PSARA endorses marriage equality

By Mike Andrew

The PSARA Board endorsed equal marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples at its January 31 meeting.

PSARA joins the Washington State Labor Council, Martin Luther King County and Pierce County Labor Councils, and many unions, churches, and community organizations in supporting marriage equality.

While many states – including Washington – have laws that give rights to committed gay and lesbian couples, and the Obama administration has issued directives that ensure fairer treatment of same-sex couples when they encounter federal agencies, they still face many obstacles that married opposite-sex couples do not.

Even where gay and lesbian couples are allowed “domestic partnership” rights, as in Washington, or “civil unions” as in some other states, these arrangements are still “separate but equal” institutions that do not give committed

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The Older Americans Act: Umbrella for millions

By Will Parry

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, long a champion of senior needs, has introduced S. 2037, reauthorizing the Older Americans Act and calling for expanded levels of funding to enable aging agencies to implement the law’s essential mission.

The Vermont Independent chairs the Senate subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging, which is charged with shepherding the reauthorization.

Originally enacted in 1965, the Older Americans Act (OAA) is a broad federal charter of rights, services and protections provided to older men and women, persons with disabilities, and family caregivers.

The periodic reauthorization of the OAA is accompanied by a nationwide critical review of its operations, involving thousands of persons active in the field of aging. Over the past year, the Administration on Aging conducted more than 60 reauthorization “listening sessions” throughout the country, as well as receiving the online ideas and proposals of individual seniors, family members and caregivers and their organizations.

Programs supported through the OAA include Meals on Wheels and congregate nutrition, a senior jobs program, the long-term care ombudsman program, services to prevent the abuse, neglect or exploitation of older persons, and the National Family Caregiver Support Program.

“These (OAA) services complement medical and health care systems, help to prevent hospital readmissions, provide transport to doctor appointments, and support some of life’s most basic functions, such as assistance to elders in their homes by delivering or preparing meals, or helping them with bathing,” said Kathy Greenlee, Assistant Secretary for Aging.

All OAA programs are administered at the state and local level by a nationwide network of “area agencies on aging.”

The assistance provided under the OAA enables millions of seniors to remain independent in their homes and communities. Over the past year alone, nearly 11 million older Americans and their family caregivers have been supported through the OAA’s comprehensive home and community-based programs.

Senator Sanders emphasized that programs meeting the basic needs of seniors save billions of taxpayer dollars by reducing or eliminating the often unnecessary and always costly health care and other expenses of nursing homes and other institutional settings.

Advocates contend that increases in funding for the program’s invaluable services are long overdue. The annual appropriation for OAA programs was cut from $2.3 billion in 2010 to $1.9 billion in 2011, despite the rapidly growing need.

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Dear Member:
Please check the address label on the back page of your Retiree Advocate. See the date on the label? When that date is printed in red, it’s time to renew your membership. Your prompt renewal saves us the cost of mailing reminder letters.

Thank you!

Continued on page 3
Discussions start March 22
at Green Lake Public Library

PSARA’s Community Outreach Committee is launching a new seniors discussion group at Seattle’s Green Lake Public Library – and you’re invited.

The first two sessions will be held from 1 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. on the fourth Thursdays of March and April – that’s Thursday, March 22, and Thursday, April 26. The Green Lake Library is at 7364 East Green Lake Drive North. For information, see www.psara.org or contact Susan Levy at sjlevy.01@gmail.com.

“Topics can range across all senior issues and concerns, from transportation to health care and the impact of budget cuts,” said the Outreach Committee’s Levy. “The participating seniors will decide. Let’s meet and discuss what we all have in common and what we can create together.”

The Green Lake Library group is the second PSARA-sponsored discussion group, following the successful current events group at the Greenwood Community Senior Center, whose next meeting is at 1 p.m. Thursday, March 8, at the senior center, 525 North 85th Street in Seattle.

Stay tuned with PSARA listserv

The PSARA listserv is a free electronic service that helps keep our calendars organized without overwhelming our email inboxes.

Sign up and you’ll get just two kinds of messages: Timely reminders of the important events listed in the “Meetings/Events” column in the Retiree Advocate. And the information you’ll need on late-breaking events and activities that come up between issues of the newsletter.

