

Trip Report: National Retiree Legislative Network**2017 Leadership Conference, Mar 13-15****Executive Summary:**

The Leadership Conference provided updates on organizational status, a presentation by Marilyn Moon from the American Institute for Research, a discussion of significant current issues by NRLN president Kadereit, and discussion of the outlook for NRLN issues with the new congress and president by NRLN Executive Director Alyson Parker, followed by visits to Capitol Hill to promote focus issues for this year.

The weather outside was frightful, with 7 inches of snow, temperatures near 20, and 30 knot winds driving chill factors down to single digits. But, neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night, stayed your ERS representatives from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.

ERS officers **David Watt** and **Dwight Rousu** conducted visits with staff members of our legislators. We focused on representatives from the greater Puget Sound area region, meeting with their particular staff who focus on committees handling pension and health issues that were the focus of this flyin for the NRLN. We visited the offices of Rep. Dennis Heck (WA) Sen. Maria Cantwell (WA), Sen. Patty Murray (WA), Rep Pramila Jayapal(WA) and Rep Suzan DelBene(WA). In our visits to Capitol Hill, we are often impressed with both with legislators and with highly motivated, informed, and hard-working staff members who are working every day to support the average citizen, including seniors and retirees. This year the impression was even stronger, given the chaotic situation in Washington D.C.

Right now, there is an immediate window following our visits when responses from our ERS members to their legislators who were visited could be important in advocating for laws or pressure on agencies to protect retirees regarding pensions and healthcare.

First Day NRLN Talks:

NRLN President Bill Kadereit opened the Monday leadership meeting of the Spring Leadership Conference. Executive Director Alyson Parker gave an outlook for NRLN issues with the new congress and the new president. Though she seemed to be trying to be politically neutral, the outlook for retiree issues is not very good.

The presentation by guest speaker Marilyn Moon from the American Institute for Research was the high point of the afternoon, with her astute view of the effect of pending legislative initiatives in the light of the reality of aging issues and financial issues of seniors. You can gather a vignette of some of her views in this 2013 video: www.air.org/resource/marilyn-moon-demystifies-medicare-reform-video .

NRLN board member Ed Beltram gave a quick overview of the focus issues for taking to the hill this spring. They included:

- Protecting retiree benefits in bankruptcy
- Protecting retirees in pension plan mergers
- Protecting retirees in corporate mergers, acquisitions, and spin-offs
- Reducing Rx drug costs - imports from Canada and Medicare negotiations
- Affordable Care Act and Medicare benefits

The Affordable Care Act focus topic was added shortly before the conference due to it rising to the top issue of the new majorities controlling both houses of congress.

You can read up on these issues on the NRLN web site, www.nrln.org where the legislative agenda tab will take you to talking points and white papers on the subjects.

Attorney Michael Calabrese, Legislative Adviser, reported on some legal aspects of some of the bankruptcy issues that were selected for focus this year.

NRLN board member Martha Deahl spoke of efforts by NRLN to organize chapters in retirement villages, which are big in southwest regions of the U.S.

The Monday afternoon meeting was followed by a social and dinner. Talking with the NRLN members from around the nation who have had their retiree benefits threatened and often severely reduced is a reminder to continue to act to prevent other companies, such as Boeing, from attacking retirees, as Boeing has been no recent friend of pensions.

Legislative meetings:

At each meeting, we gave a folder to the legislator's office, outlining the key focus NRLN issues this visit. As noted above, we met with the following legislative offices:

Rep. Suzan DelBene of Washington - DelBene sits on the Budget and Ways & Means committees. We met Tuesday with senior legislative assistant Casey Katims, who we have met with before on trips to DC. Casey was familiar with the issues and listened interactively. On the last topic we discussed, he gave some insights, but I forget what the topic was and what the insight was. So much for good note taking.

Sen. Murray of Washington - Senator Murray sits on the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) committee, as well as Appropriations and Budget. We met Wednesday with staff Fellow Sherronda Sheppard, and briefly with Senior Pensions Counsel Kendra Kosko Isaacson. Sherronda was filling in for our meeting on the Wednesday fraught with icy weather and hectic legislative flurries around the attempts to repeal the ACA. Sherronda listened and also asked insightful questions. She suggested it might be politically helpful if we could come up with a unified position on pensions with other groups, perhaps including businesses and unions. She also asked a probing question on the issue of providing catastrophic coverage under medicare, that suggested a need for better NRLN research on details of the request, what is not covered by Medicare, and any projected costs of implementation. Kendra arrived late off the floor, but received our NRLN folder with our talking points and indicated she would read through them, and debrief with Sherronda.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington - New representative Jayapal sits on the Budget and Judiciary committees. We met Wednesday with Legislative Assistant Danielle Fulfs. Many of the issues seemed new to Danielle, but she listened with interest. As one of the more progressive representatives in the house, making contact with Rep. Jayapal's office and educating her office on retiree issues helps lay the ground for more future contacts.

Sen. Cantwell of Washington - Cantwell sits on the health care sub-committee of the finance committee. We met Wednesday with Research Analyst John Fogarty. Pensions and health care are not his specialty areas. He had some familiarity with the multi-employer pension issue, which NRLN has not made a priority, and was trying to connect that issue with the issues on our NRLN priority list for this meeting. He seemed interested in reading the folder materials.

Rep. Denny Heck of Washington - Heck sits on the financial services committee, which seemed to have some relevance to pensions and savings plans as well as insurance. We met Wednesday with Legislative Assistant Erik Ashida. We had an energetic discussion as he was asking questions and trying to connect the particular NRLN issues to his experience on other issues.

Rep. Rick Larsen's office did not respond to our request for a meeting. We did make the request a little late, waiting on responses regarding the other meetings.

Rep. Adam Smith represents Judy Stenberg's district, and she was handling the meeting with Adam. Judy reported she did not get a meeting with his office.

Dave and Dwight departed late Wednesday March 15 for their scheduled flights home.

Endnote:

The current atmosphere in Washington DC is very unsettling. When forces are trying to dismantle the whole national health care system, and some are trying to surreptitiously defund medicare, threatening to start nuclear wars, and pump adrenelin into climate change; then our pension law issues and drug cost issues seemed to pale in comparison. None-the-less, we persisted. I have great sympathy for those legislators who do care about ordinary people and justice issues when they are working in the current atmosphere with limited power to affect the path of the nation. I appreciated them giving us an ear.

Dave and Dwight hope we represented your interests as well as possible on this trip. Though it is always a bit stressful, the trips are a notable experience. If you have further questions, feel free to ask either of us. We were busy trying to present the issues and listen to the legislators rather than take extensive notes, so some of the meeting descriptions above might be a bit sketchy, especially at the end of the day.

Issues:

You are invited to go to NRLN.org and read up on each of the NRLN focus issues, currently and throughout the coming year if they get updated. For accessing the full range of issues, the following link will take you there. These sources can inform your responses to action alerts, emails, local meetings, and faxes to your elected leaders.

Some of the papers are much better written than others, and vice versa. Listed below is the URL for the NRLN legislative agenda. Each topic has an executive summary on the site. The full position papers and white papers can also be found on the NRLN.org web site for greater details and references:

<http://www.nrln.org/documents/NRLN%20Legislative%20Agenda.pdf>