

**Trip Report: National Retiree Legislative Network****2019 Leadership Conference, Feb 25-27****Executive Summary:**

The 2019 NRLN Leadership Conference was held on Monday afternoon, February 25th. NRLN President Bill Kadereit gave opening remarks, followed by several other speakers as follows:

- NRLN Executive Director Alyson Parker talked about political developments in the capital.
- President Kadereit then returned to speak about NRLN finances and long-term planning.
- NRLN board member Ed Beltram made a presentation on the cost of prescription drugs.
- President Kadereit then presented problem aspects of the insurance company-based health program known as Medicare Advantage.
- Jay Kuhnle, an NRLN board member and president of the National Chrysler Retirement Organization gave a cogent presentation about pensions and corporate attempts to shift financial risk from the corporation and onto the individual retiree.
- NRLN board member and president of the Lucent Retirees Organization, Joe Dombrowski, then spoke to the desire to protect any financially endangered company retiree benefits consisting of health insurance or life insurance by modifying Internal Revenue code to allow safe funds transfers from healthy pension plans.
- Ed Beltram took the podium again and presented some new initiatives in membership outreach efforts, including Facebook and Facebook ads.
- NRLN board member and Vice President Bob Martina gave the status of the "grassworks" network that attempts to recruit and appoint a NRLN coordinator for each region or state of the U.S.

The closing conference event was a reception and dinner with the NRLN attendees joined by a significant contingent of people from the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation, including the national director of the PBGC, Tom Reeder, who gave an informative address to the group at the end of the evening.

Tuesday and Wednesday consisted of visits to the offices of elected representatives on Capitol Hill to promote focus issues for this year. Focus issues this year were:

**1. Pension Plan Risk Shifting** – *Plan sponsors are transferring pension assets to third party insurance companies to replace promised pension benefits, causing retirees to lose protections by ERISA (Employee Income Security Act) and PBGC (Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation). Such transfers increase retiree risk. NRLN has a proposal to protect retirees.*

**2. Medicare Advantage Plans – Privatization's Trojan Horse** – *CMS (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid) is using private insurance companies' Medicare Advantage plans as a move toward Medicare privatization. NRLN has a proposal to protect Medicare beneficiaries both in basic Medicare and in future Medicare Advantage years.*

**3. Reduce the Cost of Prescription Drugs** – *NRLN advocates passing legislation to A) direct Medicare to do competitive bidding for prescription drugs, B) allow importation of safe and less expensive drugs from Canada and C) ending pay-for-delay and other drugmakers' tactics that obstruct generic drugs from coming to market.*

**4. Pension Recoupment** – *If pension plan sponsors find an error (possibly years later) in the pension payment calculation they can force retirees to pay back thousands of dollars and suffer a large cut in benefits as well. NRLN has a proposal to protect retirees.*

**5. Protect Health and Life Insurance** -- *Thresholds in the Internal Revenue Code can prevent funds being transferred from the pension fund to pay for health care and life insurance that retirees were promised, even when the pension is adequately funded. NRLN is recommending IRC code changes to protect the health and insurance protections without endangering the pension fund.*

Much more detail on these and other NRLN issues can be found on the NRLN web site under the "legislative agenda" tab.

Other organizations participating in the conference were Detroit Edison Alliance of Retirees, Eastman Kodak Retirees Association, Lucent Retirees Organization, National Chrysler Retirement Organization, U S West Retirees Association, NRLN DuPont Retirees Chapter, NRLN General Motors Chapter, NRLN Desert Southwest Region, NRLN Pacific/Mountain West Region.

### Meetings on the Hill

ERS officers **David Baine** and **Dwight Rousu** conducted visits with staff members of our legislators. We focused on representatives from Washington state, trying to meet with their particular staff who focus on committees handling issues that were the focus of this NRLN conference. We visited the offices of Representatives McMorris Rogers and Newhouse on Monday morning. On Tuesday we made scheduled visits to the offices of Derek Kilmer, Rick Larsen, Suzan DelBene, and Adam Smith. We dropped in at the office of Jaime Herrera Butler and left a folder. On Wednesday we met at the office of Rep. Dennis Heck. We dropped by the offices of Pramila Jayapal and Kim Schrier, leaving folders and having short discussions. Staff from Washington senator offices were in meetings that NRLN officers had scheduled with the Health committee, so we did not schedule separate constituent meetings with either senator.

