

Keeping VA Leadership Accountable to Vets

In November 2012, the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System publicly announced an outbreak of Legionnaires' Disease. An investigation undertaken by Congress and the Department of Veterans Affairs Inspector General at the request of Rep. Tim Murphy revealed that more than 20 were sickened and six veterans died over an 18-month period from the outbreak.

The investigations also revealed top VA officials knew about troubling levels of the waterborne bacteria in the hospital's system, but did not take action to eliminate the threat. Hospital officials failed to follow their own internal Legionella controls.

On September 9th, Murphy along with the House Veterans Affairs Committee convened an investigative field hearing at the Allegheny County Courthouse. Titled "A Matter of Life and Death: Examining Preventable Deaths, Patient Safety Issues, and Bonuses for VA Execs Who Oversaw Them," the hearing exposed how VA officials collected millions in bonuses while not taking decisive action to save patients suffering under the VA's care.

Pittsburgh's regional VA director received more than \$77,000 in bonus payments (in addition to his base salary of \$179,700) during the period of the Legionnaires' outbreak. That official has since resigned.

At the hearing, Murphy questioned the VA Undersecretary who was responsible for awarding the bonus payment to the Pittsburgh VISN-4 director. The Undersecretary said he would still have awarded the mega-bonus to the VISN-4 official even if he knew then about the outbreak. The admission drew gasps from a stunned audience of family members whose loved ones died because of the outbreak.

"The faith and trust placed in the VA by our nation's veterans has eroded. These tragedies could have been avoided had those responsible for operating VA hospitals followed their own internal guidelines and acted decisively when confronted with problems," said Murphy.

The congressional investigation also revealed that VA hospitals are not required to report infectious diseases to public health agencies like other hospitals. Under current law, UPMC Presbyterian Hospital, which sits just a few hundred feet from the Pittsburgh VA Medical Center in Oakland, is required to report infectious diseases to local and state public health agencies while the federal VA hospital is not.

To fix this flaw, Rep. Murphy has co-authored the Infectious Disease Reporting Act (H.R.1792) along with Rep. Mike Doyle (D-PA). A bill similar to H.R. 1792 has passed the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and is awaiting further action on the House floor.

Murphy said the work to hold accountable those responsible for the outbreak was not complete despite the recent resignations.

Efforts to Cut Spending Yielding Results

For the first time since the Korean War, federal spending has fallen two years in a row as a result of spending cuts enacted into law under the 2011 Budget Control Act.

The Budget Control Act, or BCA, came about when House lawmakers pushed for spending cuts as a condition for meeting the President's request for additional borrowing authority (the "debt ceiling") to pay for past spending.

Each fiscal year, the BCA sets limits of how much can be spent on discretionary federal programs. If Congress does not pass legislation to limit spending, a budget mechanism known as "sequestration" kicks in and makes automatic across-the-board cuts. The BCA represents a historic shift in how the Congress treats public finances.

The BCA is working to balance the budget. The deficit has shrunk from a high of 10 percent of the economy in 2009 to just 4 percent today. With the BCA spending cuts, the deficit is now under \$1 trillion for the first time since 2008.

The Congressional Budget Office predicts a balanced budget by 2016 if annual spending is kept at current levels. Eliminating federal budget deficits means that private savings can grow, and, with these savings, more capital is available to invest in newer and better equipment for workers, modernized factories, and transportation infrastructure. It also means the United States won't have to borrow from foreign nations like China to pay for past spending.

Murphy, who recently voted to disapprove suspending the debt limit, called on House and Senate lawmakers currently meeting in a bicameral budget committee to work out a longer-term deal and agree on a spending plan for the 2014 fiscal year. The group is expected to report a yearly budget plan for the federal government by Dec. 13. Murphy urged the group to make additional spending cuts and not increase taxes.



Capitol Update

Official Report for Southwestern Pennsylvanians from Congressman Tim Murphy

Since last December's tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary school, Congressman Murphy, Chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, has been examining mental health programs, research, and barriers to care for families. His inquiry also involved societal factors contributing to, and potential causes of, outbreaks of violence.

The underlying factor in nearly every episode of mass violence over the past two decades has been an individual with an untreated or misdiagnosed mental illness. While the vast majority of individuals with mental illness are not violent, untreated schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression can result in suicide and sometimes instances of aggression against others.

Evidence reveals these types of incidents are preventable had the individuals been identified as having severe mental illness and under appropriate medical care. But our nation's mental health system has not kept up with the latest scientific breakthroughs or treatments to care for those needing immediate and sustained psychiatric care.

Recognizing the failures in our outdated mental health system, Congressman Murphy embarked on the most determined overhaul since the 1960s, to bring mental healthcare into the 21st century and meet the needs of a critical population that has been overlooked for too long.



Murphy's Subcommittee hears video testimony from Liza Long, author of the article "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother," during an emotional forum on mental illness in Washington this past March.

After convening a number of public forums in SWPA focusing on community mental health needs, Murphy drafted legislation to fundamentally reform how the federal government approaches mental health and for the first time, apply evidence-based medical protocols and accountability on how public health dollars are spent.

Shockingly, the lead federal agency tasked with delivering mental health dollars and programs, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), has

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Advancing Clean Coal, Protecting Jobs

Hundreds of coal miners and boilermakers joined with Rep. Murphy and Boilermakers Local 154 Business Manager Ray Ventrone in July to discuss the impact of the closure of the Hatfield's Ferry coal plant in Greene County on local jobs.

Did you know that while coal usage has tripled in the last 30 years, emissions have fallen by more than 56 percent?

Coal-fired electricity generation is cleaner than ever and a vital part of the economy in our region and nation. Coal supports more than 154,000 direct and 400,000 indirect American jobs, according to a PricewaterhouseCoppers study. Despite coal's environmental advancements, the Environmental Protection Agency is ratcheting up new regulations to end coal as an energy source.

