

FRIDAY ALERT



Alliance for Retired Americans

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Health Bill Moves Forward with Excise Tax Compromise

Yesterday, White House officials, leaders in Congress and labor unions reached agreement on a proposal to limit the excise tax on higher-cost health insurance plans - a sticking point that had been a major obstacle to merging the House and Senate health care reform bills. Health plans derived from collective bargaining (union employees' plans) would be exempt from the tax until 2018, instead of beginning in 2013, as had been the design. The agreement is said to raise the threshold at which other working family plans are taxed from \$23,000 to \$24,000 in 2013, with annual increases to reflect the Consumer Price Index. For individuals, the threshold will rise from \$8,500 to \$8,900. Specific provisions were made to raise the threshold for plans with retirees age 55 and up, as well as plans that have a significant number of older workers. Also, beginning in 2015, the cost of dental and vision care would be barred from the calculations. Alliance President **Barbara Easterling** said yesterday, "Many workers gave up wages in order to have their health benefits, so it is only fair that those benefits not be taxed now."

Conrad-Gregg Amendment Vote on January 20 Brings Social Security to Forefront

On December 23, when the Senate passed a bill regarding the debt ceiling extension, seniors were saddled with the first vote pertaining to possible Social Security cuts in 2010. The bill provides for a vote on January 20, 2010 of the Conrad-Gregg amendment to create a Task Force to "examine the long-term fiscal imbalances facing our nation." On Wednesday, the Alliance sent a letter to all Senators opposing the Bipartisan Task Force for Responsible Fiscal Action Act of 2009, S. 2853. By opposing the bill, the Alliance voiced its fervent opposition to the Conrad-Gregg proposal for a fast track task force on entitlements that would make it easier to cut Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. The Senate will need 60 votes if it is to pass, and currently, the Conrad-Gregg forces do not have them. The Alliance's letter states that forcing changes to these critical benefit programs, by eliminating open debate or amendments, is an undemocratic way to address the future of such programs. Next Tuesday, January 19, is a national call-in day to say NO to the Fast-Track Commission. The number for the call-in day has been provided by the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, and is 1-800-998-0180. "Tell your Senators that this type of fast-track commission is undemocratic and takes power away from Congress to make decisions about Social Security. Social Security does not contribute to the national debt; it is insurance that workers have earned," said **Ruben Burks**, Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance.

This past Tuesday, U.S. Senator **Herb Kohl** (D-WI), Chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, released a study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) on options for strengthening Social Security benefits for those populations who need them most. The GAO report can be found at <http://www.aging.senate.gov/letters/gaossreform.pdf>.

Alliance Members Encouraged to Assist Haiti following Earthquake

The support and prayers of Alliance leaders and members are with those who are suffering across Haiti, following a tragic earthquake there on Tuesday. The Alliance is encouraging that donations be made to the Solidarity Center Emergency Relief Fund to ensure that assistance reaches workers and their families. Information on contributing to the Solidarity Center Emergency Relief Fund can be accessed at www.solidaritycenter.org. Donations may also be made to the American Red Cross International Response Fund at www.redcross.org, or toll-free at 1-800-REDCROSS.

Changes Could Make More Seniors Eligible for Prescription Drug Help in 2010

Beginning the first of this year, changes in Medicare began making it easier for some beneficiaries to qualify for additional help with their prescription drug plan costs. Under the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act, seniors will no longer have to count help that they receive from someone else toward their expenses - including rent, mortgage, heat, food and property taxes - as income. Also, life insurance policies will no longer count as a resource when determining eligibility. For more information on eligibility, visit <http://bit.ly/3DdoA> or watch the webinar at <http://bit.ly/6arF1c>. You can apply for the program online at www.socialsecurity.gov, by calling 1-800-772-1213, or by applying at your local Social Security office.

Hawaii Convention

The 3rd Biennial Hawaii Alliance for Retired Americans (HARA) Convention was held on January 9 in Honolulu. "I would like to thank Alliance Regional Board member **Luis Duran** for doing a great job representing the national Alliance," said **Edward F. Coyle**, Executive Director of the Alliance. HARA officers for 2009-2011 are: **Al Hamai**, President; **Justin Wong**, Vice President and Convention Chair; **Phyllis Hiramatsu**, Treasurer, and **Jackie Foil**, Secretary.

Prepare for 2010 Senior Vote at National Alliance Convention

As 2010 political campaigns heat up, retirees need to begin learning more about elections that will see the entire U.S. House, one-third of the U.S. Senate, and 36 gubernatorial races on the November ballot. Experts are predicting a low-turnout, with older voters making up over one-third of the electorate. A great place to start is this year's Alliance National Convention, April 5-8 in Las Vegas, which will feature noted speakers and training workshops on mobilizing retirees for electoral success.

The Alliance has created a Community-Based Scholarship Program as part of an organization-wide effort to increase access to national conferences and conventions for our community-based members. Scholarships include: Waived conference and convention registration fees; up to \$1,000 to pay for travel to and from the convention; lodging while attending the conference; and \$45 daily per diem. Scholarship recipients must be an individual member in good standing of the national Alliance; a community-based member (not a member of a union that has affiliated nationally with the Alliance); and live more than 100 miles away from the conference/convention site. In total, 10 scholarships will be awarded. For more information on the scholarships and the convention overall, please go to <http://bit.ly/1jIzz2>.