

the law of the land for nearly a decade. Which group of federal workers has suffered this unthinkable injustice? None other than the 39,000 nurses who work for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and have devoted their careers to caring for our nation's ailing veterans.

In the 101st Congress, the House and Senate passed the Nurse Pay Act, well-intended legislation that was designed to ease a national nursing shortage by allowing VA medical center directors to forgo the annual general schedule (GS) pay schedule that applies to virtually all federal employees. In theory, this new law enabled directors to give nurses higher annual raises than other federal workers so they could recruit and retain a quality workforce. Unfortunately, as soon as the national nurse shortage eased, the intent of the law was manipulated and directors started using their discretion to deny raises, provide tiny raises, and even reduce pay rates.

Today, I introduced the VA Nurse Appreciation Act of 1999, legislation that will rectify the pay injustice VA nurses have suffered. This legislation will ensure that Title 38 VA nurses receive the annual GS increase plus locality pay so they will be on equal footing with other federal workers in their area. It will also give the VA Secretary the discretion to increase pay, or delegate this authority to directors, if they have trouble recruiting or retaining quality nurses.

In the last few years some congressional attention has been focused on the VA nurse problem, and the VA has quietly "encouraged" directors to give raises. Still, VA nurses have fared far worse than other federal workers. Overall, the average annual increase for VA nurses was 50% lower than the standard GS increase in 1996; 60% lower in 1997; 25% lower in 1998; and about 17% lower in 1999.

Furthermore, abuse from the Nurse Pay Act is widespread and knows no geographic boundaries. From 1996-1999, nurses at 16 different VA medical centers had their pay rates reduced by as much as 8% while other federal workers received annual GS increases ranging from 2.4% to 3.6%. In addition, from 1996-1999, NO raises were given to Grade I, II or III nurses (statistically 98% of the VA nurse workforce) at about 80 VA medical centers around the country. Worse still, some nurses go several years without raises, such as in Long Beach, CA, where VA nurses received no raises in 1996, 1997, 1998 or 1999. At other centers, meanwhile, nurses have received embarrassingly low annual increases—often 1% or lower.

Mr. Speaker, the Nurse Pay Act deserves credit for ending a nursing shortage and making salaries competitive. For example, in its first year nurse pay increased by at least 20% at 82% of all VA medical centers. Unfortunately, the well-intentioned measure's locality-based pay system eventually ended up punishing many of the 39,000 VA nurses.

Our VA nurses deserve praise for standing by our nation's veterans. Many could have sought higher paying jobs in the private sector, jobs that offer annual increases and signing bonuses. Instead, most have chosen to stay with the VA because they care deeply for our ailing veterans and enjoy a sense of reward and patriotism from their specialized work. In fact, most VA nurses have devoted their entire careers to caring for our nation's veterans. The average VA nurse is a 47-year-old female with 11 years tenure.

As a Congress we strive to take care of our veterans. Therefore, we should feel embarrassed that we haven't taken better care of the dedicated nurses who care for our veterans. The Congress never meant to create a mechanism where a VA nurse could receive an annual raise worth 92 cents a week before taxes or go several years without a raise. It's no way to treat those who care for our nation's veterans, and we have an obligation to fix it.

Mr. Speaker, our VA nurses perform a vital service for our Nation's veterans with great care, professionalism, and compassion. We now have an opportunity to demonstrate to our nurses that they are truly appreciated by passing the VA Nurse Appreciation Act of 1999.

CONGRATULATIONS TO NATALIA TORO

HON. MARK UDALL

OF COLORADO

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

Mr. UDALL of Colorado. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor Natalia Toro, who took top honors in the Intel Science Talent Search. Ms. Toro is a 14 year-old senior at Fairview High School in Boulder, Colorado.

In winning this prestigious award, Natalia bested 40 finalists, who were selected from a nationwide pool of 300 semi-finalists. In addition, she is the youngest winner ever of the Intel Science Talent Search.

