

# FRIDAY ALERT



**Alliance for Retired Americans**

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## **Retirees' Stake in Health Care Reform to be the Theme for Older Americans Month**

Retirees have a stake in health care reform, and May – Older Americans Month – is when seniors will be driving that point home! This year, Older Americans Month is a time to recognize the achievements of seniors and to highlight retirees' needs in health care reform. While lobbying and mobilizing, Alliance members will focus on the quality, delivery, and financing of national health care. Particular attention will be paid to allowing those 55-64 years of age to buy into Medicare, improving the Medicare Part D prescription drug benefit, long term care, and a public health care plan. "Throughout May, the Alliance is asking its members to focus on priorities for seniors in the health care conversation, engaging not only elected officials, but also Community Advocacy Network members, the larger senior community and coalition partners," said **Barbara J. Easterling**, President of the Alliance. "We will be providing talking points, sample letters to the editor, fact sheets, and more."

## **Sen. Arlen Specter Switches Parties, Joins Democratic Caucus**

After 27 years in the Senate and 43 years of politics as a Republican, Pennsylvania Senator **Arlen Specter** switched parties on Tuesday. The move puts Democrats one seat away from a filibuster-proof 60-vote majority, pending a court ruling on the results of Minnesota's Senate race. Specter acknowledged making the switch in an attempt to keep his Senate seat; after voting for Obama's \$787 billion stimulus plan in February he faced pressure from Pennsylvania conservatives and a tough primary challenge from former representative **Pat Toomey**. President **Obama** said he did not expect the Senator to be a "rubber stamp" – Specter made the switch by also announcing his continued opposition to the Employee Free Choice Act.

## **Obama Favors Increasing Cap to Protect Social Security**

In Arnold, Missouri on Wednesday, President Obama said that raising the payroll tax cap is the "best way" to secure the retirement program's future. While stating his preference for raising income levels over reducing benefits, Obama also rejected increasing the retirement age, noting it as a burden for older workers. Calling Social Security a "solvable problem" and refuting the idea that the system will go bankrupt, the President suggested he might hold another White House summit to deal with the issue. "After eight years of focus on a privatized Social Security tied to the roulette wheel of the stock market, it is refreshing to hear ideas that are truly aimed at protecting Social Security," said **Ruben Burks**, Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance.

## **Coalition Releases Health Care Reform Recommendations for Seniors**

The Leadership Council of Aging Organizations (LCAO) yesterday released detailed agenda recommendations for national health care reform. LCAO is a coalition of 60 national not-for-profit organizations concerned with the well-being of America's 87 million people over age 50.

**Edward Coyle**, Executive Director of the Alliance, is currently the Chair of LCAO. Highlights of the recommendations include creating a national public-plan option as an alternative to private health insurers and using the government's bulk purchasing power to negotiate volume discounts from drug manufacturers. The full recommendations are available at [www.lcao.org](http://www.lcao.org). "Congress has an opportunity to improve the quality, affordability, and accessibility of health care for the fastest growing segment of our country. Our health care crisis is a big reason why so many Americans worry they will not be to retire securely – if they can even retire at all," said Coyle.

### **U.S. House and Senate Approve Budget on Obama's 100<sup>th</sup> Day in Office**

On Wednesday, House Democrats voted 233 to 193 to give final approval to a \$3.5 trillion budget that addresses the Democrats' top domestic priorities. Seventeen Democrats joined 176 Republicans in opposition; the Senate result the same day was 53 to 43, with 4 Democrats, including newly minted Democrat Arlen Specter, joining 39 Republicans against the plan. The votes came on Obama's 100th day in office. The passage of fast-track reconciliation rules as part of the budget will allow Senate Democrats to push through health care reforms with just a simple majority instead of the 60 votes needed for most controversial legislation. The deal gives Democrats significant room for maneuvering as they move ahead with a health care plan, which is still in the early stages of drafting. It also allows 11 years to pay for any health care initiative.

### **Chrysler and GM Retirees Hang On Tight**

Chrysler filed for bankruptcy protection on Thursday and will form an alliance with the Italian carmaker Fiat Group. The Obama administration said it had long hoped to stave off bankruptcy, but some hedge fund creditors would not budge on proposals to reduce Chrysler's \$6.9 billion in secured debt. The United Automobile Workers union (UAW) had said on Wednesday that its members ratified a cost-cutting deal with Chrysler by a 4-to-1 margin. The union has yet to complete a deal with General Motors (GM). The UAW members at both Chrysler and GM stand to lose some of their pay and benefits. Under proposed deals devised by the Treasury Department, U.A.W. pensions and health care benefits for Chrysler retirees would largely be protected, but retiree dental and vision benefits would be eliminated.

### **Kathleen Sebelius Confirmed as Secretary of Health and Human Services**

The Senate confirmed Kansas Governor **Kathleen Sebelius** as Secretary of Health and Human services by a vote of 65 to 31 on Tuesday, officially filling the last Cabinet vacancy. Sebelius, a former state insurance commissioner and former president of the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, is an expert on insurance regulation and will lead the administration's health care reform initiative.

### **Alliance's 2008 Voting Record to be Released Next Week**

This coming Monday, the Alliance will release its new voting record, showing the tabulation of 10 key Senate votes and 10 key House votes in 2008. Go to [www.retiredamericans.org](http://www.retiredamericans.org) at mid-day on Monday to see how your elected officials voted on important senior issues, and look for a summary of the results in next week's Friday Alert.