabilitation of the blind.

With bi-partisan support, the House also approved H.R. 2623, which waives the co-payment required for veterans receiving hospice care at home or at acute or palliative care facilities, rather than from a VA health care facility.

Cutting Poverty in Half by 2017

As co-chair of the House Out-of-Poverty Caucus, this week I co-introduced a resolution that sets a national goal of cutting poverty in the U.S. in half over the next ten years.

It is unacceptable that, in the richest nation in the world, there are 37 million people living in poverty. Eradicating poverty needs to be a national priority, and the best way to achieve this objective is to set some measurable goals. If we are serious about this condition, we need to commit to cutting the number of people living in poverty in this country in half over the next ten years.

The 37 million Americans living in poverty include 13 million children and nearly 25 percent of all blacks. Nearly a fifth of these children go to bed hungry at night because their parents, many of whom are working full time at the minimum wage, still can't make ends meet.

Five million people have fallen into the vicious cycle of poverty since 2000. The impact of growing poverty is disproportionately falling on minorities. Since 2000, median income has declined by 2.1 percent among non-Hispanic whites, by 7.4 percent among blacks, and by 5.9 percent among Hispanics. Almost one quarter of African Americans and 21.9 percent of Latinos live in poverty, compared to 8.6 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 9.8 percent of Asians.

Poverty is no stranger to eastern North Carolina. According to the latest U.S. Census, the per capita income in the First Congressional District is the lowest in the state, and 27% below the state's median income. The rate of poverty in the First District is almost double that of the state and nearly 29% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty.

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Nearly 5% of the homes in Hertford County don't have a kitchen; more than 2% of the homes in Bertie, Halifax and Northampton counties still don't have plumbing; and, more than 5% of the homes in Beaufort, Bertie, Gates, Halifax, Hertford and Northampton don't have a telephone.

The bill prides recommendations for cutting poverty on four principles: promoting decent work, providing opportunity for all, ensuring economic security and helping people to build wealth. The recommendations included raising the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation; expanding the earned income and child tax credits; promoting unionization by making it easier for employees to vote to join a union; offering child care assistance for low income families; guaranteeing early education for all; and providing two million people with "opportunity housing vouchers."

Applauding N.C. County Medicaid Phase Out

In light of this week's agreement to eventually relieve North Carolina's counties of Medicaid costs, I have called for a halt to federal legislation I filed to accomplish the same goal.

The North Carolina General Assembly and Governor Easley deserve a great deal of credit for doing right by the counties and relieving them of growing Medicaid burden. While I introduced the federal legislation, it was always my hope that the state would find a way to resolve this issue.

This week, the General Assembly and Governor Easley agreed on a plan where the state increases its share of Medicaid in 2007 until it eventually funds the full cost of the program by 2009. In exchange, the state would receive a half cent of the counties' share of the sales tax.

With the agreement in place, I wrote to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce's Subcommittee on Health Chairman, Frank J. Pallone, to ask that no further action be taken on the federal legislation.



The Medicaid County Protection Act of 2007, H.R. 326, was filed out of concern for growing financial hardship on the North Carolina counties.



North Carolina was among the few states to administer Medicaid through its counties, and it was the only state that requires counties to pay a fixed percentage – 15 percent – of the federal share of Medicaid costs. Costs have been growing rapidly in recent years and without legislative relief, the costs to counties in the coming year were projected at more than \$517 million.

Over the past eight years, some counties have seen as much as a 144% growth in Medicaid cost but counties have no mechanism to meet these huge increases. Half of North Carolina's 100 counties were committing more funding to Medicaid than for school facilities. Further, nine counties had been forced to commit more than 10% of their budgets to meet the Medicaid obligations, and nine more were on the cusp of having to dedicate a tenth of their budgets to Medicaid.

It was an unfortunate, unfair and growing burden that hit the poorest counties the hardest. I'm certainly pleased that this important issue has been resolved.

Health Care for Children and Seniors

The House approved the Children's Health and Medicare Protection Act (CHAMP Act), H.R. 3162, by a 225 to 204 vote this week. The legislation reauthorizing the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) needed to ensure millions of children receive health-care and to protect Medicare for seniors.

During the past decade, the joint federal-state program known as SCHIP has provided millions of children with needed medical coverage, including some lifesaving procedures. In 2006, SCHIP covered 248,366

children in North Carolina. Still, 274,783 children remain uninsured. SCHIP reauthorization offers an opportunity to ensure that more of these children covered.

Medicare and SCHIP will also help children obtain vital screening and prevention services that will assist children with staying healthy and maturing into productive adults.



House Backs Needed Rest for Troops in Iraq

The House this week approved the "Ensuring Military Readiness Through Stability and Predictability Deployment Policy Act" by a 229 to 194 vote.

Americans are proud of the brave men and women who risk their lives for our nation. This legislation provide our troops with the time to return home, rest, recuperate and train before returning battle.

The legislation mandates minimum periods of rest and recuperation for servicemembers between deployments. The bill states that if a unit or member of a regular component of the Armed Forces deploys to Iraq, they will have an equivalent amount

of time at home before they are redeployed.