Simply call the office at (206) 448-9646, or email president@psara.org and ask to be on the listserv. That’s all it takes.

Lots of interesting stuff coming up! Don’t miss out!

Mystery message and a secret word...

M is for MEMBERS. Every new member adds muscle.
E is for the EDGE we get over the AARP guy next door.
M is for MORE members – the potential is inexhaustible.
B is for BOLD and BRAVE – even BODACIOUS! That’s us!
E is for EXTRAORDINARY. That, too, is us!
R is for READERS. Readers develop into activists!
S is for SHARE. Let a friend read the Advocate. It’s a persuader!
H is for HAPPY, when the Advocate hits her mailbox each month.
I is for the INITIATIVE you show in signing up that new member.
P is for PAGE NINE and its magic, easy-to-use coupon. Check it out!

Now, Dear Reader, find the secret $15 word hidden in this month’s mystery message – and sign up that new member TODAY!

-- The Editor
PSARA endorses marriage equality

Continued from page 1

same-sex couples the full recognition that marriage does.

And while Washington recognizes same-sex relationships that are legal in other states and accords them the same status as in-state domestic partners, these “separate but equal” arrangements are not necessarily transferable to other jurisdictions, so a couple who are in a domestic partnership in Washington, let’s say, may find that in Missouri they have the same legal status as strangers.

That’s why equal rights for gay and lesbian couples is a critical civil rights issue. And it’s one that is taking center stage in U.S. politics.

Governor Christine Gregoire signed Washington’s marriage equality law on February 14, after it had been passed by the legislature. Washington is the seventh state to give full equality to gay and lesbian partners. Opponents of equality have filed a referendum to overturn the new law and are collecting signatures to put it on the ballot in November.

If it reaches the ballot, Referendum 74 will ask voters to approve or reject marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples.

In Maryland, the legislature has passed a similar law, giving equal marriage rights to same-sex couples. Gov. Martin O’Malley, who made the new law the centerpiece of his legislative agenda, has promised to sign it. New Jersey’s legislature also passed a marriage equality law, but Gov. Chris Christie – a Republican Vice Presidential hopeful – vetoed it.

Activists in Maine have succeeded in their petition campaign to get a marriage equality initiative on their state ballot in November. Maine’s legislature passed marriage equality in 2009 and Maine’s governor signed it, but the law was reversed by a state-wide referendum, much like Proposition 8 in California.

Prop 8 itself was declared unconstitutional by a Ninth Circuit Court panel on February 7. The court ruled that there could be no rational basis to take away marriage rights from one group of people simply because of their sexual orientation.

Finally, a U.S. District Court judge in San Francisco ruled that the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) violates the Fifth Amendment guarantees of due process and equal protection.

DOMA prohibits the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages even if they are legal in the states or territories where they are performed.

One of the consequences of DOMA is that gay and lesbian couples can’t count on Social Security survivor benefits, or federally administered pension benefits if one of the partners dies. Federal employees have been denied healthcare, and pension benefits for their spouses, even if they have been legally married in the states where they live.

The Obama administration has also come to the conclusion that DOMA is unconstitutional and no longer defends it in court. In the San Francisco case, DOMA was defended only by a special attorney hired by House Speaker John Boehner (at taxpayer expense, by the way) to preserve unequal treatment of gay and lesbian couples.

Washington United for Marriage is the coalition that has been formed to support marriage equality when and if it goes on the November ballot. For a complete list of organizations supporting equal rights for same-sex couples, visit their website: www.washingtonunitedformarriage.org.

Umbrella for millions

Continued from page 1

The Leadership Council of Aging Organizations (LCAO), representing some 66 organizations, has told Congress it “strongly believes that increasing the authorized funding for all titles of the OAA is necessary.”

The Sanders bill would increase funding across the board.

In its detailed message to Congress, the Leadership Council also urged that “where possible in the OAA, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults should be included as a vulnerable population with greatest social need as a result of a lifetime of bigotry, stigma and discrimination.”

The needs of all underserved and vulnerable communities of older adults “should be explicitly addressed in the OAA in ways that account for their unique family structures and collective experiences. Terms such as ‘adult care,’ ‘family,’ ‘family caregiver,’ ‘spouse,’ ‘underserved area,’ ‘vulnerable elder’ and ‘family violence’ should be defined to account for the variety of family and care structures of all racial and ethnic communities, and LGBT communities,” the Leadership Council said.

