Caring Across Generations Lobby Day

By Robby Stern

The Silver Tsunami is arriving as the oldest edge of the baby boomer generation is reaching their mid 60s. While the vast majority of this generation does not yet need assistance with life’s daily tasks, we know enough about the aging process to know that the time will come when many of them will need help of some kind to stay in their own homes. PSARA is working on these issues right now!

The first annual Washington Caring Across Generations Lobby Day will occur on March 28th in Olympia. Our goal will be to introduce legislators to the Caring Across Generations campaign. We will also advocate for legislation at the state level that will address the changes necessary to allow seniors, people with disabilities and individuals needing care to get the support they need to continue to live in their homes.

PSARA members are invited to join with members of 31 other organizations

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Is there really a debt crisis?

By Mike Andrew

Is the country in the grip of a “debt crisis” so dangerous to our future that we need to restructure major social programs that have been in place since the New Deal? The short answer is NO.

A longer and more complex answer is that the so-called “debt crisis” is being used as a pretext to attack social programs that protect the country’s economy, in particular Social Security and Medicare, for the benefit of the wealthiest Americans.

In other words, the “debt crisis” is really a policy crisis that’s playing itself out in an argument over the federal budget.

Let’s look at the facts.

As of February 21, the total debt of the United States amounted to somewhat more than $16.6 trillion, according to the Boston Business Journal.

Of that debt, more than a third, $4.9 trillion, is accounted for by what are called “intergovernmental holdings.” In other words, the government owes that much money to itself. The rest, $11.7 trillion, is owned by outside investors, and the Treasury Department says that about half of that is owned by foreign investors, chiefly China and Japan.

The debt held by investors amounts to about 74% of the US GDP. Just for the record, this compares very favorably to the debt-to-GDP ratios of many of our international competitors. Japan’s debt-to-GDP ratio, for example is a whopping 198%.

Even Germany, the champion of fiscal austerity, has an 83% debt-to-GDP ratio.

The next thing to understand about the debt is that no matter how big it is, it doesn’t have to be paid back all at once. As long as foreign and American investors continue to have confidence in the ability of the US government to pay back its debts as they fall

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Top CEOs plan to loot US social programmes

By Margaret Flowers

The Fix the Debt campaign comprised of over 80 powerful CEOs is attempting to cut corporate tax rates by cutting social programme spending.

The new recommendations for Social Security and Medicare released by the Business Round Table are beyond belief. It's as if the people who wrote them never gaze outside of the tinted windows in their limousines.

The newest tactic to impose more austerity measures in the US comes from a group of over 80 CEOs who are starting with $60 million to spend on a campaign called "Fix the Debt". They plan to convince people in the US that not only are cuts to vital programmes necessary, but that such cuts will strengthen them when exactly the opposite is true.

These CEOs are members of the Business Round Table, an elite corporate club that claims to create 7.3 trillion in annual revenues. That gives them a lot of political clout. The real reason for their push to cut spending on important programmes like Social Security and Medicare is so corporate tax rates can be cut further.

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Vivian Lee honored by Northwest Asian Weekly’s Women of Power

By Frieda Takamura, PSARA Secretary

Vivian, PSARA Executive Board member, was honored at the Northwest Asian Weekly’s Women of Power: Building Bridges luncheon on January 31. The theme of the very well-attended event, “Reaching out beyond their own community bringing people together,” describes Vivian’s lifetime achievement as an educator, advocate and community activist for social justice.

An article in the Weekly explains, “Vivian Lee is a retired nurse who developed and implemented policies that brought more Asian Americans and other people of color into the nursing profession...Lee is now a consultant in Women’s Health and Clinical Administration, reviewing federal grants and contracts for the DHHS and the Centers for Disease Control...She has also worked with the U.S. Public Health Service, most recently serving as the founding director of the Office of Women’s Health, serving Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska.”

Resplendent in Husky purple and gold, the colors of her beloved alma mater, the University of Washington, Vivian talked at the luncheon about her continuing efforts with the UW Office of Minority Affairs to diversify the student body and faculty, not only to reflect the changing demography of the community but also to capitalize on the many talents of students of color to make for a better, stronger community. Working with other activists in the communities of color in the 1960’s, Vivian helped to bring attention to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity at the University. Their persistence resulted in pioneering changes that even today, makes the UW a welcoming and supportive institution for students of color. In addition to helping to create the UW Office of Minority Affairs, Vivian was a founding member of the University President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity and continues to serve in that capacity.

Vivian serves on the PSARA Diversity Committee and has represented PSARA with the Caring Across Generations campaign.