The legislation helps to alleviate a significant military readiness crisis. The war in Iraq continues to put tremendous strain on our troops. Already, an estimated 250,000 soldiers in the Army and Marine Corps have served more than one tour in Iraq, and each one of the Army's available active duty combat brigades have served at least a 12-month tour in Iraq or Afghanistan. And this spring, the Defense Secretary announced that all active duty Army soldiers would have their tours in Iraq extended from 12 to 15 months.

House Approves Ag, FDA and Nutrition Funds

This week the House approved the \$90.7 billion FY08 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, H.R. 3161. The bill seeks major investments in food safety, rural development, renewable energy, conservation and nutrition.

Problems with poultry, pet food, toothpaste, spinach and other foods have exposed inadequacies in our nation's food safety system. To address this, the legislation requires the FDA to develop a food safety management plan that includes benchmarks to improve the food inspection and recall system. It also provides an additional \$28 million to the FDA for food safety over last year's budget; adds another \$131 million for food safety research at USDA; and, provides \$7 million to improve the safety of imported foods.



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Nutrition is also a major thrust of the bill, with an 8% increase over this year's budget for programs to teach children better eating habits. Nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) would also see an 8% boost, and it rejects a proposal to eliminate the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which provides food to the elderly and others not covered by WIC.

The measure also targets increases for community health, clean water infrastructure, education and day-care facilities. The bill also restores proposed cuts to rural housing assistance and housing aid to farm laborers, and it funds an initiative to double the number of low-income families in rural areas who are able to build their own homes by 2010.

Renewable energy research would benefit from the \$1.2 billion included in the bill, which is more than triple FY07 funding for research, business loans and grants to farmers for biomass, wind energy and other projects.

Keeping America Competitive

With strong bi-partisan support, the House approved the conference report on the 21st Century Competitiveness Act of 2007, H.R. 2272. The bill emphasizes training more teachers and students in math, science, engineering and technology. Some of the key provisions:

- Provide funding to train 25,000 new math, science, engineering and technology teachers
- Establish a public-private partnership with the business community and institutions of higher education to develop

programs to educate and train mathematicians, scientists and engineers to meet the workforce demands of the business industry

- Expand access to Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes for students and increase the number of qualified AP/IB teachers
- Broaden the participation of minorities and women in science and engineering fields at all levels, from kindergarten students to advanced researchers

Congressional Ethics Reform

This week the House overwhelmingly approved the most sweeping overhaul of congressional ethics rules since the Watergate era with a bill aimed at curbing the influence of lobbyists.

The Honest Leadership and Open Government Act imposes new rules on legislators and lobbyists, requiring reports on the campaign checks that lobbyists solicit from different contributors and denying congressional pensions to lawmakers convicted of felonies. Some key provisions include:

- Senators must disclose earmarks 48 hours before a vote, and certify

that they have no direct financial interest in it; (The House adopted similar requirements in January)

- Senators and staff may not accept gifts from lobbyists and their clients; (The House adopted a gift ban in January)
- Former senators must wait two years before lobbying Congress in person; Ex-House members and top congressional aides must wait one year
- Lawmakers convicted of bribery, perjury or similar crimes would lose their congressional retirement benefits

More House Action on Darfur



With almost unanimous support, the House passed a bill this week that would authorize and protect states that divest from companies that support the Sudanese government.

By a 418 to 1 vote, the House approved the Darfur Accountability and Divestment Act of 2007, H.R. 180. I was among the 130 House members to co-sponsor the bill.

The bill was introduced under the belief that no one should have to worry that they are supporting genocide, whether it's through their tax dollars or their pension fund. The bill is designed to protect the rights of states to divest their own public pension funds from companies doing business in Sudan and to increase the financial pressure on Khartoum to end the genocide in Darfur.

Since 2003, more than 2.5 million people have been displaced and some 200,000 people killed due to violence instigated by janjaweed militias. Khartoum is widely accused by both Darfurians and the international community of unleashing the janjaweed on Darfurians after rebels from ethnic African tribes in the region rose up against the central government. Khartoum, however, has repeatedly denied involvement in the atrocious violence in Darfur.

The Darfur Accountability and Divestment Act would establish a federal list compiled by the U.S. Treasury Department of foreign companies whose business in Sudan directly or indirectly supports the Darfur genocide to better inform Americans regarding their investments.

Further, the bill forbids the federal government from entering into or renewing contracts with companies on the list and authorizes state and local government to do the same. The bill also protects the rights of state and local governments and asset managers to divest without fear of lawsuits.

The same day the House voted to increased pressure on Sudan, the U.N. Security Council unanimously approved the creation of a 26,000-strong peacekeeping force to be sent to Darfur. The Sudanese government has reluctantly agreed to the hybrid U.N.-African Union body which is scheduled to be nearly fully deployed by the end of the year.

In April, I was part of a Congressional delegation that traveled to El Fasher, in North Darfur. While there, they visited El Salaam Internally Displaced Persons Camp, and met with the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) Force Commander, Major General Luke Aprezi, at AMIS Headquarters. The delegation also met with United Nations (UN) officials working on the ground, including the UN Mission in Sudan, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

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