Sanders’ legislation also instructs the Bureau of Labor Statistics to improve the way it calculates the budgets of the elderly by including medical and prescription drug costs so that annual cost-of-living adjustments will more accurately reflect seniors’ actual expenditures.

The Alliance for Retired Americans welcomed Sanders’ bill as “vital to the health and economic security of millions of older Americans and their families.”

“For years, OAA funding has not kept pace with inflation or the growing population of individuals eligible for services,” ARA President Barbara Easterling wrote Sanders. “Your legislation, with enhanced funding for these critical programs, will significantly address the shortfall.”

Assistant Secretary Greenlee said need for OAA support is growing rapidly. “Every day, more than 9,000 baby boomers turn 65. In just four years, the population aged 60 and older will increase from 57 million to 65.7 million,” Greenlee said.
Scrap the Cap!’ to preserve and strengthen Social Security!

By Robby Stern

Responding to the economic “deal” reached in Congress last month extending the Social Security payroll tax holiday, Senator Tom Harkin said, “I never thought I would live to see the day when a Democratic president would agree to put Social Security in this kind of jeopardy.”

The “deal” continues until the end of 2012 the cut that has reduced the employee share of the payroll tax from 6.2% to 4.2%. It requires that 100% of the cut, which began with the tax holiday in 2010, is to be compensated for by transferring the approximately $225 billion combined two-year amount of the cut from the general fund to the Social Security Trust Fund.

The political reality is that the longer the payroll tax holiday is extended, the harder it will be to restore the tax to the 6.2% rate. Social Security has always had standing as a unique government program with its own dedicated revenue stream. Requiring the general fund to reimburse the Social Security Trust Fund allows the enemies of Social Security to point to Social Security as one of the sources of the deficit. They can actually identify the $225 billion that the general fund will be reimbursing the Social Security Trust Fund.

The extension of the tax holiday, along with the proposed COLA cut (otherwise known as the Chained CPI), the threat to raise the retirement age, and the means testing of Social Security -- all require that Social Security advocates go on a multi-year offensive.

The broader goal of PSARA as an organization is to help build strong families and a better future for ourselves, our children and grandchildren, and the generations to come. We work together to make things better, and try to look out for each other. We are determined to make sure that families and communities have what they need and we demand that government work for the people and not just for the interest of the few.

The ongoing threats to Social Security promise greater suffering for families because they will not have what they need to live with dignity and respect. Our politicians are all too willing to compromise the needs of the 99% for corporate and Wall Street interests. Wall Street would like nothing better than to get its hands on some portion of the contributions to Social Security.

The $110,100 income cap beyond which no Social Security taxes are paid is arbitrary and unfair. Our campaign to “scrap the cap,” will require that high earners pay their fair share. We want to insure that Social Security will be there for generations to come. The additional revenue gained by applying the payroll tax to all income would guarantee the long-term solvency of the fund. It would also enable us to make Social Security even stronger.

We want to insure that the Social Security program will be there for generations to come. Getting rid of the income cap will allow us to actually strengthen Social Security and make it better. The Social Security Works WA Coalition has proposed these improvements, all made possible by scrapping the cap:

1. Increasing benefits for the lowest income earners.
2. Increasing benefits for surviving spouses. This will help low-income and moderate-income widows and widowers.
3. Providing family care credits for individuals (mostly women) who leave the work force to take care of family members. (Alternatively, we could reduce the calculation of benefits from the highest 35 years to the highest 30 years in the workforce.)
4. Restore Social Security benefits up to age 22 to young people attending college who suffer the death of a parent or have parents on Social Security. This benefit existed prior to the “reforms” in the 1980s.

We look forward to working with our members in this historic multi-year campaign. Talk to others about the fight to strengthen Social Security. Invite us to speak to your organizations or religious institutions.

We’re fighting to make sure families have what they need. The starting point is to “scrap the cap.” Let’s take the offensive together!
For caregivers – and for all who need care

By Will Parry

A spirited assembly of caregivers, activists and advocates, more than 200 strong, launched a “Caring Across Generations” campaign in Seattle at the Greenwood Senior Center February 11.