“I can’t put into words how much she has meant to me and the International District Community Health Center when I was its Executive Director,” PSARA Board member Frank Irigon said. “She gave us more than just support, she backed us with grants that made it possible for us to grow and thrive and continue to provide culturally sensitive and language appropriate health services.”

Ambitious Plans

At its January meeting, the PSARA Executive Board laid out ambitious plans for 2013. Specifically, the board called for us to add 250 new members to our rolls. This may seem ambitious, but it’s perfectly doable if we remember why we joined PSARA.

Maybe we heard about it from a friend, maybe we saw an issue of The Retiree Advocate and were especially interested in one of the articles, maybe we met a PSARA member at an event - or on a picket line. However we became PSARA members, there are many people just like us who will want to join up - if they get the opportunity.

Let’s give them that opportunity! Invite a friend, neighbor, or co-worker to join PSARA, or give them the gift of a PSARA membership and let them see for themselves why you are a PSARA member.
Care Workers and Immigration Reform
By Hilary Stern, Executive Director of Casa Latina & a PSARA member

Every day, hundreds of thousands of undocumented women go to work in homes across the country, caring for children, parents and grandparents; they clean, wash, teach, support and cook. Some live in their employers’ homes. Others commute long distances to work. They do the work that makes all other work possible. And they are part of a global pattern of migration across borders in search of work and a better life for their families.

Domestic workers have faced generations of exclusion from basic labor protections. Isolated in the workplace, they are among the most invisible and vulnerable workers in the workforce today. As a result of our current immigration laws, many are trapped in undocumented status without a roadmap to citizenship.

Now for the first time in twenty years, we have the opportunity to change that with a comprehensive immigration bill that brings people out of the shadows and meets our future labor needs.

The Caring Across Generations campaign, of which PSARA is a member, is a broad coalition of consumer and employer groups, unions, women’s and worker groups that has a shared interest in a stronger care workforce. We support a comprehensive approach to win citizenship for people that are here. We also support revising the visa program to meet our future labor needs, including our increasing need for caregivers for our aging population.

Presently, a mostly immigrant workforce provides care for 12 million aging and disabled Americans. By 2050 the number of Americans who need care will grow to 27 million. Any immigration legislation should include protections and access to citizenship for domestic and care workers who are helping to fill an urgent and important labor shortage—including a road to citizenship for workers who are currently present in the country and all those who may come in the future.

Legislative proposals are being debated. We need to be vigilant and pay attention to the details. For example, eligibility for legalization should not depend on proving continuous employment. Having to prove continuous employment will exclude many if not most domestic and care workers from a legalization program. Care workers often have gaps in their employment history when their clients die or when they need to piece together informal arrangements with a variety of families. Basing eligibility solely on employment history would also exclude elderly and disabled relatives who are living with immigrant families.

Other priorities include making sure that the fees are affordable, that there is a variety of documentation that can be used to prove presence, that English language requirements are not impossible obstacles and that the Affordable Care Act includes aging and disabled immigrants.

Legislation is moved forward by compelling stories of real people. If you know someone who is an undocumented caregiver that cares for a loved one, tell us your story. Help us put a human face on this issue and pass an immigration reform that strengthens our ability to care for each other.

Contact Robby Stern, president@psara.org or Susie Levy susie@washingtoncan.org with your story.

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Is there really a debt crisis?
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due, the government will always be able to borrow new money to pay off old debts.

The idea that “our children and grandchildren” will suddenly be confronted by demands to pay trillions of dollars at some time in the future is a fiction promoted by people who want to justify an all-cuts budget.

The third thing to understand about the national debt is that it’s the result of deliberate policy decisions made by those same people.

In 2001, at the beginning of George W Bush’s first term, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projected that the US would run a $5.6 trillion budget surplus between 2002 and 2012. Instead, the country went into debt by an additional $6.1 trillion.

According to the CBO, the difference between the projected surplus and actual debt in 2011 can be attributed to:

- $3.5 trillion – Economic changes due to the recession, including lower than expected tax revenues and higher than expected safety net spending;
- $1.6 trillion – Bush Tax Cuts;
- $1.5 trillion – Increased defense baseline budget and non-defense discretionary spending under both the Bush and Obama administrations;
- $1.4 trillion – Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq;
- $1.4 trillion – Incremental interest due to higher debt balances;

The final thing to know about the national debt is that it’s not at all clear that debt reduction is a good idea at the present time.

