

Trip Report: National Retiree Legislative Network

2020 Leadership Conference, Feb 24-26

Executive Summary:

The 2020 NRLN Leadership Conference was held on Monday, February 24th. There was a morning meeting of the NRLN board, which we observed, but it was conducted in a quiet circle at the front of the room, and we heard only snatches of the conversation at that board meeting. For the afternoon general meeting, 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. She also mentioned there had been progress on the hill on the recoupment issue. Before, if a pension plan had overpaid a pensioner, they could legally aggressively seek to make the pensioner or heirs repay the pension fund immediately. The new bill limits the mandatory repayments to not more than 10% of the over-payment amount per year, and recoupment has to end at the death of the pensioner if they die.
- NRLN board member for Communication, Ed Beltram, made a presentation on the lobbying issues for this year of de-risking (risk shifting), mergers, acquisitions, and spin-offs. (more details on these issues are available on the NRLN web site.)
- The guest speaker for the conference was Tricia Neuman, Senior Vice President of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Director of the foundation's program on Medicare policy. Her impressive resume can be read at <https://www.kff.org/person/tricia-neuman/>. Her message largely paralleled the NRLN concerns that Medicare Advantage is something of a stealth project to privatize Medicare. Medicare Advantage is run by insurance companies who are paid by the federal government, often with more generous funding than is available for regular Medicare for fee. This is Tricia at the podium.



- President Kadereit then added his discussion of the NRLN Medicare Advantage lobbying presentation for going to the hill. Much of his information focused on present and projected costs of standard Medicare for fee versus Medicare Advantage. Also addressed were questions of what insurance companies might charge in the future if regular Medicare for fee were discontinued as a price competitor, essentially privatizing Medicare.
- Ed Beltram took the podium again and briefed the issue of reducing the costs of prescription drugs. There are several bills addressing this issue, such as HR 3, but progress seems at least temporarily stalled in attempts to move the Senate.

The closing conference event was a reception and dinner with the NRLN attendees joined by some national leaders of the Committee for the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare. That had some personal interest because I have been a member of NCPSSM for a long time.

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. 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.

2. 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.

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. Pensions in mergers, acquisitions, spinoffs -- Special concern for the practice of corporations spinning off under-performing subsidiaries which increases the risk of a distress termination of a pension plan, and thus lost benefits for retirees.

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

NRLN staff and members from other states met with key committee legislators from the states of Iowa, Delaware, Florida, Michigan, Oregon, Ohio, Maryland, Nebraska, besides our visits to Washington state legislators.

Meetings on the Hill:

Steve Ellis 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 with responsibilities handling issues that were the focus of this NRLN conference. We visited the offices of representatives Denny Heck, Adam Smith, Senator Patty Murray, representatives Suzan DelBene and Pramila Jayapal on Tuesday. On Wednesday we made scheduled visits to the offices of Representative Kim Schrier, and Senator Maria Cantwell.

Legislative meetings: At each meeting, we gave an NRLN folder to the legislator’s office, outlining the key focus NRLN issues for this visit. (If my detailed recollection of each meeting is a little brief and non-specific, I apologize for delaying so long to compose this report. DR) As noted above, we met with the following legislative offices:

www.engineeringretirees.org

Retired Boeing engineering & technical employees

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

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.

Sen. Patty Murray of Washington - Northwest Regional NRLN representative Judy Stenberg had arranged a meeting with key Murray staff person Kendra, and we attended the meeting with Judy. Kendra was proactive and hoping to get some of our issues included in some bills that were expected to pass. She was well aware of the Medicare Advantage threat to privatize Medicare.

Rep. Suzan DelBene of Washington - Congresswoman DelBene sits on the Budget and Ways & Means committees. We met with Kyle Hill, who is Legislative Director for Suzan. DelBene is the representative for my district, and I appreciated having a meeting with the LD for her office for a good informed discussion. (The very junior staffer last year was a bit of a disappointing appointment.)

Rep. Pramila Jayapal of Washington - Jayapal sits on the Budget and Judiciary committees. We met with the staff person shown in the photo, though I have misplaced his business card and thus his name. Jayapal's office was refreshingly in tune with most of our NRLN issues. (no that is not a spider on his forehead, it was Ash Wednesday.)



Rep. Kim Schrier of Washington - We met with her legislative director Alex Payne, who we had met with last year. 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. We had a good discussion.

Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington - Again Judy had arranged a meeting with staff persons, and we joined in. Senior tax and economic advisor Lara Muldoon and Legislative Correspondent Anna Conroy met with us. Again, a good discussion, and staff was well aware of the moves to have Medicare Advantage supplant regular Medicare for fee.

Endnote:

Steve 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' staff rather than take extensive notes, so some of the meeting descriptions above are a bit sketchy, especially at the end of the day.

The conference was held before the Covid19 pandemic was in full explosion. It has been somewhat distressing to now be monitoring politicians using the pandemic as a way to attack and weaken social security, as well as trying to attack pensions, and dole out huge breaks for large corporations at the same time. Also, with so many businesses facing hard times and potential bankruptcies or major reorganizations, the issue of protecting pensions (for those who still have them) is an area needing close watching. Also, medical costs of treating people in the pandemic, especially older people, may result in more expensive medical insurance unless Medicare for All manages to become law. It is a time when being a watchdog and an advocate are more important than ever. Keep informed. Keep active.

Issue Resources:

You are invited to go to 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 even 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>

You are also able to forward news and concerns directly to the NRLN.