



# NRLN Focus

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## **The NRLN Clarion Call . . . Washington, DC Event Informs Lawmakers of Retirees Needs**

By Bill Kadereit, NRLN President



Back in May when eight NRLN members participated in the first conference call to begin planning for the first ever Fly-In/Drive-In to Washington, DC, we were uncertain how receptive Grassroots Network members would be to the idea. On September 15th in a Washington,

DC hotel conference room 66 motivated individuals from 19 states and 10 retiree organizations came together to begin preparing for meetings with their Representative and Senators and/or members of their staffs.

In comparison to a number of other organizations who have conducted grassroots events in Washington, DC, our turnout was significant. Our orientation session on the opening afternoon provided our Grassroots Network members with a solid understanding of the messages and printed materials they were to take into the Capitol Hill offices.



Bill Kadereit, (left) NRLN President, visits with John Christie, President of the General Motors Retirees Association, during an orientation session break

Following the overview I provided about the NRLN, our Washington, DC staff members discussed two of our primary legislative initiatives. Michael Calabrese, NRLN Legislative Adviser, talked about our objectives for pension asset protection. Marta Bascom, NRLN Executive Director, covered what we hope to gain for retirees if a health care reform bill is passed by Congress this year.

With the health care reform debate being "center stage," our timing was perfect to be advocates for

legislation to provide incentives to employers to continue health care benefits for retirees. Health care reform bills currently in the House and Senate are opportunities for us but certainly not the NRLN's last shot at retirement health care issues. We will continue to advocate our health care legislative objectives year after year if



North Carolina Grassroots Network members Michael Burks, (left) AT&T retiree, and Ron Hoth, Lucent retiree, visit with North Carolina Senator Kay Hagan

necessary.

Will Buergey, Chairman of Delta Pilots-DP3 and who headed the NRLN's Task Force on Bankruptcy and PBGC Rules reform legislation, briefed the audience on why legislation is needed to better protect retirees when a company declares bankruptcy and when a pension plan is taken over by the PBGC. The white papers produced by the Task Force are intended to educate members of Congress on the inequities working against retirees in Bankruptcy Court proceedings and the PBGC's calculations of payments.



Gene Schlesinger, a staff member for Florida Senator Bill Nelson, takes notes as he listens to Florida constituents who are members of the Delta Air Lines Retirement Committee and Delta Pilots-DP3

Kitty Kennedy, NRLN Board Member and President of the Telephone Retirees Association of Arizona—affiliated with the Association of US West Retirees,

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(Continued from page 1) **The NRLN Clarion Call**



Michigan 5th District Representative Dale Kildee (center with striped tie) is photographed with Michigan NRLN Grassroots Network members.

and Joe Dombrowski, Lucent Retirees Organization Mountain Region Director, talked with conferees about the importance of developing a working relationship with members of Congress and their staff members. Bob Martina, NRLN Vice President – Grassroots Network, talked about the structure of the Grassroots Network and made a recruitment pitch for everyone in the room to serve as congressional district or state leaders.

The hospitality and dinner provided a time for conferees from the same states to get acquainted and make plans for meeting as a group with their Senators and House Representative. It was also a time for individuals to share information about their retiree associations. As I talked with individuals and small groups, I found plenty of enthusiasm among them for their task on Capitol Hill the next day, and for some the next two days.

During our full day on Capitol Hill, as I walked between my appointments, I bumped into a number of our members on their way to their next meeting. Those who had had a meeting with one or two of their lawmakers were optimistic that they had gotten a positive reaction to the need for legislation to help retirees keep the pension and benefits they had earned.



Arizona 1st District Representative Ann Kirkpatrick (center) meets with Kitty Kennedy, US West/Qwest retiree, and Joe Dombrowski, Lucent retiree.

On the third day of our time in Washington, DC, 24 Grassroots Network members participated in a meeting with officials at the Pension Benefits Guaranty Corporation (PBGC). We aired our concerns and I believe the

PBGC officials will give serious consideration to what we think are actions which are unfair to retirees and ways the PBGC should change its procedures.