According to Christina Romer, Garff B. Wilson Professor of Economics at UC Berkeley and a former Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers in the Obama administration, cuts aimed at reducing the budget deficit might actually be harmful. “A crude rule of thumb is that every $100 billion of deficit reduction will cost close to a million jobs in the near term. If that isn’t a reason to move gradually, what is? But if you need another, just look at Europe,” she said, referring to the catastrophic economic collapse of several European countries after implementing austerity measures.

That analysis was confirmed by the CBO in its report on the probable effects of the impending “sequester.” There would be an increased risk of recession during 2013 if the deficit is reduced suddenly through automatic spending cuts, the CBO said, even though lower deficits and debt would improve economic growth over the long term.

The real problem with debt is that the government has to pay interest on it, and money spent on interest payments is money that can’t be spent on programs. In other words, if the government owes a lot of money, it will pay a lot of money to bankers who own the debt, rather than spending it to build roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals, or to help support unemployed workers, veterans, or retirees.

The conversation we should be having now is not “should we spend money or not?” but “where do we want additional revenue to come from” and “where do we want to spend the money?”

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The Retiree Advocate

March 2013
The Schrader Amendment

By Robby Stern

Several weeks ago we learned that Washington Congressional Representatives Smith, Heck, Kilmer and Larsen joined with 52 additional House members to vote for what was called the Schrader amendment. The amendment called on the President to submit a budget that stabilized the federal debt in the long term by following the “principles” of the Simpson-Bowles plan.

The “principles” advocated by Morgan Stanley director Erskine Bowles and former Republican Senator Alan Simpson, call for significant cuts to our earned benefit programs. Bowles and Simpson issued a statement strongly commending the sponsors of the amendment and urged their colleagues “to follow their leadership in pushing for a bold, bipartisan plan to bring our debt under control.”

Have these Washington state representatives and their colleagues learned nothing from the European Union’s turn to austerity? Unemployment grows and deep recessionary times with even higher unemployment seem inevitable in many European countries where austerity has been imposed.

Respected progressive economists like our recent visitor Dean Baker, and Nobel Prize winners Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz strongly criticize this approach. They argue that an austerity agenda will likely drive us into a double dip recession and increase our already too high unemployment. They argue that while we may need to address our debt in the long term, the immediate need is to stimulate the economy, not cut earned benefit programs that pump billions of dollars into the economy. Significant revenue can be achieved by ending the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy and creating new revenue streams, like a financial transactions tax, that address the growing wealth gap in our country.

I contacted the offices of each of the Washington Representatives. They all defended their positions on the Schrader amendment. Quoting a statement from Rep. Smith, he stated: “With an annual deficit running over 30 percent of our yearly budget, even rolling back many of the tax cuts and using a slower approach to deficit reduction will not be enough. Mandatory spending is nearly 60 percent of our yearly budget, and savings must be found in this part of the budget even to achieve the modest goal of deficit reduction....

“The Schrader Amendment is a non-binding proposal that requests the President consider the Simpson-Bowles plan as a framework while creating his budget. I supported this legislation because it is important that we use a balanced approach that gets our deficit under control over the long-term by increasing revenue, making strategic cuts to spending, and implementing efficiencies wherever possible...”

Rep. Smith’s reference to “mandatory spending” and a “balanced approach” is code for cuts to Social Security and Medicare. Despite the fact that Wall Street and the richest 2% created the fiscal crisis brought on by the great recession, we are being told that we must pay for their avarice.

Rep. Smith’s statement is consistent with the echo chamber that surrounds Washington D.C. Dean Baker discussed how Simpson and Bowles have become almost god-like in the chambers of our elected officials. The reality is that these two and those who support their “principles”, like the “Fix the Debt” CEOs, have an agenda to cut our earned benefit programs.

This is not paranoia. In his recent visit, Dean Baker provided us a perfect example. In their 2010 report, Simpson-Bowles called for $300 billion in cuts to Medicare over the decade. Since then, the Congressional Budget Office has reduced its Medicare spending projections by more than $500 billion. We already achieved more savings than Simpson-Bowles targeted, but in their most recent update of their principles they continue the drumbeat of cuts to Medicare as an “entitlement program”.

Reasonable savings can be achieved in Medicare. Authorize Medicare to negotiate the cost of prescription drugs. Change the reimbursement mechanism so we are not paying per procedure but rather for quality of care. (This approach is piloted in the Affordable Care Act.) Lower the age of eligibility for Medicare, allowing a healthier cohort to voluntarily pay premiums to Medicare rather than private insurers. Compare these approaches to Simpson-Bowles that calls for raising the age of eligibility for Medicare.

