

Trip Report: National Retiree Legislative Network

2023 Leadership Conference, Feb 27 - Mar 1

Executive Summary:

The 2023 NRLN Leadership Conference was held on Monday, February 27th. There was a morning meeting of the NRLN board, which was conducted in a quiet circle at the room and could not be heard well.. For the afternoon general meeting, approximately 20 people were in attendance. NRLN President Bill Kadereit gave opening remarks, followed by several other speakers.

- Jay Kuhnie, a retiree from Chrysler, spoke on one of this year's focus issues, pension de-risking, wherein a company transfers pension funds and payment responsibilities to an outside firm, such as an insurance company or bank. This shifts the financial risk of paying pensions out away from the company. ERISA and PBGC protection of pensions is lost. Of note, he quoted a source that said 27% of American corporations are expected to do this risk shifting this year.
- NRLN Executive Director Alyson Parker talked about political developments in the capital. She identified some successes over this last year in achieving progress on some of last year's focus issues, such as recoupment of overpaid pension benefits, a more clear annual funding letter for pension funds, and easing regulations on transferring excess pension funds to underfunded health care plans..
- NRLN board member for Communication, Ed Beltram, made a presentation on the lobbying issues for this year. This included prescription drug prices, the Health Coverage Tax Credit, and the Susan Mcffley Act that would help a large group of Delphi retirees who lost pensions in a bad judicial decision during the Chrysler bankruptcy.
- The guest speakers for the conference were Jeannie Fuglesten Biniek, of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Associate Director of the foundation's program on Medicare policy. She was joined by Meredith Freed, Senior policy analyst on Medicare policy. They presented changes and problems with Medicare, ACO REACH, and Medicare (Dis)advantage. Some points of interest were that ACO REACH only affects traditional Medicare, not Medicare Advantage. 70% of Medicare Advantage plans have zero premiums, . Minorities are more likely to have MA. Some MA plans cap their payout coverage for vision, hearing, and dental, and do not have good coverage if the patient develops a serious illness. I can email you a copy of the KFF presentation slides if you ask.

- 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 fee for service versus "Medicare" Advantage. Much of this material can be found on the NRLN.org web site.

The closing conference event was a reception and dinner with the NRLN attendees.

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 MA threatens to shrink and kill traditional Medicare. MA costs about 10 percent more than traditional Medicare. We advocate for equaling out benefits and subsidies between MA and traditional Medicare so MA is not favorably subsidized. Also reduce wrongful payments, prior authorization denials, and upcoding only to escalate MA payment rates.

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 currently remove ERISA and PBGC protection and so increase retiree risk. NRLN has proposals to protect retirees by requiring the third party is financially dependable, has reinsurance, and that the ERISA and PBGC protections transfer along with the pension.

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 other countries that have the same standards as the FDA. and C) ending pay-for-delay and other drugmakers' tactics that obstruct new and generic drugs from coming to market. Also approve the Prepare act, which tries to ensure a drug ingredient supply on-shore to protect against both shortages and price spikes.

4. ACO REACH This administrative complex concoction has a contorted history of experiments that have not worked. NRLN advocates that it have strong oversight, and that its size should be limited and the experiment be sunsetted. Any good objectives it has, could be implemented elsewhere.

5. Fix Delphi pension unfairness Restore the lost pensions with the Susan Murphy act, HR735

6. Reinstate the Health Care Tax Credit If people lose health care coverage in derisking or foreign trade job losses and incur health care costs they could get a tax credit for those expenses. The bill sunsetted, expired, and should be reinstated.

Much more detail on the above and other NRLN issues can be found on the NRLN web site under the "legislative agenda" tab. Some items there are a bit old and some are better written than others.

Meetings on the Hill:

Dwight Rousu (ERS) conducted visits with staff members of legislators. Judy Stenberg is a Northwest regional vice president of NRLN who lives in Bellevue with responsibilities in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Hawaii, and Alaska. We coordinated focus on representatives from Washington state, trying to meet with their staff with responsibilities handling issues that were the focus of this NRLN conference. We also made attempts to meet with NW legislators on health committees and finance committees. *Some of our requests for meetings were not responded to, and some representatives decline meetings from people outside their congressional district.* We visited the offices of Senator Cantwell, representative Pramila Jayapal, Senator Lisa Murkowski, new representative Marie Glugesenkamp Perez, representative Adam Smith, and representative McMorris Rodgers. Dwight had to check out of further meetings mid-afternoon Wednesday for the flight home but Judy had a later meeting scheduled with Senator Tester of Montana. On Thursday, Judy had an appointment with Kendra Issacson, Pension Policy Director for Senator Murray.