While I mentioned most members of the planning committee among the individuals who made presentations at the orientation session, I want to acknowledge three other committee members who did a great deal of work. They are Bob Foresta, NRLN Vice President – Legislative Affairs and a Board Member of Detroit Edison Alliance of Retirees (DEAR); Cathy Cone, past Chair of the Delta Air Lines Retirement Committee (DALRC); and Ed Beltram, NRLN Vice President – Communications. Also, the help with conferee registrations by Jane Banfield and Kathy Maher, leaders of AT&T Concerned Employees & Retirees (ACER), was greatly appreciated.

Our event in Washington, DC was not an end in



Conferees at NRLN Washington, DC event listen to a presentation about information to share with members of Congress

itself. In reality, it was another step toward building relationships with members of Congress and their staff members. I am optimistic that those who took the time to travel to our nation's capital will seek out opportunities for future meetings with their Representative and Senators when the lawmakers are back home. I hope that other Grassroots Network members will also become involved in building a relationship with their members of Congress by visiting local/state offices to get acquainted with staff members in order to increase the likelihood of being able to meet with the Representative or Senator in that office in the future.

Continuing to build an effective Grassroots Network membership which establishes relationships with members of Congress is crucial to protecting retirees' pensions and benefits plus making sure that Social Security and Medicare are strong. Please do your part as a Grassroots Network member.



## Grassroots Network Members' Comments On Washington, DC Event

Following the NRLN's September 15-17 event in Washington, DC, NRLN President Bill Kadereit sent an email to the participants requesting they report on the meetings with their lawmakers and members of their staffs to record for future follow-ups. Also, conferees were asked to provide comments about their participation. Here is a sampling of the comments received.

"It was a motivating and positive experience for me. This trip makes me realize how massive the task will be to pass legislation to protect seniors' rights. When we made our visits to our Senators and Representatives, we were part of a string of lobbyists waiting for their turn. Our efforts were just one drop in the bucket. It's going to take many more such visits and extensive grassroots efforts back home to begin to get retiree concerns recognized." **Chuck Austin, President of the National Chrysler Retirement Organization from Lake Orion, MI**

"I thought the meeting was the type we should be doing to engage our members and give them an idea of what we actually do and how much work and time is involved in each issue we put forth. This will also stress the importance of their involvement. The booklets the NRLN put together were excellent. I heard that from the legislative aides I addressed. It was a professional presentation, nonpartisan, representing retirees. Great job!" **Jane Banfield, NRLN Vice President – Northeast Region and AT&T-ACER President from Bernardsville, NJ**

"Great meeting! Was nice meeting everyone face-to-face. I hope for the next round that GMRA will have more leaders and members available to lobby their representatives." **John Christie, President of General Motors Retirees Association from Washington Township, MI**

"I thought that the trip to Washington was well worth it. I believe that addressing our issues to our Senators and Congressmen or their staffs in person is worthwhile. I also think that I learned a lot about the issues from the session [NRLN orientation] on the 15th." **Kathy Fish, Delta Air Lines Retirement Committee (DALRC) member from Clearwater, FL**

"Having been on the planning committee for this event, I was concerned that we might overload some of the attendees with too much information and how-to instructions for conducting their visits with their elected officials. Quite the contrary, I had the opportunity during the social part of the event to talk to quite a few

attendees that had never been to Washington nor had they ever tried direct communication with their elected representatives. Without exception, they were excited about getting first hand information of our legislative agenda and were very much put at ease as the [NRLN orientation] presentations were made about the information packages that they would take on their individual visits [on Capitol Hill]. As I and others from Michigan moved among congressional offices, meeting other attendees, the consensus was that they felt fully prepared to discuss the concerns of retirees' with their congressional leaders." **Bob Foresta, NRLN Vice President – Legislative Affairs and Detroit Edison Alliance of Retirees (DEAR) from Sterling Heights, MI**

"I had an excellent meeting with Representative Virginia Fox and after spending 30-40 minutes with her she had me meet her chief of staff, Todd Poole. I met briefly with Kay Hagan but Michael Burks (Raleigh, NC) met with her staff health care specialist while I went over to meet with Senator Richard Burr. He wasn't available but I spent over an hour with his Retirement Policy Director, Steven Perrotta. I had a good experience with all, including Senator Kay Hagan, though brief. She claims to be very supportive of protecting retiree benefits as were the rest." **Ron Hoth, Lucent Retirees Organization Board Member from Bermuda Run, NC.**