The Seattle Times recently ran a front page article from the Washington Post recounting the “grim” financial outlook for future retirees. According to the research, 54% of private sector workers have NO retirement plan through their employers.  40% of personal wealth was destroyed by the Great Recession and most of the recent stock market gains are flowing to the well-off.

Workers are suffering long periods of unemployment. There has been a large loss in home equity value, which is often considered part of the plan for retirement. Well over 50% of workers over 30 have no plan for retirement because the American economy is simply not affording the opportunity to make such a plan. For these workers, Social Security will be THE source of economic survival when they are no longer working for a wage.

A recent poll by the National Academy of Social Insurance asked Americans about Social Security and how they want to change it. More than 2 in 3 wanted to raise their own payroll tax rate as well as lift the payroll tax cap so all Americans pay the same Social Security tax rate. (Scrap the Cap!)

Simpson-Bowles “principles” call for reducing Social Security benefits by adopting the Chained CPI. They also want to slowly increase the retirement age beyond 67!

Representatives Smith, Kilmer, Heck and Larsen took a bad vote on the Schrader amendment. Let them hear from you!
Caring Across Generations
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on this advocacy effort in Olympia on March 28.

PSARA is also part of the national Caring Across Generations campaign which is working to address the present challenges of home care as well as the future needs created by someone turning 65 every 10 seconds. Engaging in efforts at both the federal, state and local level, we promote policies and legislation that will allow disabled people and our aging population to experience their senior years with dignity and respect.

At the same time, we support legislation that insures that those who work to provide the care earn a family wage and also have access to the training they need. Many of the workers providing care services are immigrants, some of whom lack legal status.

As the baby boomers age, there will be a need for a much larger number of care workers, many of whom will come from the immigrant population. The Caring Across Generations campaign will work for comprehensive immigration reform to allow many of these care workers and their families to come out of the shadows. These families, too, deserve to live with dignity and respect in our communities.

This year the Washington Care Council, the decision-making arm of the campaign at the state level, has adopted an ambitious legislative agenda. The elements of the legislative goals include:

- Support for the full Medicaid expansion (many care workers and care recipients will become Medicaid eligible as a result of the full implementation of the Affordable Care Act).
- Subsidies for medical coverage for people who earn above the income level for Medicaid eligibility but whose income is too low for them to be able to afford medical coverage. (This includes many care workers.)
- Urging the state to take advantage of the federal Community First Choice Option which would restore recent cuts to home and community-based long term care services and prevent additional cuts. This would bring an additional $50 million of federal revenue to the state but would require a state allocation of funds to receive the federal match.
- Support for passage of Paid Sick Days legislation (similar to Seattle’s ordinance) and a Family & Medical Leave Insurance program that would cover the entire state. This would assure that no worker would have to choose between economic security and family health and well-being when the worker or a family member requires care.
- Support for legislation that will facilitate immigrants playing the critical role of caregivers and domestic workers. This includes legislation related to access to education, health care, documentation (e.g. drivers licenses) and other tools needed to fill the crucial roles they play in our homes and communities.

This 1st Annual Lobby Day will afford PSARA members the opportunity to meet people from many different backgrounds and national origins who are part of the Caring Across Generations campaign. Transportation, lunch, childcare and language interpretation will be provided.

If you would like to participate in this day long effort in Olympia, read the flyer in the middle of this issue of the Retiree Advocate and respond by March 21 to assure yourself a place on the bus.

Democracy Under Attack
By Alex Stone, Communications & Technology Manager at Economic Opportunity Institute and a PSARA member

It was a case study for democracy in action.

Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn signed Seattle’s Paid Sick and Safe Days ordinance into law in September 2012, making Seattle the third U.S. city to enact such a standard. The Seattle City Council had voted 8-1 in favor of the measure after deliberating for several months, and receiving thousands of emails, postcards and phone calls in support. A coalition of more than 100 Seattle-based businesses, community organizations, labor unions, and faith groups backed the measure.

Now, at the behest of business lobbyists, conservative legislators representing Centralia, Ellensburg, and largely rural parts of Washington are leading the effort to repeal Seattle’s law – and preempt future local paid sick days efforts.

According to the Seattle Times, Rep. Matt Manweller (R-Ellensburg) and John Braun (R-Centralia), were approached by a business lobbyist who suggested two different bills: One would exempt any business with locations outside Seattle – including big businesses like Burger King and Home Depot – from Seattle’s law. The other would outright overturn Seattle’s law.