Ms. Toro's entry was a physics project in which she studied oscillation of neutrinos, the most elusive of subatomic particles. She completed her research on this subject while participating in the Research Science Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology last summer.

While I take pride in highlighting Ms. Toro's achievement in this competition, I am equally happy to salute her love of science and learning. I firmly believe that we can offer our children no greater gift than to instill in them a love of learning. The Toros are an example of how parental involvement can play a critical role in a child's intellectual development, as well as the child's overall success in life.

Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pride to share with my fellow members of the House of Representatives the outstanding achievement of Natalia Toro. I would like to acknowledge her parents, Beatriz and Gabriel Toro, for inspiring her thirst for knowledge. The Denver Post recently highlighted Natalia's achievement. Mr. Speaker I submit a Denver Post article to be included in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD.

[From the Denver Post, July 14, 1998]

THE SCIENCE OF NURTURING

Congratulations to Natalia Toro, who at age 14 already has become a role model, especially for other first-generation American youths.

Natalia's proficiency in mathematics and science propelled her into first place in the Intel Science Talent Search for her work in high-energy physics. She is the youngest winner ever in the 58-year-old contest formerly run by Westinghouse.

With her prize \$50,000 scholarship, the Fairview High senior now plans to attend either Stanford University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the California Institute of Technology.

How did this daughter of Colombian immigrants achieve academic excellence?

Her mother credits Natalia's natural curiosity.

"She's very curious. And she's a hard-working person, and I think she really has a passion for learning. I don't think we did anything special," says Beatriz Toro.

But while Natalia's parents won't take credit for her accomplishments, they surely fueled her love of learning.

Beatriz and Gabriel Toro came to America from Colombia in 1979. They chose to teach their only child English as her first language. She learned Spanish later "with our help," her mother says, and is fluent in both.

Toro, a civil engineer, and his wife, who has degrees in psychology and nursing, sent Natalia to the small, private Bixby Elementary School in Boulder, then to the public Fairview. She also has attended classes at the University of Colorado.

"Those schools, they did their part with my daughter," Mrs. Toro says.

But the parents did their part, too. When Natalia asked questions, they tried to answer them. When they didn't know the answers, they headed to the library to find the answers.

"I think the most important thing is that your kids are happy," Mrs. Toro says. "When you're telling the kid, 'You have to do this and you have to do that,' I don't think it works. I wouldn't push a child."

"It sounds funny, but I didn't do anything special with my daughter."

That depends on what constitutes "special."

Not all parents take a child's questions seriously enough to research until they find the answers. But doing so surely send the message that learning is fun.

Not all immigrants are able to make sure their children learn English before the parents' native language. But doing so surely eases a child's way through U.S. schools.

And not all families place a priority on happiness. But it seems only natural that a happy child would be a curious, alert and motivated child.

We salute Natalia for the path she has taken, and we commend her parents and her schools for helping her to find that path. This is a girl who does Colorado proud.

SERVICEMEMBERS EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY ACT OF 1999

HON. BOB STUMP

OF ARIZONA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

Mr. STUMP. Mr. Speaker, on March 18, 1999, I introduced H.R. 1182, the Servicemembers Educational Opportunity Act of 1999, along with Mr. SPENCE, Mr. SMITH of New Jersey, Mr. QUINN, Mr. EVERETT, Mr. HAYWORTH, Ms. CHENOWETH, Mr. LAHOOD, Mr. HANSEN, Mr. MCKEON, Mr. GIBBONS, Mr. TALENT, and Mr. BILIRAKIS. This measure would enhance benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill for persons who enlist in the armed services for 4 years of active duty service or reenlist for 4 years of such service effective October 1, 1999.

In exchange for a 4-year enlistment or reenlistment, individuals would receive an enhanced Montgomery GI Bill that would (a) pay 90 percent of the costs of tuition and fees, (b) pay a sum equal to the reasonable costs of books and supplies, (c) pay a monthly stipend of \$600 per month for full-time enrollment (or