"The event was well planned – just the right amount of time for the kick-off meeting Tuesday afternoon. Guest speakers were knowledgeable and approachable – "they were us." Bluebook [folder] hand-out was extremely helpful and the folks I met with seemed truly appreciative of receiving it. It could become a valued retiree issue handbook reference. (Folder's contents is posted at <http://www.nrln.org/BKLETTERS/fly-in%20report.pdf>) This was my first time meeting with my representatives – a very interesting and fun experience. I found the reps very friendly and attentive to my comments. My presentation was easy and benefitted greatly by the "coaching" the NRLN provided all of us on how to present your case." **Bob Lane, Verizon retiree from Harleysville, PA**

"I was impressed by the professionalism and organization of NRLN." **Ron Jones, Delta Pilots – DP3 member from Oxford, GA**

"Success and camaraderie describe the outcomes of the NRLN-sponsored gathering to lobby members of Congress about retiree pension and benefit protections. Occasionally we would run into one another in the halls and share our stories. Everyone thought it was a positive



(Continued from page 3) *Grassroots Network Members' Comments ...*

event even with those Congressional members who have no concerns for retirees and just shook their heads to be polite." **Kitty Kennedy, NRLN Vice President – Mountain Region, and President of the Telephone Retirees Association of Arizona—affiliated with the Association of US West Retirees.**

"All in all it was very interesting to walk the halls and see the power brokers of our nation at work. I can't say if we did any good but I know all of us certainly did no harm and I was privileged to represent the NRLN and DP3. The Tuesday meeting was very helpful to give us our confidence, skills and white papers. We [Coleen and I] will continue to follow up with the staffers in the future." **Ken Ulrich, Delta Pilots-DP3 member from Louisville, KY.**

"I spent twenty minutes with Congressman Jim Matheson (UT) and he asked intelligent and genuinely interested questions. He took the packet after I explained the gist of our concerns and told him that the NRLN and its excellent staff had already done most of the work for him and were there as a support system any time he needed us. I introduced the NRLN as 2.1 million of America's fastest growing demographic and most reliable voters. He got it and said he was familiar with us." **Valerie Walker, retired Delta Air Lines pilot from Sandy, UT.**

also discovered that few people are willing to pay for it through tax increases. Again, no great surprise.

So the past ten months have resulted in an exercise in trying to fund everybody's health care priorities (each member has their own list, you see) in order for legislators to deal with voters in the fall of 2010 and be able to claim a victory of some kind – Democrats claiming that they passed comprehensive health care reform that helps everyone, and Republicans claiming that they defeated socialized medicine.

The fact is that both sides will have a hard time claiming any kind of victory, regardless of where the debate ends up unless they take a closer look at what really needs fixing. The vast majority of those using the health care system in our country are retirees. This isn't rocket science – as our bodies age, we require more medical attention. Democrats and Republicans in Congress and the White House need to focus on retiree health care. In other words, they need to fix Medicare without inadvertently dismantling the system and deal directly with the issue of diminishing or eliminated retiree health care benefits from former employers

It has been noted in this column in the past that it appears to be open season on retirees, and it remains so. There has been no political will from either political party to overrule the EEOC decision which permits employers to eliminate over-65 retiree health care benefits without violating the Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

Congress has been equally resistant to addressing corporations' broken promises to retirees. They have yet to gain momentum on ways to reduce the cost of pharmaceuticals such as prescription drug reimportation. Now as part of the search for health care reform funding there have been numerous assaults on Medicare reimbursements to hospitals and providers which could logically have a trickle-down effect on Medicare recipients.

The lack of retiree focus in the current debate is glaring. Between the House and the Senate

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## A View From Washington

By Marta Bascom, NRLN Executive Director



### The Evolution of the Health Care Debate – An Unfinished Story

Since his election in 2008, President Obama and the Democratic-led Congress made health care reform a legislative priority. It has been said and generally agreed upon that our health care system is broken and in need of repair. Therefore, without much guidance from the White House, Congress set out to fix that which they perceive is wrong.