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PSARA Board member Frank Irigon (left) testifies in favor of legislation that would establish a Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program in Washington. "Many of our kids now have the responsibility of caring for an elder in addition to the responsibilities to their own children and their jobs," he said. "Family and Medical Leave Insurance is part of the solution to a looming crisis in elder care."
Cuba: A world apart and yet so close

By Leno Rose-Avila

A world apart and yet so close. Recently I went to Cuba and found so many interesting aspects that I encourage many of our members and readers to go to this island country and see for yourselves.

Obviously seniors are taken care of better there than here in the states. They are given free housing and medical assistance. At the Bed and Breakfast where I was staying there was an emergency dental clinic that was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And it is all free. For a developing country their citizens have great teeth.

But all is not perfect in Cuba. They still have a government that does not have full protection of human rights and still has long term prisoners which have never really received a fair and honest trial. But as you know we still control Guantanamo which has been the site of torture and long term imprisonment without the decent standards demanded under the universal declaration of human rights.

Raul Castro, Fidel’s brother who is now president, is opening Cuba up to more tourism, allowing more small businesses, and is looking for ways to build the economy. The Chinese are pushing the Cuban government to build up their tourism and make a bigger profit.

On my next trip to Cuba I will go to the eastern part of the country where I am told there is more poverty and more of the Afro-Cuban population.

The people were friendly and were willing to discuss Obama and his promise for immigration reform. I distributed many Obama shirts and other immigration rights information.

One Cuban gentleman said that Cuba may have too much government but that the United States may need more government.

One stark difference from other Caribbean or Central American Countries was the lack of weapons on the street. Havana was safe and it did not take assault weapons to do so.

There are thousands of tourists from all over the world. The tourist buses are nicer than the buses here in Seattle, their first class hotels are on par or better than ours. And while the Government owns most businesses the service is not bad.

As of January 14th any Cuban who has the money and permission from their job is free to apply to travel to any country that will have them. This will create new immigration issues for our Homeland Security office.

And it is a delight to see all the late 50’s Chevrolets and some other models from those years still prowling the streets but now running with Russian motors. There are not many vehicles in Cuba so I never experienced rush hour traffic.

The U.S. government does business with China which is a more powerful Communist country and yet we still have an embargo with Cuba... that needs to change to benefit all of us.

Leno Rose-Avila is Director of Seattle’s Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs and a member of PSARA’s Executive Board.

Democracy Under Attack
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and prohibit similar laws elsewhere. Majority leader Sen. Rodney Tom of Medina is a co-sponsor of both bills. These bills aren’t just an assault on the democratic process. They’re part of a coordinated, nationwide effort to overturn local paid sick days laws.

In November 2008, 69% of voters in Milwaukee, WI approved a paid sick days law. The city’s business lobby responded with a (frivolous) lawsuit to block it, while scrambling to write a state law to prohibit its implementation.

The business lobby eventually lost in court – but not before the two-and-half-year judicial process allowed them to score a bigger victory. With Scott Walker as Wisconsin’s new governor and Republicans firmly in control, state legislators repealed Milwaukee’s paid sick days law less than two months after the court’s decision.

Today, Wisconsin is a template for conservative legislators in other states including Florida, Louisiana, and here in Washington – largely aided by the corporate front group ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council). One ALEC committee meeting in 2011 focused entirely on paid sick leave. Committee members (including state legislators from around the country, and corporate members from Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell) were given copies of Wisconsin’s bill.

As other cities and states have taken up paid sick days, ALEC and other big business lobbies like the National Restaurant Association have fought them by any means necessary. Just this week, a Florida judge ruled Orange County Commissioners had violated the “plain meaning of its charter” by refusing to allow voters to consider a paid sick days initiative that qualified for the November 2012 ballot. Several commissioners are under scrutiny for deleting text messages from lobbyists who helped orchestrate the delay.

ALEC, corporate lobbyists, and business associations may have no allegiance to our American democracy – but elected officials should hold themselves to a higher standard. Here in Washington, Sen. Braun and Rep. Manweller have no right to vote in Seattle elections, much less set labor policy there. Their attempt to overturn Seattle’s paid sick days law violates the democratic rights of Seattle voters, and shows a willingness to violate democratic principles in favor of corporate interests.
Caring Across Generations is a national movement making sure seniors, people with disabilities, and individuals needing care, get the support they need to continue to live in their homes, that the workers who provide that support have quality jobs, and that workers and consumers are treated with dignity and respect. In Washington, our state-wide coalition of 31 organizations representing seniors, people with disabilities, caregivers, domestic workers, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and family members is working together for dignity and respect.