Sponsored by the 23 participating organizations of the Seattle Care Council, the event brought together women and men diverse in ages, faiths and cultures, but united in support of a common goal: To elevate the vital work of caregiving to its proper place in society.

The Puget Sound Alliance for Retired Americans strongly supports the campaign. It sent a substantial delegation to the founding event.

The Seattle event followed a founding national Care Congress in July in Washington, DC. Local and regional Care Congresses are to be held in New York City, San Francisco, Boston and other cities.

In Seattle, an initial goal will be formal recognition of the increasingly critical role of caregiving with passage of a City Council resolution. Councilmembers Nick Licatsa and Mike O’Brien were on hand at the Seattle Congress to express their support for the Seattle Care Council’s work.

The birth of the new movement reflects a recognition that care workers look after some of the most vulnerable populations in our country, people of all ages with disabilities and the infirm elderly.

Caregivers are also part of an extremely vulnerable work force. Millions of care workers and other domestic workers lack the basic legal protections of U.S. labor law, as well as the protection of a union. Substandard pay and lack of essential benefits drive many into poverty.

Today’s critical shortage of caregivers can only worsen with an aging population unless corrective measures are taken. Caring Across Generations foresees a years-long transformative crusade to achieve five policy goals:

• The creation of new, quality jobs in home care.
• Labor standards and improved job quality, both for the existing jobs and for the new jobs.
• Training and career ladders for home care workers.
• A new visa category and path to citizenship for immigrant care workers.
• Support for individuals and families who need it, including a matching registry, and the creation and maintenance of new funding sources.

At the national level, Caring Across Generations is currently rallying support for proposed Labor Department regulations that would bring an additional two million home care workers under the minimum wage and overtime provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Expected this summer is a formal U.S. Senate resolution of support for the Caring Across Generations agenda, which will be the precursor to legislation embodying the policy goals of the campaign. Washington Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell will be urged to sponsor both the Senate resolution and the subsequent implementing legislation.

We buttonhole our legislators

More than 300 determined senior citizen lobbyists swarmed Capitol offices February 27, buttonholing legislators on critical issues in the annual Senior Lobby Day.

The crowd that assembled in the sanctuary of Olympia’s United Churches to hear Governor Christine Gregoire and other speakers included a contingent of more than 50 members of the Puget Sound Alliance for Retired Americans – a record turnout for our organization.

After a morning of issues briefings, the activist seniors spent a full afternoon in face-to-face lobbying with legislators and their staffs.

The PSARA group, and many others, stressed the urgency of new revenue to restore funding for the vital programs that have been the victims of deep budget cuts in recent sessions.

The PSARA members also emphasized their support for the establishment of a state bank, and for the inclusion of a public option in the health care exchanges that will become operative in 2014.
Learning from the past to build a brighter future

By Mark M. McDermott

“Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Those who do not remember their past are condemned to repeat their mistakes.”

-- George Santayana

Record inequality of income and wealth. Tens of millions suffer and fear personal economic disasters while the 1% live in luxury. Millions have lost their homes; millions more are threatened with foreclosure. Our tax system favors the wealthy and Corporate America at the expense of the people. Powerful banks and financial institutions threaten our way of life while unions are under attack from right-wing elected officials backed by the deep pockets of Corporate America.

Congress and the Supreme Court serve the interests of the 1% while blocking the reforms needed to reestablish justice and fairness. Tens of millions lack jobs and health insurance and millions more struggle to feed themselves. Our youth face growing challenges of finding a good job and paying for college. Millions worry about an adequate income in retirement. People of color and immigrants still lagged.

Mark McDermott

In the midst of the Great Depression, through unprecedented economic and political organizing, people came together to win a better future. The historic people’s victories of the New Deal in the 1930’s and the Great Society of the 1960’s ushered in the greatest period of shared economic prosperity in our history. People of color, women and immigrants still lagged, but for four full decades, we were moving toward justice and a brighter future.

Over the past three decades, Corporate America and its Republican and Democratic allies have stolen the broadly shared prosperity of the 1940s through the 1970s, and have given us an increasingly insecure and unjust present and future. Today we must take our country back from Corporate America and its political allies.