Along the way they made an unfortunate, although not surprising, discovery, which is that complex, micro-managed health care systems are expensive and difficult to implement. They are also difficult to pass into law. Oh, yes, they



(Continued from page 4) **A View From Washington**

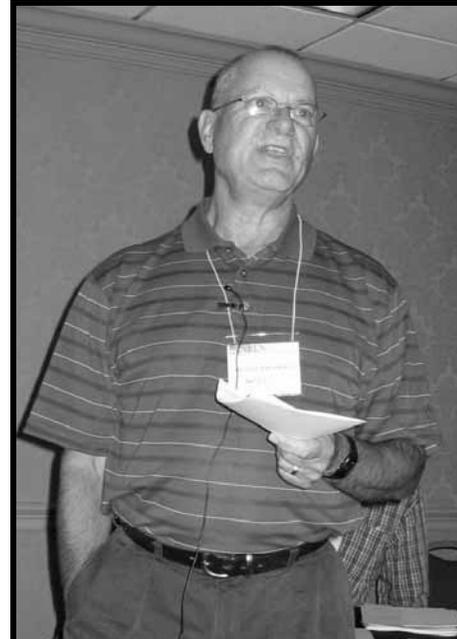
**there are five committees of jurisdiction producing bills on health care reform. Only one, the House Education and Labor Committee bill, has language which directly focuses on retiree health care benefits from former employers.**

**The NRLN has been working closely with Reps. Tierney and Andrews of that committee, as well as its chairman, Rep. Miller, on this language which would help both younger retirees pay for high-priced health care expenses as well as a prohibition on cuts to corporate health care benefits for retirees.**

**The House is currently in negotiations to combine three bills into one final form, and it remains unclear whether members will succumb to corporate pressure to keep the language out of the final product, and even more unclear as to whether the Senate would accept those provisions.**

**The only clear conclusion that emerges from this process is that this particular health care reform debate is not a one-shot deal. Even if both the House and Senate can agree on a single bill to send to the President for his signature, it will not be sufficiently comprehensive to cover all of the issues affecting the entire population, and most importantly for our purposes, that of retirees.**

**There will be other legislative opportunities where retirees can press for Congress to address the issues affecting America's seniors. Retirees must remain singularly focused on talking to their members of Congress about their particular needs and remind them that, as voters, they are paying close attention to their activities on Capitol Hill. Retirees' attention to their members has to be constant, both in their Washington, D.C., and their district/state offices. Only then will Congress listen and act. In the meantime, the NRLN remains in the trenches, advancing with nary a retreat.**



Will Buergey, President of Delta Pilots - DP3, talks about the NRLN white papers on bankruptcy law reforms and PBGC rule changes. Buergey was chairman of the NRLN task force that produced the white papers to be used to lobby members of Congress.



NRLN Grassroots Network members from Michigan meet with Michigan Senator Carl Levin's staff members, Kristina D. Ko and Tyler Gellasch during Sept. 16 visits on Capitol Hill.



Bob Martina, NRLN Vice President - Grassroots Network, talks to conferees about becoming state and congressional Grassroots Network leaders



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**National Retiree Legislative Network, Inc.**

The NRLN is the only nationwide organization solely dedicated to representing the interests of retirees and future retirees. Our mission is to secure federal legislation to protect retirees' employer-sponsored pensions and benefits plus keep Social Security and Medicare strong.

**President**

Bill Kadereit - bkad@sbcglobal.net

**Vice President, Secretary/Treasurer**

Robert Tompkins - tompkinsr@comcast.net

**Vice President, Legislative Affairs**

Bob Foresta - robertforesta@sbcglobal.net

**Vice President, Grassroots Network**

Bob Martina - rfjm9870@aol.com

**Board Members**

Jane Banfield - janebanfield@aol.com

Will Buergey - buergeyw@alphacomm.net

Joseph R. (Dick) Ciocca - jrcdick@hotmail.com

Chuck Gilbert - chuck@dlsusa.com

Kitty Kennedy - kathleen\_kennedy2@comcast.net

Ralph Maly - rmaly@cwa-union.org

Mary Ann Neuman - maneuman12@msn.com

Judy Stenberg - vp-nrln@q.com

Ray Sternot - rsternot@ameritech.net

**NRLN Headquarters**

601 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

Suite 900, South Building

Washington, D.C. 20004-2601

Tel: 202-220-3172 or 1-866-360-7197

Website: <http://www.NRLN.org>

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