

National News

Lautenberg Upholds Right to Health Care

U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg, a New Jersey Democrat, told a 10,000-person rally of public health workers on Nov. 7 in Washington that he would not “rest on my laurels” in the fight for every American’s right to health care.

In his 20 years in the U.S. Senate, he said, the battle to “improve public health” has been “harder than it should be” because of “special interests that put *private profits* ahead of the *public good*.” It is “shameful that 45 million Americans don’t have health insurance and it is doubly shameful that over 8 million of those Americans are children,” he told the crowd. Access to health care for “young people” will be a fight. The greatest challenges ahead, he insisted, “will be to protect programs . . . such as Medicare, Medicaid, and S-CHIP” and to make drugs affordable to the people who need them.

“I supported Senator Kerry’s clarion call during the campaign to guarantee health insurance for every child. Is that expensive? Absolutely! But not as expensive in the long run as not providing that coverage!”

Lautenberg, who is himself an octogenarian, concluded, “I’m not going to rest on my laurels. I’ll continue to stand . . . in the battles we wage” for a healthier America.

Tennessee Governor To Cut Health Care

Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen, a former health-care executive, announced that the state’s enhanced Medicaid program, TennCare, was too expensive and that he would terminate it as of the third week in November. Since 1994, Tennessee’s disabled and low-income citizens, about 430,000 persons, have been covered under TennCare, which is designed to provide nearly universal coverage for all the state’s

citizens. As of January 2005, disabled and low income citizens will begin to lose their TennCare health care coverage.

One columnist wrote in *The Chattanooga*:

“To torpedo TennCare is to sign their death warrants,” referring to four specific people he knows, who will die without TennCare coverage. Weighed against these lives, and the potential loss of life of tens of thousands of others, life is the Governor’s plan to save \$5.1 billion dollars—the difference between cutting the \$7.8-billion TennCare program and replacing it with a basic Medicaid program, which will cost \$2.7 billion.

Many of the 430,000 TennCare recipients will not qualify to receive Medicaid; thus, more people will join the ranks of the uninsured in Tennessee. Already, even with TennCare in place, hospitals in the state provided more than \$1 billion of uncompensated care last year. “If 430,000 people lose TennCare benefits,” hospitals will lose much more, said the president of the Tennessee Hospital Association. Reimbursement rates to hospitals have already been lowered to cut costs.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia imposed “cost control” measures on state health programs in the fiscal year 2004 budget. In fiscal year 2005, a Kaiser Commission report found that planned changes to health care programs include—in 22 states—a co-payment requirement, for non-preventative-health-care physician visits, emergency room visits, and prescription drugs for children. In fiscal year 2004, 38 states cut eligibility, and 34 limited benefits; those reductions occurred even though the U.S. Congress provided a one-time \$10 billion “relief” to the states. That money ran out as of June 30.

This means that Federal matching funds are now less, yet Medicaid programs are growing as more people lose their employer-based health benefits—or lose their jobs.

More battles as in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Mississippi, reported in *EIR* (see Oct. 8, 2004 issue) can be expected as the Bush Administration agenda of austerity sets in during the months to come.

Portable Nuclear Reactor Is Under Development

A portable nuclear reactor that generates its own fuel is under development by U.S. national laboratories and the Department of Energy. Called SSTAR, for small, sealed, transportable, autonomous reactor, the 3-meter by 15-meter fast reactor would generate 10 to 100 megawatts of electricity and could be delivered to its site by ship or truck.

The lead-cooled fast reactor would breed its own fuel at the same time that it generates energy, so it would not need to be refueled in its 30-year lifetime. The spent reactor would be picked up by the supplier country and replaced with a new one. The reactor is described in the July/August 2004 issue of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory newsletter. Livermore, Los Alamos and Argonne national laboratories are participating in the reactor design.

The concept is promoted as having a significantly reduced “proliferation concern,” and also as suitable for countries that lack sophisticated energy infrastructure and trained manpower. The reactor, which weighs about 500 tons, would be delivered sealed, and ready to be plugged into the power grid. The SSTAR is also suitable for production of hydrogen, because of its high operational temperature (800°C).

The SSTAR features the same kind of meltdown-proof passive safety systems as the General Atomics GT-MHR and the South African PBMR modular reactors, although there was no mention of mass-production. A prototype is scheduled to be built by 2015.

One of the technical challenges for the project is to perfect building materials that can withstand 30 years of neutron bombardment inside the reactor vessel. However, at the same time that the Department of Energy is funding the development of this new, portable reactor, it has closed down the only nuclear facility designed for testing such new materials—the Fast Flux Test Facility (FFTF) in Washington state!