It is critical that we learn from the successes and failures of those who built the foundations of a more just and hopeful nation in the 1930s and 1960s. We also need to understand the shrewd strategies used by Corporate America and its political allies to steal our shared prosperity and darken our future. One of their standard methods is to divide working people by playing the blame game.

PSARA is sponsoring a two-hour interactive economic workshop for its members to learn more about the important historical lessons to be drawn from our victories and defeats in the long road toward justice. Most of all, the workshop provides an opportunity to discuss the broader strategies we need to win a brighter future.

To quote the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “The moral arc of the universe is long and it bends toward freedom.” I add: “But only if the people bend it.” This is our mission. Come to the workshop. Together we’ll shape the way forward.

Fukushima’s U.S. death toll

Carried across the full breadth of the Pacific Ocean, fallout from the March 11 Fukushima nuclear disaster has accounted for an estimated 14,000 excess deaths in the United States.

That’s the finding in a peer-reviewed article by epidemiologist Joseph Mangano and internist and toxicologist Janette Sherman, published in the December edition of the International Journal of Health Services.

Their estimate of 14,000 excess U.S. deaths is comparable to the estimated 16,500 excess deaths in Russia in the 17 weeks following the Chernobyl meltdown in 1986.

Since the meltdown, the Environmental Protection Agency has found levels of radiation in air, water and milk in some cases hundreds of times higher than normal in cities across the western U.S.

The normal level of Iodine-131 in precipitation (rainfall) is about 2 picocuries per liter. The post-Fukushima level in picocuries in Boise was 390; in Kansas City, 200; in Salt Lake City, 190; in Olympia, 125.

Mangano, the study’s co-author, said that the findings “are important to the current debate about whether to build new reactors and how long to keep the aging ones in operation.”
Port truckers call a truce, return to work

By Mike Andrew

Four hundred short-haul truckers who move freight from the Port of Seattle to local customers returned to work February 14 after shutting down the Port for more than two weeks.

Truck driver Demeke Meconnen, one of the leaders of the walkout, said the group saw that employers were starting to lose their accounts, so drivers agreed to move cargo again while continuing to push for changes.

All trucking firms, except one – Pacer – recently sat down for talks with the drivers, he said.

"This is not only about the money. We're talking about safety, respect, dignity, and fairness," Meconnen said. "All the drivers are very happy for what they have done."

The drivers had not moved freight since January 30, when 200 of them drove to Olympia to testify at a legislative hearing about unsafe conditions at their jobs. They lobbied for passage of HB 2395/SB 6461 which would allow them to be classified as employees of the trucking companies.

Because Port of Seattle truckers are currently misclassified as “independent contractors” they are denied basic protections that employees are guaranteed under law. Among other rights denied to them is the right to organize a union and bargain collectively for better pay and working conditions. There is certainly plenty to bargain about.

“In order to get a load,” one driver said, “you have to get up early, at four o’clock in the morning. You pull yourself up into the cab of your truck while you’re still half-awake – you don’t even see your family before you leave. Then you go down to the harbor and get into the lines. And you wait. Finally, you get to the head of the line, and you get a container. Then you’re on the freeway, making time as fast as you can, to deliver it to the customer. When you get there, you usually have to wait to unload as well, before you go back down to the harbor for another pick up. No one pays you for all those hours of waiting.”

“When we stay at a terminal we don’t get paid,” said another driver, Michael Kidane. “When we haul heavy loads or reefers (refrigerated containers), we don’t get paid for that. When we return a chassis, we don’t get paid. The company gets paid for all this, but we don’t.”

“We have to pay for insurance, fuel, dispatch fees, $161-a-month tonnage fees and repairs,” he added. “We work for below-the-minimum wage and we have families to feed and mortgages to pay. ”

The biggest issue is the conditions.

“We are considered like containers too, thrown out after we’re used,” Kidane said. “But I’m a human being, and I want them to see me and treat me like a human being.”

Truckers also complained about derogatory terms directed at them on the job, including “baby” and “monkey.” Some said it was the first time in their lives they had encountered naked racism.

“We are mostly immigrants and mostly blacks,” one driver, Abdi, said. “I come from Somalia. Nobody even knows the word discrimination back there. But over here, I see discrimination when something wrong is happening. And everything wrong is happening in the Port of Seattle. We may come from countries far away, but we still have rights.”

