

Health Physics Society
Congressman Jim Langevin
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Welcome to the Ocean State. I'm proud that you have chosen Providence for your conference. I know you have a very busy schedule, but I hope you have an opportunity to venture outside of the convention center to see all that Rhode Island has to offer.

I want to start by thanking you for the work you do. The Health Physics Society performs an important mission by promoting radiation safety. Radiation is often misunderstood by the public, but varying doses of it play a role in products found in our everyday lives, ranging from nuclear energy to cell phones, from medical and dental equipment to computer monitors. I am impressed by the variety of positions you hold, including radiation safety officers at medical facilities, environmental decontamination occupations, and occupational safety specialists.

I too work with radioactive material, but from a further distance. As the lead Democrat of the Homeland Security Subcommittee on Prevention of Nuclear and Biological Attack in the House of Representatives, I have had a chance to delve into some of the critical security issues presented by the threat of nuclear weapons or radiological materials falling into the wrong hands. My work on these issues has certainly not made it any easier for me to sleep at night, but I know the work is important, and it has been a privilege to be a part of it.

Through my work on the Homeland Security Committee and the Armed Services Committee, on which I also serve, I have become convinced that the nuclear terrorist threat is real, requiring the full and urgent attention of our government. My colleagues and I have learned about the relative ease with which a terrorist can build a crude nuclear device or a dirty bomb, scenarios which reinforce the importance of securing nuclear material at its source. We have also examined the current state of our technological capabilities in terms of detecting nuclear material crossing our borders and discovered that it leaves much to be desired. And we have seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that our nation's ability to respond to the devastation that would be wrought by a nuclear attack on our soil is woefully inadequate and must be enhanced.

Thus, the core of our efforts in the nuclear arena must focus on a three-pronged approach of prevention, detection and response. It is also certainly worth noting here that intelligence is the best tool we have to prevent any terrorist attack, including a nuclear one. Unfortunately, we have learned that intelligence is not always reliable, so we must ensure that we have other robust tools at our disposal.

I firmly believe that the surest way to prevent a nuclear terrorist attack from occurring is to stop terrorists from obtaining weapons-grade nuclear material in the first place. A dirty bomb could disperse radiological materials and wreak havoc on us by rendering an area uninhabitable for many years. But while programs such as Nunn-Lugar, which seeks to secure fissile material in the former Soviet Republics, have been successful, there remains a great deal of work to do, which requires additional funding and diplomacy.

Another area that we must focus on is security at civilian research facilities that use weapons grade material like highly enriched uranium. There are 20 metric tons of highly enriched uranium at civilian sites. In addition, over 130 research reactors in 40 nations use highly enriched uranium for fuel. Our government must work with these nations to ensure that they safely dispose of this material or increase the security at their facilities.

As I mentioned, the second prong of our efforts against nuclear terrorism is detection. In particular, my subcommittee has focused on the quality of detection equipment, as well as the ongoing debate over how to proceed with installation of current technology and the development of the next generation of detection tools. Radiation portal monitors are being installed at our ports and border crossings to detect potential nuclear materials as cargo enters our country via ship or truck. However, the pace of deployment is too slow. I have been working to more rapidly deploy current and next generation radiation monitors because these detectors might be our last opportunity to catch this material before it is too late.

And in a worst-case scenario, where our prevention and detection efforts fail us, we must know that our government, at every level, is prepared to respond to the unimaginable but all too real possibility of a terrorist nuclear attack on our shores.

Yet, nearly five years after 9/11 supposedly shocked us into plugging security gaps and addressing vulnerabilities, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath illuminated massive weaknesses in our response capabilities. We must ensure that our government is ready to respond to potential radiological disaster by putting competent people in charge of FEMA and making sure that the parts of the government in charge of preparedness speak to those in charge of response. I know that through your efforts and expertise, the Health Physics Society will be able to help in any response scenario through determining safe levels of radiation and assistance with decontamination. However, I hope your assistance is never needed.

Before I go on too long with the horror movie script, I want to let you know that there are other issues I work on in Congress, issues that probably affect you and your families on a daily basis.

My work in government has flowed from the fundamental idea of personal empowerment. It's about giving people the tools they need to pave their own way. To me, that's the role of government. In Washington, I am working hard to ensure future generations inherit a top-notch education system, a strong economy, reliable and affordable health care, and a balanced federal budget. I would like to briefly discuss these topics today.