Recently, EPA officials speculated there will be severe weather in the year 2300, requiring the government to construct seawalls to protect against coastal floods, invest in increased air conditioning, and combat drought. Based on this belief, the EPA has written a regulation calculating new higher taxes per ton of coal. This EPA rule was developed without public input or authorized by a vote in Congress.

Oversight Chairman Tim Murphy, a long-time supporter of clean coal technology and scientific-based research of fossil fuels at the National Energy Technology Lab in South Park, has been scrutinizing the scientific basis for the new EPA regulations that will not only shut down coal but impose a high up-front cost on manufacturers and the energy sector.

Murphy continues to advance the deployment of scrubbers and emission controls on coal power plants, and convened a congressional hearing entitled "EPA's Regulatory Threat to Affordable, Reliable Energy: The Perspective of Coal Communities" in October in Washington, DC, to discuss the impact of these anti-coal regulations on local communities.

Business Manager of Boilermakers Local 154 in Pittsburgh, Ray Ventrone, presented testimony to the panel on

how thousands of members of his skilled trade union earn a living putting environmentally advanced emission controls on plants like the Hatfield's Ferry in Greene County. Two years ago, local construction trade members installed state-of-the-art scrubbers at the facility, making it one of the cleanest in the country. But even the most up to date technology isn't good enough for the EPA. Citing the cost of compliance with the latest EPA mandates, the power plant closed and the resulting direct job loss will be in the hundreds.

"We can have clean air and keep coal as a vital part of our economy," said Ventrone, "but we can't do it if the EPA and their allies are allowed to continue waging a devastating war against our jobs."

Ventrone voiced support for Rep. Murphy's legislative amendment to stop the new anti-coal regulations. Murphy's amendment passed the House of Representatives on a bipartisan vote earlier this summer.

"The EPA didn't consider the nearly 400 people, who were put out of work with the closure of Hatfield's Ferry and Mitchell coal-fired power plants in Greene and Washington counties," said Murphy.

Share Your Healthcare Story

Rollout of the healthcare law has been disrupted on many fronts: from the technological failures of Healthcare.gov website, to the shock of learning from your insurance carrier that the plan you currently have to suit your healthcare needs will no longer be available and your only other option is a more expensive plan. Congressman Murphy welcomes input from his constituents and asks you share your personal experiences with him via his new website, "Affordable Care Act: Share Your Story," at Murphy.House.Gov/ShareYourStory. Complete the short online form. Share whether the system worked for you, if you've been able to enroll, or if you've been contacted by your insurance carrier regarding changes to your plan.

Have you shopped for a new plan and found it to be much better and more affordable than your previous one? Share your story and your thoughts on what action Congress should take.

Murphy Bill To Promote Recovery For Mentally Ill

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wasted millions of taxpayer dollars on non-evidenced based programs such as coloring books; paintings; staff musicals; and conferences where the mentally ill are told how to wean themselves off doctor-prescribed medication.

The Murphy bill stops wasteful and ineffective spending, emphasizing early detection and treatment that is integrated between clinicians and behavioral health professionals.

After decades of de-institutionalization, the number of severely mentally ill in prison and on the streets has steadily risen. Murphy's bill increases the number of psychiatric hospital beds. Thirty percent of the homeless and between twenty and fifty percent of inmates are seriously mentally ill.

Those with mental illness can lead fulfilling lives if they enter care early, but the current lapse of time between a psy-

chotic break and treatment now stands at a staggering 112 weeks. The legislation will also reform involuntary commitment laws so patients with paranoid schizophrenia, who are least likely to understand or recognize their impaired condition, get the care they need.

Murphy's bill also drives additional research at the National Institute of Mental Health, and addresses barriers where federal rules interfere with a physician's ability to share critical information about a loved one's mental state with a parent or caregiver.

"Fifty years ago President John F. Kennedy declared 'reliance on the cold mercy of custodial isolation will be supplanted by the open warmth of community concern and capability.' The first, serious steps at fulfilling that promise must begin now," said Dr. Murphy.

Restoring Local Control In Education

This summer the House of Representatives voted to restore local control in public education by passing the Student Success Act (H.R. 5), reversing the onerous federal mandates created by the No Child Left Behind law.

The Student Success Act replaces over seventy federal K-12 education programs — each with its own bureaucracy — with a new Local Academic Flexible Grant, allowing states and school districts to support local community priorities. Under the grant, states distribute funds based on local student needs such as additional tutoring, after-school programs, or school security measures.

By eliminating the "adequate yearly progress" mandate (AYP), which requires every public school to make strides toward the goal of having 100% of students meeting grade-level proficiency in reading and math by 2014, the Student Success Act ends the one-size-fits-all approach where every student, regardless of ability or disability, must master the same test.

Rep. Murphy, who prior to serving in Congress treated students with learning disabilities as a child psychologist, said AYP overlooked individual factors. "There is a better way to measure learning growth among children," said Murphy.

Murphy worked with the bill's author to eliminate AYP and allow districts to use growth models to track progress more accurately over time, giving teachers, administrators, and parents

useful feedback about a student's abilities. Applying this methodology would switch the emphasis from judging schools based on comparisons of past classes, to one of tracking each student's individual progress.

The Student Success Act also advances local control of education by:

- Lifting federally mandated interventions currently required of poorly performing schools, giving states and districts flexibility to develop their own improvement strategies.

- Allowing states and school districts to design their own teacher and principal evaluation systems without federal interference.

- Prohibiting a "Common Core" mandate, restating that local districts have responsibility for curriculum design.

H.R. 5 is awaiting Senate action.

Do you have Medicare, Social Security, or VA casework? Rep. Murphy can help.

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