For more information and to register, contact Robby Stern: 206–448–9646

Our 2013 state legislative agenda includes Medicaid expansion and implementation of the Basic Health Option, new investments in homecare through the Community First Choice Option, Paid Sick Days and Family and Medical Leave Insurance, and support for immigrant workers in Washington State.
Of course, they don't say that. They say things like Social Security and Medicare are running out of money and we must preserve and strengthen them. They say things like the language we used in 2010 when we were fighting cuts by the Deficit Commission. This push for corporate tax cuts comes although corporate profits have grown by 171 percent during the Obama presidency alone, the highest growth in profits since 1900.

Here is a quote from one CEO, Gary Loveman of Caesar's Entertainment Corporation:

"Medicare and Social Security were not designed to cope with America's new demographic realities. CEOs are calling for gradual changes that will modernize these programmes and preserve the safety net for future generations of retirees."

**Cutting social programmes**

His language is slick. It is true that these programmes were not designed to cope with the new demographics. But I'm not talking about an ageing population as he purports (although our life expectancy is actually dropping), I'm talking about the job insecurity, falling wages and increasing wealth divide that exist today. Social Security and Medicare were created as social contracts for a working population to provide for those who need help and for all to have access to income and health care when they retired.

Social Security and Medicare were not designed for a population in which the vast majority of wealth is funnelled to the top 1 percent who avoid paying taxes. The Business Round Table report makes it sound as if the Social Security trust funds will be drained by 2033. What they don't say is that modest changes such as lifting the cap on the Social Security tax or treating investment income the same as income from wages would make Social Security solvent for many decades after that.

Instead they call for raising the retirement age to 70, restricting the growth of benefits and converting the Cost of Living Adjustment to a chained CPI. They also recommend that people save more. In today's economy, in which poverty is increasing, changes that delay or decrease benefits would be just plain cruel. Our older population is carrying high credit card debt and experiencing growing food insecurity. Future seniors are expected to face even greater poverty. They cannot bear further reductions in benefits. And many American families are struggling to meet basic necessities, let alone put money into savings. In fact 38 percent of families have no savings at all.

The Business Round Table is also sounding an alarm on Medicare. Their purpose is to push more people into private insurance and further privatise Medicare while keeping those who need health care services in public programmes. They would do this by increasing the Medicare eligibility age to 70 and opening Medicare up to more private health insurance plans that can be sold across state lines (code for allowing insurers to locate in states with the weakest regulations).

This is wrong on so many levels. Increasing the Medicare age will cause more deaths, especially in minority and low-income communities. And while it would save the federal government some money, it would shift even greater cost onto individuals who are unable to handle that increase. This means seniors would face greater difficulty meeting their basic needs.

**Real solutions**

The changes put forth by the Business Round Table are destructive, unnecessary and counterproductive. The US already spends a low portion of its GDP on public programmes when compared to other wealthy nations and we are suffering from the results. Restricting social spending further andprivatising our social insurances will drive us towards greater poverty, economic stagnation and worse social outcomes. On the contrary, there is strong evidence that investing in social infrastructure stimulates the economy and shortens recessions.

There are real solutions that would address our current crises and actually preserve and strengthen Social Security and Medicare. For example, reclaiming taxes that the wealthy avoid paying would raise enough revenue to strengthen and expand both programmes. Because Social Security is the most successful and popular pension plan in the US, there is a solid argument that we would be better off if benefits were doubled, a sort of "Social Security Plus". Steven Hill of the New America Foundation describes this in more detail. Hill concludes:

Social Security Plus would provide a stable, secure retirement for every American and contribute greatly toward a solid foundation from which to build a strong and vibrant 21st century economy. All Americans should have retirement benefits they can count on, not the crumbling casino of retirement overseen by the same Wall Street bankers and financial managers who drove the US economy off the cliff.

And Medicare does not add to the deficit, it is self-funded. The primary challenge for Medicare is that it operates within a market-based health system fraught with runaway health care costs. The most popular and effective solution would be to expand traditional Medicare to every person in the US and ban private health insurance. This would immediately institute proven cost controls and create a system that values health of the population rather than profit. Over time, our Medicare system could be improved. Dean Baker estimates that if our health care costs were brought in line with what other wealthy nations spend, nations who have universal coverage and better health outcomes, we would not have a national deficit.

It's up to us to save Social Security and Medicare. These top CEOs have money and political persuasion. We have the truth on our side and greater numbers of people. Let us raise our voices now for a healthier and more prosperous future for all of us.

