

# FRIDAY ALERT



**Alliance for Retired Americans**

815 16th Street, NW, Fourth Floor • Washington, DC 20006

202.637.5399 • [www.retiredamericans.org](http://www.retiredamericans.org) • [arafridayalert@retiredamericans.org](mailto:arafridayalert@retiredamericans.org)

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## JUNE 15-18 LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE WRAP-UP EDITION

### Retirees Lobby Congress on Health Care Reform

Nearly 550 retirees attended the Alliance's annual legislative conference last week. On Wednesday, the participants went to approximately 200 scheduled appointments with members of the U.S House and Senate, lobbying their home state elected officials in advance of key votes on health care reform while outlining retirees' stake in the health care debate. Specifically, the attendees advocated for: establishing a public plan option to compete against private health insurance plans; maintaining tax-free health care benefits; and creating the opportunity for early retirees (ages 55-64) to buy into Medicare. Other items on the agenda: repealing the prohibition against Medicare negotiating volume discounts with pharmaceutical companies; ending taxpayer subsidies to private insurance companies that run Medicare Advantage programs; and including the Community Living Assistance Services and Supports (CLASS) Act in health care reform to help Americans with the daunting costs of long-term care. Delegates also lobbied their lawmakers for passage of the Employee Free Choice Act and legislation to protect and strengthen Social Security. Before heading to Capitol Hill, Alliance members gave their Leadership Award to Rep. **Jan Schakowsky** (D-IL), a longtime champion for the nation's seniors. "The members of the Alliance are lifelong activists, who bring energy, enthusiasm and passion to their work," said Alliance President **Barbara Easterling**. "They will be educating and mobilizing their neighbors in the coming weeks because they know that our country will never be a just society until every American has access to quality, affordable health care."

### Seniors Bestow Kourpias with the President's Award, Name Grants in His Honor

Even though his title may have changed, George Kourpias is still as active as ever in the fight for the rights of America's workers. Kourpias, who retired as president of the Alliance for Retired Americans in February, was honored Wednesday night at the conference's banquet dinner. The former president of the Machinists (IAM), he was the first president of the Alliance. AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer and Alliance Executive Vice President **Richard Trumka** praised Kourpias as a man who "every day of his life...has been devoted to combating the forces of greed and privatization that threaten the dignity of those who work for their daily bread." **R. Thomas Buffenbarger**, who succeeded Kourpias as IAM president, added, "George Kourpias brought to the Alliance for Retired Americans the same passion of fighting for working families that he had as president of the Machinists union. His dedication and untiring efforts to mobilize retirees have put the Alliance in a strong position to help win meaningful health care reform, protect pensions and make sure our nation's workers aren't shortchanged after a lifetime of work." The Alliance, which is naming its state grant program after Kourpias, also named him as Alliance for Retired Americans president emeritus. Trumka went on to congratulate the Alliance members for the "incredible work you've done to change the Congress in 2006, and your encore performance in 2008, that's given us a

president who doesn't think 'union' is a dirty word." Kourpias, in receiving the Alliance's President's Award, added, "We have to go out and continue to build and organize clubs and always be there to protect our Social Security and our Medicare and help the labor movement in these difficult economic times."

### **Sebelius: Now is the Time for Health Care Reform**

Speaking in the opening session of the legislative conference last Monday, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary **Kathleen Sebelius** told seniors that they could be a big part of the historic shift in health care policy. "This is the time [to pass health care reform]. This is the moment. We cannot let it pass by...[It's] the president's number one priority," she declared. Sebelius told the delegates that any health care reform must include an option for a public plan and must not tax the health benefits that workers and retirees receive through their employers. AFSCME President **Gerald McEntee** pointed out that **President Obama** received a higher percentage of votes from union retirees than any other group of voters. McEntee, who heads the AFL-CIO Political Committee, said health care reform is just one of the ways that "we're taking back our nation for working families and retirees." Communications Workers of America President **Larry Cohen** said on Tuesday that lawmakers must also hear that the Employee Free Choice Act is vital to rebuilding the nation's middle class.

### **Additional Speakers Complete the Line-Up**

Other experts in their fields who spoke at the conference included: **Ruben Burks**, Secretary-Treasurer of the Alliance; **James Hoffa**, President of the Teamsters; **Edward F. Coyle**, Executive Director of the Alliance; **Judy Cato**, Executive Vice President of the Alliance; **Richard Fiesta**, Director of the national Alliance's Department of Government and Political Affairs; **Steve Protulis**, Executive Vice President of the Elderly Housing Development & Operations Corp.; and several others. **Burks** remarked that the problems facing the auto industry and the nation are connected. "We have let the Wal-Marts and the Wall Streets of the world run roughshod over our nation's labor laws," he said.

### **Drug Companies Pledge \$80 Billion for Seniors, Health Care Reform**

After the conference was over, drug makers offered to spend \$80 billion over 10 years to help older Americans afford medicines and to lower the cost of the proposed overhaul of the health care system. In a statement, President Obama said an agreement reached between drug makers and Sen. **Max Baucus** (D-MT), the chairman of the Finance Committee, narrowed the "doughnut hole" in the Medicare prescription-drug program that raises costs for many retirees. Said Coyle, "This agreement is a good first step, and now we need to make it stand by writing it into the final bill. It was only weeks ago that we had a similar meeting at the White House, only to have the agreements questioned after the meeting ended." He added, "Studies show that people in the donut hole often stop buying their prescriptions, because they are unable to wait for catastrophic coverage to kick in. The drug companies are losing business from donut hole victims."