“There are white drivers, black drivers, Indians, Chinese, and Africans. They call all of us a bunch of monkeys,” said another driver, Abdulkadir Ali.

“We understand,” Jaswinder Singh said, “and we are not scared….We come from India, and we fought there against the British and kicked them out. We are fighting for the same thing here – integrity and simple respect and fairness. We believe in democracy, and we will fight peacefully, the right way.”

Some employers have agreed to raise the pay per load to $44, to compensate drivers stuck in line more than an hour, and to pay for some trips drivers make when they have no load.

A solid core of several hundred truckers now has the experience of shutting down their workplace for two weeks, forming flying squads to deal with emergencies, and talking to legislators and reporters.

More than that, they have built incredible unity across racial and ethnic lines to unite people whose native languages might be Amharic, Somali, Urdu, or English.

And they have mobilized the support of a broader community. Their February 6 rally drew allies from the Washington State Labor Council, Unite H.E.R.E. United Food & Commercial Workers, Teamsters and other unions, PSARA, Puget Sound Stage, and Seattle Solidarity Network.
On the path to affordable health coverage

By Roberta Riley

Eight years ago, self-employed landscaper Ingrid Gordon had to make a tough call. "It was a choice between food and health insurance—and food won." When her health insurance premiums increased to $1,000 a year, Ingrid was forced to join the more than one million uninsured Washington residents.

At first blush, it’s hard to feel much sympathy if, like me, you pay far more than this for private health insurance. But Ingrid has turned me around. No one works harder than Ingrid. At 47, she can dig up the roots of a tree stump or transplant ten bushes faster than I can brew a pot of coffee and skim the morning headlines. Ingrid knows first-hand why insurance is important. In 2004, she stumbled down her steps, ended up in the emergency room and faced $26,000 in medical bills – more than her annual salary.

But like many landscapers, house cleaners, childcare workers, barbers, taxi drivers, waitresses and other hard-working people, Ingrid is too young for Medicare, earns slightly too much to qualify for Medicaid, and simply cannot afford private insurance. The current system leaves Ingrid few options.

Two years ago, as federal lawmakers tussled over national health reform, our own Senator Maria Cantwell realized that millions of Ingrids struggle to make ends meet. Senator Cantwell also recognized that for health reform to succeed, it would be critical to cover as many people as possible. Otherwise, as more uninsured people resort to emergency rooms, health costs climb, causing premiums for everyone else to soar. And so our state’s junior senator pulled out all the stops to persuade her colleagues to adopt a little-known provision in the Affordable Care Act, referred to as “Health Reform’s Best-Kept Secret” – the Federal Basic Health Option.

A few weeks ago, Senator Cantwell shared her perspective with me. Back when she served as a state legislator, she helped launch our state’s Basic Health Plan to offer more affordable coverage to low-income people. She learned that states can successfully administer quality, affordable health insurance. When federal health reform finally came around, she knew that even with the subsidies Congress was considering, many with limited income would still have trouble affording coverage. So she knocked on her colleagues’ doors and persuaded them to make sure that health care reform created the opportunity for Washington and other states to expand the Basic Health model.

Now, it’s up to our state lawmakers to adopt the Federal Basic Health Option. It’s tailor-made to lift our state Basic Health Plan off the chopping block of state budget cuts, to rebuild it with federal funding, and to make it a sustainable model for the nation.

Here’s how it would work: Starting in 2014, many Washington State residents will be able to buy health coverage through a new insurance marketplace, the “Exchange.” People earning less than 400% of the federal poverty level can receive federal subsidies to make this coverage more affordable. The problem is that for those earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level (roughly $38,000 for a family of three); these subsidies may not be enough for a family, struggling to budget for essentials like rent and heat, to afford coverage.

If our state opts to have a federal Basic Health Program in addition to the Exchange, the state would pool federal subsidies for those earning less than 200% of federal poverty level and cover these individuals directly through a state-administered program. As with our current Basic Health Program, the state could eliminate marketing and overhead costs – and apply the savings toward providing more affordable, quality coverage.