Margaret Flowers, MD served as Congressional Fellow for Physicians for a National Health Program and is on the board of Healthcare-Now.
The 6-year term of Bush-appointed Social Security Administration (SSA) Commissioner Michael Astrue finally ended on January 19. He tendered his resignation to the White House on February 8, and Carolyn Colvin was installed 5 days later as Acting Commissioner.

As Principle Deputy Commissioner, Ms. Colvin was next in the line of succession. The President has not yet nominated her, or anyone else, to serve a new 6-year term as Commissioner of Social Security. The Commissioner, Principle Deputy Commissioner, and SSA Inspector General are all subject to Senate confirmation.

It took the Senate two years to confirm Ms. Colvin after Mr. Obama nominated her as Principle Deputy, so it’s anybody’s guess how long it will take for a new Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner to be nominated and confirmed. In the absence of confirmed nominees, the President can name individuals to serve as Acting Commissioner and Principle Deputy.

At least 6 names have been mentioned, but Ms. Colvin and Social Security Works Co-Chair Nancy Altman appear to be the front-runners. Ms. Altman has the support of the AFL-CIO, the Leadership Council of Aging Organizations, and other groups and coalitions that advocate on behalf of the clients served by SSA.

Nancy Altman was the keynote speaker at the Everett Social Security Works Washington Forum, and also at this year’s gathering of American Federation of Government Employee (AFGE) Social Security Administration activists from throughout the country. We were preparing for Capitol Hill visits to inform lawmakers about how staffing cuts and bad management decisions are dismantling service.

Ms. Altman expressed her strong support for community-based service, and also listened and learned from Social Security Administration employees. There is no doubt that she would make a wonderful Commissioner. I asked her how AFGE could form strong coalitions with community organizations to protect and improve Social Security, and she said that we should follow the model created by Social Security Works Washington.

The great unknown is whether Ms. Colvin would restore service; or would continue down the Astrue path of office closings, reduced public hours, and Internet self-disservice. She has had a good working relationship with AFGE in the past, but that is not enough in itself.

PSARA, our labor and community allies and activists who work for the Social Security Administration are determined to see the Agency’s service and management problems fixed. Social Security Administration employees will only find satisfaction in our work when the Social Security Administration can provide high-quality, timely, equitable service to workers and their families, and deliver it through high quality personal face-to-face service when such service is desired.
At the annual Senior Lobby Day, PSARA joins many senior advocacy organizations in Olympia to learn, share information, and meet with their legislators.

For me, it started with getting up before sunrise, dressing for blustery weather, taking a short walk to the carpool meeting spot, (stopping on the way for the essential cup of coffee). Then, getting on the road to Olympia, we reviewed our appointment schedule, our “talking points” and our PSARA legislative agenda, which PSARA members had approved at our fall 2012 Legislative Conference. Since that conference, I know members of the PSARA Governmental Relations committee worked many hours to make the logistical arrangements to get PSARA members to Olympia. They arranged a charter bus, set up car pools and planned details of legislator appointments.

The United Churches building near the Capitol campus was overflowing with senior advocates from all over the state. I spoke with some people who were attending for the first time, and many who had come for years. It was busy and at first seemed chaotic. I appreciated the hosts from the Senior Lobby who were helpful and organized, providing comprehensive packets of information for us, along with directions to make the day go smoothly.

Before our legislator visits, speakers included our new governor, the attorney general, the leaders of DSHS, the Area Agencies on Aging and other organizations involved in advocacy and service to seniors. So many speakers in a short time- it was too much to take in all at once. Fortunately there were plenty of handouts and reports to refer to later.

Over hearty box lunches the PSARA group met to hear from our lobbyist, and review instructions and directions to the legislator’s offices. We shared umbrellas for the short chilly dash over to the Capitol campus. I tried to think of it as an adventure in citizenship rather than an inconvenience. A highlight of the day was watching our own Robby Stern being greeted again and again by lobbyists, legislators, and staff as we walked through the halls of the Legislative building. Apparently it’s one of those places “where everybody knows his name”.

Another highlight for me was listening to our legislators explain the various behind-the-scenes strategies that go into getting a bill passed. I am glad that my own district legislators are already supportive of most of PSARA’s priorities.