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, it is hard to be in the moment in a meeting and also take cogent notes.)

Sen. Cantwell We met with Legislative Correspondents Jordan Smith and Astor Tellman in the Hart Building ground floor restaurant, since all the meeting rooms in the Senator's office area were busy. The presentation and conversation on the issues went well.

Rep. Jayapal of Washington - We met with legislative staff person Rachel Madley. She was well informed and engaged on the issues. She provided the good news that the dishonest Medicare Alliance letter distributed by Medicare Alliance for legislators to sign, and which most did sign in past years, a letter that advocates for Medicare Advantage, had been stopped from being distributed this year. A good meeting, and she was up with us or ahead of us on most of our issues.

Sen. Murkowski of Alaska We met with Communications Director Karina Borger. and another staffer. Murkowski is in Judy's region and on a committee of interest for our issues. We had a good discussion. We found out that Alaska, as well as North Dakota have no Medicare Advantage plans. That took care of one issue. We also learned that Alaska has a shortage of medical personnel, which concerns them. I found a moment to congratulate them for instituting rank choice voting, which they appreciated.

Rep. Marie Gluskamp Perez of Washington, 3rd CD Judy had a different meeting at this time, so I met with legislative Assistant Jason Edwards and a legislative aide whose business card I have misplaced. Jason is energized and interested. and took a lot of notes, while seeming to be in agreement on our issues. I found it encouraging that the new congresswoman has good staff as part of her team.



The above photo shows the Perez meeting.

Rep. Adam Smith of Washington - Congressman Smith is ranking leader of the Armed Services Committee, and Judy Stenberg, is in his district. We met with staff person Victoria Thomas. Judy has talked regularly with her, so this was mostly a touching base courtesy meeting in the hall outside the office.

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington - Representative Rogers is on the powerful commerce committee. We met with legislative aide Kendall Dehnel. The presentation and affable discussion went well.

Endnote:

Dwight hopes we represented ERS 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. 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.

Side notes:

Travel was interesting. The Sunday Alaska Air daytime flight to DC National was canceled a couple hours before the scheduled departure. To allow arriving in time for the Monday meeting, Alaska scheduled me for the Sunday United Airlines midnight **red**eye flight to Dulles airport. After asking for guidance at Dulles, I found the obscure portals for the terminal shuttle and the slightly marked pathway and elevator to the new Metro **silver** line. Made it to the hotel by 9AM Monday.

Packing to return to Seattle on Wednesday afternoon, I received a text message that one of the attendees at the Monday meeting and dinner had just tested positive for Covid. Next day at home, I got a message that two of the people at the meeting had now tested positive for covid. I felt better about being a lonely minority of one who wore a mask. No Covid symptoms, but wore a mask for a week to protect others against the possibility.

Traveling from the Yotel Hotel down to National airport, I launched into the Metro route I had used in previous trips to DC: take the **red** train from Union Station to Gallery Plaza, and transfer underground to the **Yellow** line to Reagan Airport. Waiting at the boarding platform for the **yellow**, no **yellow** trains were arriving to the station... (time enough for a panhandler to hit me up, but he got surrounded by the metro police) Two other people with suitcases were similarly wondering what was going on with the lack of **yellow**. Inquiring to some locals revealed that the **yellow** line was under a several month reconstruction project. The two other stranded travelers figured out a route by getting on the **blue** line, which would take us on a circle back north and then back south, where the **blue** line also stopped at Reagan. This all burned a bit of time but the Alaska Air flight home had a one hour delay in departure time, so I did not miss my flight.

The National airport had been re-arranged over the last three years since I had been there, and with an increased number of people in the airport, there were no openings in any of the eating spots. This made the enroute pretzels more tasty.

12,000 steps on my fitness ap!

I support mass transit, and DC is pretty good, but this might have been a time in DC to take a taxi.

cheers.