As one of 185,000 Washington residents who would qualify for the Basic Health Option, Ingrid is urging state legislators to take up the option as a companion program to our Exchange. Please join her. Support House Bill 2319 (“Implementing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act”), a bill that would set up our state exchange, implement market reforms to rein in unfair practices by the insurance industry, and set the state on a path toward the Federal Basic Health Option.

The bill has passed the House and is under consideration in the Senate. If it passes, it will help people like Ingrid secure health insurance – and it will reduce the cost of health care for all of us.
April training for 100,000 activists

April, 2012, will bring more than the annual golden burst of daffodils. April will bring a campaign by more than 40 labor and community organizations with an historic objective: In a seven-day period, from April 9 to April 15, they intend to train 100,000 Americans for non-violent direct action.

An open letter to America, signed by leaders of the 40 participating organizations, declares that “we will gather across America, 100,000 strong, in homes, places of worship, campuses and the streets, to join together in the work of reclaiming our country.”

In training sessions, the 100,000 will explore the ugly reality of our corporate-dominated economy, who’s responsible, and what a popular movement, using proven techniques of non-violent direct action, can do about it.

“We are at a crossroads in our country,” the open letter said. “We have a choice to make. Greater wealth for a few or opportunity for many. Tax breaks for the richest or a fair shot for the rest of us. A government that can be bought up by the highest bidder, or a democracy that is truly of the people, by the people, and for the people. The choice is in our hands.

“We will reshape our country with our own hands and feet, bodies and hearts…to forge a new destiny, one block, one neighborhood, one city, one state at a time.”

Signing the letter representing labor were leaders of the Teachers, Communications Workers, Service Employees, UNITE-HERE, Auto Workers, and Steelworkers. Other signers included the Campaign for America’s Future, Fuse, Greenpeace, Jobs With Justice, MoveOn, Progressive Democrats of America, Rainforest Action Network, U.S. Student Association, and the Working Families Party.

-- Will Parry

More for the military, less for home heating

Since 1981, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, has provided first-come, first-served, lump-sum cash to help qualifying households heat their homes during the cold winter months.

Generally the aid amounts to a couple of hundred dollars a year. When the funding runs out, any remaining families are left out in the cold, waiting for warmer spring weather.

LIHEAP funding for Fiscal Year 2011 was $4.7 billion. Obama’s 2012 budget cut that back to $2.57 billion. The 45 percent reduction was by far the largest cut in the program’s 30-year history.

Meanwhile, Congress raised military spending for 2012 by $5.6 billion.

“By knocking a billion off the increase it gave the Pentagon,” Daily Kos commented, “Congress could have frozen the LIHEAP budget at the current (2011) level. It decided to freeze some people on fixed incomes instead. In the name of austerity, of course.”

Fighting to save Investment Trust bill

Representative Bob Hasegawa, the prime mover behind legislation to establish the Washington Investment Trust (WIT), popularly known as the state bank, is determined to keep the issue alive and to explore ways to move the bill forward.

“I’m continuing to work the bill,” Hasegawa said, despite the fact that neither HB 2434 nor the Senate companion bill, SB 6310, made it out of committee by the February 14 cutoff date and are therefore considered dead for the session.

Hasegawa described the trust as “one of those tools that will help us create a sound financial future for the state,” providing such “clear and tangible benefits as savings on interest for infrastructure projects, expanded borrowing power for more capital projects, more jobs, and lower interest rates on student loans.”

He gave this specific example of what the trust could do:

“If the trust were capitalized at $1 billion and it turns over on average every 24 months, it could finance $2 billion of construction every 48 months. By contrast, $1 billion in bonds can only finance $1 billion in construction over the 20 to 25-year repayment period of the bonds.”

“I’m committed to the fight to move the bill forward this session,” Hasegawa said. “In the meantime, it will be important for folks in the communities to spread the word about what the WIT could do for the economy of our state.”

http://www.psara.org/membership.pdf
Overheard. . .

The country is governed for the richest, for the corporations, the bankers, the land speculators, and by the exploiters of labor...The majority of mankind is ground down by industrial oppression in order that the small remnant may live at ease.

-- Helen Keller

Oil giant BP...

... reported profits of $7.7 billion for the last quarter of 2011, two years after it caused the worst oil spill in history. While BP was netting its billions, fishermen were netting deformed, discolored shrimp, even shrimp without eyes, from the stricken Gulf of Mexico.