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### Legislative meetings:

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

**Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington-** We met with Matt Neighbors, Legislative Counsel for Congresswoman Rodgers, who addresses health care issues for the representative. He listened attentively to our issues. On drug prices he mentioned that they were looking at practices of pharmacy benefit managers in the health insurance business. There are allegations that drug formularies which decide which drugs are covered and at what rate, and drug prices paid to pharmaceutical companies are being influenced by "kickback" incentives to the insurance companies. More transparency is being sought.

**Rep. Dan Newhouse of Washington-** We met with Elizabeth Daniels, Legislative Assistant and Deputy Press Secretary for Congressman Newhouse. Elizabeth seems to handle all issues other than agriculture, an impressive breadth of issues. She listened actively. She also informed us that in all of the 4th district no insurance companies are selling medigap policies to cover prescription drugs, a situation that makes Medicare Advantage relatively more attractive, at the peril of regular Medicare.

**Rep. Derek Kilmer of Washington** - We met with Tom Seaman, a Wounded Warrior Fellow assisting in the office of Congressman Kilmer. We presented the full range of issues, as opposed to just two or three, and since none of us had immediately following meetings to attend to, we had a longer and more rambling social conversation with Tom. We hope he has brought our issues forward in the staff councils of the Congressman.

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**Rep. Rick Larsen of Washington** - Congressman Larsen sits on the Armed Services and Transportation committees. His committee assignments are not directly pertinent to our issues, but our issues are pertinent to the people in his district, including our retirees from Everett. We met with Legislative Assistant Katy Nazaretova. We had a good interactive discussion of the issues we were presenting.

**Rep. Suzan DelBene of Washington** - Congresswoman DelBene sits on the Budget and Ways & Means committees. We met with Victoria Honard, who was somewhat new to the job, and with not even a business card yet. We had a good discussion of the issues, and hopefully brought up her awareness of our focus issues for this spring.

**Rep. Adam Smith of Washington** - Congressman Smith is majority leader of the Armed Services Committee. Judy Stenberg, NW region VP from NRLN joined us for this meeting, as Judy is in the 9th district, as is Dave. We met with Legislative Assistant Fernando Ruiz, an astute Legislative Assistant with whom we met also last year. We had a good discussion with him on the focus issues we were presenting.

**Rep. Jaime Herrera Buetler of Washington** - Since attempts to schedule a meeting had failed, and we had a spare time slot, we dropped in to her office and left off a folder.

**Rep. Denny Heck of Washington** - Congressman Heck sits on the financial services committee, which has relevance to pensions and savings plans as well as insurance. We met with Legislative Assistant/Press Secretary Emily Kolano. She seemed well informed on the issues.

**Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington** - Jayapal sits on the Budget and Judiciary committees. Attempts to arrange a meeting had failed, so we did a drop-in visit to the office. We actually were able to have a good but short discussion with a staff person, for whom we failed to get a business card. We were able to pass along kudos for the Congresswoman having signed onto sponsor three of the bills that were on the NRLN priority list. This is more than any other Washington state representative or senator at this time.

**Rep. Kim Schrier of Washington** - Again attempts to schedule a meeting had failed. Since this is Congresswoman Schrier's first year in DC, perhaps a bit of office disorganization is an expected situation. We dropped into the office during a lull in our schedule. We were granted a short meeting with her new legislative director Alex Payne, who was previously unfamiliar with ERS and the NRLN, and so we were able to provide some basic familiarity and a brochure of focus issue concerns. Since Congresswoman Schrier has a background as a physician, her voice on Medicare and drug prices is expected to carry more weight than other voices, and we voiced to Alex our hope that she would help address problems on all such related issues.

Dave and Dwight departed late Wednesday Feb 27 for their scheduled flights home.

## Endnote:

The atmosphere in Washington DC under this administration and an administration-friendly senate is unsettling. Forces there have been trying to dismantle the whole national health care system, and some are trying to surreptitiously defund Medicare, menacing with nuclear weapons, and pumping adrenalin into climate change. The change in control of the House creates some hopeful notes for protecting senior health and wealth, but the combined weight of the Senate, the administration, and a now actively regressive Supreme Court may delay putting system improvements into law. Even on the Democratic side of the house there is a division between those who only want to fix up the affordable care act, and those who have espoused Medicare for all as a key issue. Our niche is that whatever evolves, we want strong durable programs that protect the interests of retirees, both for us and for the future for our children.

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Dave and Dwight hope we represented your interests as well as we could on this trip. It is always a bit stressful, but the trips into the marble halls 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 are a bit sketchy, especially at the end of the day.

**Issues:**

You are invited to go to [www.NRLN.org](http://www.NRLN.org) and read up on each of the NRLN focus issues, currently and throughout the coming year **if** they get updated. (Some of the issue papers could benefit from an update.) For accessing the full range of NRLN 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>