We can write to our legislators, phone or email them, but it’s a different experience to visit them in person and more powerful when many groups join together. I know it’s sometimes inconvenient to take time to visit our elected representatives, but I know we do have to go beyond voting. We have to “show up and speak up” for the issues important to us.
Washington Voting Rights Act Will Ensure Fair Representation and Accountable Local Government

By Rich Stolz, Executive Director of OneAmerica and a PSARA member

A key theme that has emerged since the 2012 elections is the growing power of Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, and immigrant voters. In Washington State, minority populations represent the fastest growing demographics. In fact, the growth in communities of color helped the state gain a tenth congressional district in the latest round of redistricting, amplifying the voice of all state residents in Congress. In many local governing bodies across the state, however, there is a dearth of minority representation.

When voters go to the polls, they want to know that they have an equal opportunity to elect the candidate of their choice, regardless of skin color, and have their vote count. The Washington Voting Rights Act (WVRA), HB1413/SB5473, will be an effective tool to ensure fair representation and accountability in local elections – the overriding values of any healthy democracy.

The WVRA looks specifically at polarized voting—where there is a difference in the choice of candidates preferred by voters in a protected class and those preferred by the rest of the electorate—when it denies certain communities an equal opportunity to influence elections. The most common problem with polarized voting is when it is combined with an at-large election system. This allows slim majorities to dominate elections, resulting in significant blocs of voters never having the opportunity to elect leaders who represent their communities.

Here is an example of how it might play out at the local level: imagine that a city elects 10 council members at-large. If 60 percent of its voters continually prefer candidates that oppose funding for social services, then only candidates who run opposed to funding for social services will win and occupy all 10 council seats. So, while 40 percent of voters prefer candidates that support social services, their position will have no representation on the council.

Under the WVRA, that city would be empowered to change to a district-based election system under which the 40 percent minority voting bloc could elect at least some representatives to the council to fight for social service funding and government becomes more accountable.

Upon passage of the WVRA, local jurisdictions would have more flexibility to move from at-large to district-based elections, since there are currently some restrictions on how election systems operate. If a challenge were brought under the WVRA, local jurisdictions would have 45 days to review evidence of polarized voting that denies voters an equal opportunity to influence elections. If convinced, jurisdictions could choose to voluntarily adopt acceptable election systems and avoid litigation. If a jurisdiction chose not to voluntarily conform to the WVRA, litigation would ensue and the courts would determine whether changes to the election system were necessary.

The federal Voting Rights Act has been an important tool in defense of voting rights for years, but it has come under attack and may be struck down altogether. The WVRA is necessary to ensure that Washington State continues to protect fair representation for all communities.

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PSARA Forms New Committee on the Threat to the Environment

While continuing the economic and social justice work we already do, PSARA will take an active role in challenging the causes of global climate change. We have formed a standing committee to work on the growing threat to our future posed by global climate change, chaired by Executive Board members Tom Lux and Kristen Beifus.

Our efforts will include working with allies to support concrete programs whose goal is to create good family wage jobs that are consistent with the need to confront the challenges of climate change.

The first meeting of the PSARA Committee on the Environment will be 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m., Thursday, March 14, Seattle Labor Temple, 2800 First AV, Room 226, Seattle. All interested members of PSARA are welcome.
Meetings and Events

PSARA Government Relations Committee: 12:30 – 2 p.m., Wednesday, March 13, Seattle Labor Temple, Room 226, 2800 First AV, Seattle. All members welcome to help guide PSARA in our efforts to influence policy at the federal, state & local level.

PSARA Environmental Committee: 10a.m. – 11:30a.m., Thursday, March 14, Seattle Labor Temple, 2800 1st Ave, Room 226, Seattle. All members welcome as PSARA kicks off our Environmental Committee. We will formulate PSARA’s policies and actions related to the crisis created by climate change & the need to create good union family wage green jobs.

PSARA Education Committee: 1pm-2:30pm, Thursday, March 14, Seattle Labor Temple, 2800 1st Ave, Room 226, Seattle. Join with PSARA members as we educate members of our community about the root causes of economic injustice and how we can organize for a brighter and more secure future for all.

PSARA Executive Board Meeting: 1p.m. – 3p.m., Thursday, March 21, Central Area Senior Center, 500 30th Avenue S., Seattle. All PSARA members are welcome.

Green Lake Discussion Group: 1 p.m. – 2:30 p.m., Thursday, March 28, Green Lake Library, 7354 East Green Lake Drive N., Seattle. PSARA Outreach Committee led discussion group discussing issues determined by participants.

Caring Across Generations 1st Annual Lobby Day: 10a.m. – 3:30p.m., Thursday, March 28, Colombia Room, Washington State Capitol, Olympia, WA. Transportation, lunch, childcare & interpretation provided. Join people from across the state to talk to our lawmakers about Caring Across Generations. RSVP to president@psara.org or call the PSARA office, (206)448-9646