One of the most important things we can do to empower a new generation is to guarantee that every single child receives a world-class education. That means building state-of-the-art classrooms and teaching 21st-century skills for a 21st-century economy. Right now, too many children are learning in crumbling facilities, with obsolete technology and outdated textbooks. In fact, according to a recent report, 81 percent of the public schools in Rhode Island are in disrepair, and the figures are similar nationally. That's simply unacceptable. We can and must do better.

While Congress has made some progress, we still have a way to go. Only 25% of our citizens have a college degree. Too many kids drop out of high school, and higher education is prohibitively expensive for many families. In the new economy, higher education should not be a privilege for the few, but a right for everyone.

One of the first things we can do is invest more in Pell Grants. In 1972, when the program was created by Rhode Island's esteemed Senator Claiborne Pell, the maximum federal grant award could pay for more than 80% of tuition costs at a four-year college or university. But today, the maximum award covers only 39% of average tuition costs. I hope to keep Senator Pell's dream alive by ensuring access to higher education.

Our nation also needs to do more to promote scientific achievement and encourage students to obtain advanced scientific degrees so that we can continue to lead the world in innovation. In particular, we need to train more health physicists because radiation issues are only going to become more prevalent in the future, and we need bright minds to keep us safe.

Our country's businesses have been through a lot over the last few years, but economic conditions continue to improve. Business owners and entrepreneurs, with their constant innovation, ability to provide new services and products to the marketplace, and creation of business ownership opportunities to diverse and traditionally underrepresented groups have helped our country rebound since the recession a few years ago. I have worked hard to ensure small business owners have the access to capital they need, by providing funding for government-guaranteed, to lower the hurdles to starting a business for anyone with a good idea.

However, I am still concerned that the current economic recovery has bypassed too many Americans. In order to return our nation to the consistent economic growth, job growth, and wage growth we saw during the 1990s, we must provide incentives to spur investment now and target tax cuts to those who will use the money immediately. All of this must occur with long-term fiscal responsibility in mind so that we do not leave future generations with the bill. In 2006, the government is expected to spend well over \$300 billion more than it takes in. While I support reducing the tax burden, I am wary of borrowing money to cut taxes when our national debt is more than \$8 trillion, of which every penny must be repaid with interest. We need to return to the fiscally responsible policies that we had in place during the last decade, which led to unprecedented growth and fiscal responsibility.

Equally important to spurring economic growth is empowering all Americans with access to the same quality of health care that is available to members of Congress. In response to double digit annual increases in health care prices, I have proposed a universal health care system, in which businesses are able to contribute to the system at a fixed rate, offering them more stability, while ensuring that every family has access to affordable care.

My proposal is modeled after the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, which is comprised of private insurance carriers and administered by a small federal agency. This agency is responsible for approving or disapproving carriers, negotiating benefit and rate changes, and auditing carriers' operations under the law. Under my proposal, the agency would do the same for Americans participating in an American Health Benefits Program. The government would

make a substantial contribution to every participating American's premium. Employers who currently negotiate plans and offer health insurance as a benefit to their employees may continue to do so. Alternatively, they may choose to participate in the system by contributing to the financing of AHBPA -- thus minimizing their role to a fixed, predictable, mandatory payroll tax.

The only way to develop a functional, national health care system is to involve business, government and individuals. Until every American views health care as an individual right and responsibility, instead of a benefit tied to employment, the problems that plague the health care system will persist.

Our nation faces many challenges, but the United States has always succeeded when we pull together and work toward the common good. I am confident that together, we can find solutions to our health care crisis, improve our education system, and make our businesses more competitive to succeed at home and overseas. We can develop a comprehensive national security strategy to confront the dangers of terrorism and enhance our homeland security to make Americans safer. These are the goals we all share, and these are the issues I fight for every day in Congress.

Let me wrap up by leaving you with a message that I think can help us all in both our personal lives and our careers, and that's my firm belief that challenges -- whether personal or political -- shouldn't derail us, they should empower us. Yes, America is facing some challenging times, but we are a resilient nation.

I've learned that being knocked off your path is often a sign that you're destined to forge a new one. You just have to think bigger -- you have to imagine new horizons, and I am a strong believer that the best America is yet to come. To paraphrase the late Bobby Kennedy, "Some see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not." I plan to keep dreaming, and I hope you all will do the same.

Thank you again for inviting me today, and I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.