

Members of NCRO and Other Retiree Groups Meet with Congressman Levin on “Jobs Bill” Exclusion

Roseville, Michigan – Members of several salaried retiree organizations – including the National Chrysler Retirement Organization (NCRO) – met with U.S. Congressman Sander Levin on June 2 at the Congressman’s Roseville, Michigan office, to voice concerns over an important retiree provision that was left out of a House “Jobs Bill” that was co-authored by the Michigan Congressman, and approved by Congress in May.

The meeting was organized by the National Retiree Legislative Network (NRLN), an advocate for federal legislation to protect retirement pension plans. NRLN had been negotiating with Levin’s committee to include language that would include a “pension asset protection” (PAP) provision in the Bill (H.R. 4213).

H.R. 4213 contains, in part, provisions allowing companies temporary relief from contributing to their pension plans. The bill draft also included limited protection from corporations which take the funding relief option using pension assets for lump sum severance payments during the relief period. PAP wording endorsed by NRLN and other retiree organizations would have restricted that ability to bleed pension plans for non-pension use, but it was pulled from the final bill after months of negotiations.

The retiree groups were highly critical of Levin and the House Ways and Means Committee when they discovered their PAP clause was dropped.

NCRO is a member of the NRLN, and was represented at the Congressman Levin meeting by Chuck Austin, President; Chris Dyrda, Vice President of Legal Affairs; and Deb Morrissett, Vice President of Political Action. Other salaried retiree groups represented at the meeting with Congressman Levin included the General Motors Retirees Association (GMRA) and the Detroit Edison Alliance of Retirees (DEAR).

“In general, we were pleased that Congressman Levin took the time to hear our complaints and agreed to follow-up with us in September to address further our concerns for legislation to protect against pension abuses,” said NCRO’s President, Chuck Austin. “While we didn’t get the wording we wanted in this bill, we did make our voices heard, and demonstrated to the Congressman that retiree issues need to be considered in the process going forward.”

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A Message from the National Retiree Legislation Network: Pension Asset Protection - We Must Prevail

Because of the tremendous support that the NRLN received from its Grassroots Network members and Retiree Associations we came very close to having the NRLN's Pension Asset Protection (PAP) language retained in H.R.4213. Unfortunately, the House Ways and Means Committee's staff did not keep our PAP language in the bill and passed it on May 28th and sent to the Senate where it is pending.

Part of the problem of keeping PAP in the bill was that the bill, in addition to containing pension plan funding relief for companies, included urgent measures such as prohibiting cuts in Medicare payments for doctors; soon-to-expire federal COBRA premium subsidies for Americans who have lost their jobs, plus various tax provisions. This complexity distracted attention from our PAP proposal. Although the "train had left the station" the NRLN continued to stress the importance of PAP in the following ways:

- Grassroots Network members continued to email letters on PAP to their U.S. Representatives;
- The NRLN issued a national news release expressing our outrage that the PAP provision was dropped;
- Constituents of Congressman Sander Levin, Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, sent letters to the editor and some were published;
- Ten leaders and members of the General Motors Retirees Association (GMRA), National Chrysler Retirement Organization (NCRO) and Detroit Edison Alliance of Retirees (DEAR) met on May 24th with a member of Chairman Levin's staff at the Congressman's Michigan 12th Congressional District office in Roseville, MI to advocate PAP, and
- On June 2, I joined the Presidents of the GMRA, NCRO and DEAR plus five of their Board Members for a face-to-face meeting with Chairman Levin at his Roseville office.

Through our meeting with Chairman Levin, we provided him with an understanding of why we are passionate about legislation being necessary to prevent companies using pension plan assets for non-pension expenses. We also explained to Chairman Levin the role of the NRLN and Retiree Associations in representing the interests of retirees, including our members who are his constituents. Chairman Levin agreed to meet with us in his Capitol Hill office on September 14th if the NRLN goes through with its preliminary plans for another Washington, DC Fly-In.

We told Chairman Levin that the NRLN will continue to seek PAP whether that is through the introduction of a stand-alone bill or as a provision in a pension reform bill that the Obama Administration is considering. We believe the Pension Rights Center will be an ally as we work to gain PAP legislation. We will work to convince the AFL-CIO and other groups to support PAP or at least not oppose it.

Our experience with PAP this year reinforces the importance of personal local contact with members of Congress by Grassroots Network members and Retiree Associations. Our active Grassroots Network members and strong Retiree Associations can offset much of the big money because politicians know that our retirees vote. The General Motors, Chrysler and Detroit Edison members in Congressman Levin's district made that point very well and set the example for what must be done elsewhere when needed.

We believe we have made significant progress this year so far and that there are members of Congress who will be supporters. As we continue to pursue passage of a bill that carries our PAP proposal, I know I can count on your continued grassroots support to get the measure passed. You are a vital part of the process.

Bill Kadereit, President
National Retiree Legislative Network