

on that committee worked very hard, and I will tell you, to have it stopped, as so many things have been blocked around here—when I look at the total votes, Democrats did their job. We voted, every one of us, in unison to get this legislation moving forward. Yet, if you look at the total, on this vote last night there were eight Republicans who voted to move the bill forward.

When you consider what is at stake—I mean, we listened to the arguments from the other side, but when you talk about making sure physicians are treated fairly so they can treat older citizens in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and across the country; when you talk about reimbursement in the case of hospitals in northeastern Pennsylvania, where they are competing for skilled personnel, yet we are not going to move something forward that can help them on their wages so they can have the best possible care for older citizens—in my home area of northeastern Pennsylvania, we have the highest percentage of people over 65 of anyplace in the country. We need help with this wage index problem to recruit the best personnel.

When you talk about beneficiaries, these are very vulnerable low-income beneficiaries, some of whom do not just have to worry about their Medicare benefits, but they are standing in lines to get food from food pantries. The Presiding Officer has talked about this a lot over the last year. The price of everything in their lives has gone up—gasoline and food, they are worried about Medicare, they are worried about their children and their grandchildren. And we can't vote to move something forward? It is outrageous that we have this split where you get all these Democrats voting for it and only eight Republicans.

Finally, when it comes to pharmacies and rural providers, my goodness, if we can't move legislation forward to make sure the Federal Government pays pharmacies within 14 days, what are we doing? We can't get the votes to move forward.

People across America and families on Medicare are worried. They are worried about Medicare and how it is going to impact their lives. I want them to be aware of what happened here. Democrats voted in unison to move this forward, to make these changes to the Medicare Program. The other side did not. It is a very simple equation. I know we will vote on this again, and I hope our colleagues on the other side, when they consider what is at stake for rural America—for small towns across the country and for very vulnerable people—I hope they would take that into consideration and vote the right way for older citizens and for those families.

I yield the floor. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Will the Senator withhold his request?

Mr. CASEY. I will withhold.

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. President, may I be recognized?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Alabama is recognized.

#### RURAL HEALTH CARE AND WAGE INDEX PROBLEMS

Mr. SESSIONS. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Pennsylvania for raising some important issues with regard to the way our Medicare system works—and Medicaid, too, for that matter. In many areas of the country at least half the health care that is provided goes through those programs. I would like to associate myself with what I understood to be one comment that he made about rural health care and wage index problems.

Hospitals in America are reimbursed at different rates. If you are a hospital in a smaller area, the Federal Government calculates how much you should be reimbursed based on what they call a wage index, and that wage index pays substantially less or results in a payment substantially less than is given to hospitals in urban areas for the very same procedure and the very same care.

We tried to make some progress, and did make some progress, a few years ago under the leadership of Senator GRASSLEY. He understood the issue. He believed it was adverse to some of the smaller communities in Iowa. We had some discussion about it. We made some progress, but it is still very dramatic.

Let's say the average is \$100 for a procedure; this is what a hospital would be paid. If your wage index is 80, then you would be paid \$80. If your wage index were 120, you would be paid \$120. If you have two hospitals, one of them with a higher wage index, it gets paid \$120, and a poorer, rural hospital would get paid \$80.

This has some ramifications that go beyond common sense in that the equipment that a rural hospital needs to utilize may be utilized less often, and therefore is more expensive per procedure, than one that will be utilized in a wealthier hospital in a wealthy area. I think this is a big issue.

In response to the concern about the bill, I understand there is a firm view of Members on this side, and the President, that the Medicare Advantage program not be eliminated in this bill. That is basically what has happened. We want to see many, if not all, the reforms in here, or most of these reforms, but there are one or two matters that this side of the aisle feels very strongly about. If we could work those out, I think we could pass that legislation in prompt order.

Some would say it has been blocked by those on this side, and some on this side say it has been blocked by the unwillingness to discuss the concerns that we have, and therefore it is blocked on the other side.

I see our distinguished majority leader.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

#### THE PEPFAR REAUTHORIZATION

Mr. REID. Mr. President, in 2003, Congress responded to President Bush's call for action by creating the Global HIV/AIDS Program. The goal of that program was to confront the crisis which has killed more than 30 million Africans since 1982. Thousands are dying every day. About 5,000 are dying every day in Africa—every day, weekends, no holidays off. This strongly bipartisan effort to create this legislation has already helped tens of millions of Africans affected by HIV/AIDS. It has been 5 years since we passed that legislation, and now it is time to reauthorize the Global HIV/AIDS Program.

This program was started with bipartisan support, and that support remains today. The House of Representatives passed the reauthorization on a strong bipartisan vote. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee also passed the bill with broad bipartisan support. This legislation has the strong support of Senate Democrats, most of the Senate Republicans, and President Bush.

Unfortunately, as happens often, the legislation has been blocked by a small group of Republican Senators who have placed a hold on this legislation, preventing us from moving forward. That is why several months ago I asked Chairman BIDEN and Ranking Member LUGAR to negotiate a compromise. They worked tirelessly on this challenge. I thank them for their hard work. Also, Senator ENZI, the ranking member of the HELP Committee, in the absence of Senator KENNEDY, has worked very hard to get rid of some of the holds.

Given the importance of this legislation and the overwhelming amount of work we have to do in the Senate, I thought it would be appropriate to set a deadline to get something done, and that deadline was this week for the negotiations to be completed. First, it was Monday, then Tuesday, then Wednesday. Then yesterday I was told by Senator ENZI there was one more person to work it out with and we could clear it tomorrow. That is today—he told me that yesterday.

We thought an agreement had been reached, and we have a final text of the agreement. I thank everyone for their work and their leadership during these negotiations, for their hard work over the past few days to close the deal on the final issues.

Senators COBURN, ENZI, BURR—I indicated, and the White House—have all taken part. I certainly hope my colleagues on the other side will not block this bipartisan agreement.

President Bush will be attending the G-8 conference over the July recess and