and universities. It is time for the Senate, when it reauthorizes the Higher Education Act, to change this.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. HEITKAMP. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING LEGISLATION

Ms. HEITKAMP. Mr. President, I come to the floor today to talk about what I believe may be one of the most critical pieces of legislation to address human trafficking in the United States, and that is the piece of legislation authored by Senator LEAHY—the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act.

I am proud to be a cosponsor of this legislation and to add my name to the amendment Senator LEAHY submitted yesterday that adds this important piece of legislation to this current debate.

Senator LEAHY, as we all know, has been a tireless advocate for homeless and runaway youth and for LGBT individuals and for victims of human trafficking. His bill would provide the necessary services and additional protections for all of these young children. So I thank Senator LEAHY again for his continued work on behalf of some of our most vulnerable—our runaway and homeless youth.

As a former attorney general, I certainly believe that additional tools need to be made available to prosecutors so they can prosecute traffickers and johns and that we need to intervene and provide recovery services for victims. I think that need has never been greater. But why I am speaking today on this legislation is because it goes to that critical element of prevention. It supports those who are most susceptible to human trafficking, and that is our runaway and homeless youth.

Preventing one of the most vulnerable segments of our population from falling prey to this modern-day slavery should be one of the top priorities of this Nation. When we talk about trafficking, frequently people think these are young girls who may be coming into our country in containers or are trafficked from elsewhere. But we know that over 80 percent of the people trafficked, especially in the sex trade in this country, are citizens of our country. They are our children. They are American children. So we cannot simply put a face on this that doesn't recognize that American children are being trafficked.

Who among these children are the most vulnerable? It is runaway and homeless youth. So it is our responsibility to do everything we can to prevent those children from being in a place where they are extraordinarily vulnerable.

We have heard some people say they do not believe that homeless and runaway youth are more susceptible to being trafficked and that we shouldn't single out special services for LGBT youth. I don't believe that, and I know better, because I have been to facilities that provide services for runaway and homeless youth. I don't believe people who say this have ever spoken to the social workers and the professionals who deal with these children every day.

I don't believe people who say that understand that runaway and homeless youth, unfortunately, have been, more than likely, already sexually and physically abused or told every day they are worthless or told that because of who they are, they are no longer welcome in their home. And when you diminish the spirit of a child, you then create a vulnerability in that child to be a target for traffickers.

A lot of people also think this is just a big-city problem. Well, let me tell you some of the stories of North Dakota. Just last June, a 13-year-old runaway from Minneapolis was rescued and her traffickers were arrested in Fargo-Moorhead. Police believe the traffickers were more than likely on their way out to our oil patch with the victim, and they stopped over in Fargo-Moorhead to make a little cash by selling these children in the Fargo-Moorhead area. This is a story we hear over and over again—the vulnerability of children, the trafficking of children into the oil patch in western North Dakota.

In fact, talking to the experts who track advertising of young children, whether it is in the deep or dark Net or whether it is in things such as backpage, they will tell you the spike in trafficking and ads in western North Dakota alarms them and should alarm us. So this is not a big-city problem. We know this is a problem that affects North Dakota. If traffickers are willing to snatch up a runaway in the Twin Cities and bring them out to North Dakota, you can be sure they are trying to prey on this vulnerable population in North Dakota as well.

This is personal for me. I know a lot about this topic because my sister works in this area, and I have spent a lot of time with her staff. They are the largest agency in North Dakota serving runaway and homeless youth populations in Fargo-Moorhead. I have heard stories of how vulnerable these children are. I have heard them tell stories about how the trafficking victims, with whom they have already worked, are sometimes recruited by those bold enough to try to cycle through waiting rooms where they are waiting for these kids.

I have heard the stories of guys waiting just down the block or in parking lots of shelters to snatch up these kids. Also I have heard stories of how once a young child is involved in this, they then become recruiters of other young runaway children.

These stories are why it is so imperative to take action. And we can take action here in the Senate. We can take action by taking up the Runaway and Homeless Youth Trafficking Prevention Act. This bill reauthorizes vital programs that provide short-term shelter for youth who do not have a place to sleep—imagine that: youth, our children, do not have a place to sleep; crisis interventions and referrals to youth on the street and at drop-in centers—a hand up: we will take you and we will help you recover from whatever has happened in your life; long-term residential services; training and education; and employment support to help get these kids off the street and permanently provide a safe and secure path forward.

Importantly, this bill makes sure that LGTB runaway and homeless youth are not discriminated against when it comes to providing resources and services. We can have an opinion about this, but we all know that no human should be subjected to those kinds of conditions, and we must do everything we can to help them seek and receive the same services as any other child.

By ensuring that runaway and homeless youth have a safe place to stay and the resources they need, we can stem the tide of human trafficking in our country. By identifying vulnerable youth early and as effectively as possible, we can reduce the number of child sex trafficking victims by preventing them from becoming victims in the first place.

We can and we must do everything in our power to not only identify, prosecute, and help victims recover, we must do everything we can to prevent human trafficking. We can take a huge step forward on that by focusing attention and resources on our runaway and homeless youth population.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING ACT OF 2015

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of S. 178, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 178) to provide justice for the victims of trafficking.

Pending:

Portman amendment No. 270, to amend the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act to enable State child protective services systems to improve the identification and assessment of child victims of sex trafficking.

Portman amendment No. 271, to amend the definition of ''homeless person'' under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to include certain homeless children and youth.

Vitter amendment No. 284 (to amendment No. 271), to amend section 301 of the Immigration and Nationality Act to clarify those classes of individuals born in the United States who are nationals and citizens of the United States at birth.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I appreciate the courtesy from the distinguished Republican leader, Senator CORNYN, in letting me go forward for a few moments.

I would like to note that the executive director of the Vermont Coalition of Runaway & Homeless Youth Programs—a group I know well for the important work they have done—wrote to me yesterday to express the concern of the coalition and to express their support for the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act and encourage us to put aside our differences and work together to support those in need.

He wrote:

Difference of opinion and the deliberative role of the Senate is part of what makes our democracy strong, but sometimes unity of purpose should prevail, particularly in efforts involving protections for the most vulnerable among us. There should be no doubt that legislation involving the well-being of individuals who have been victimized by the most base of human behavior should be free of partisan wrangling. I . . . encourage your efforts to remove partisan language from the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act in an effort to ensure that the Act and the Runaway and Homeless Youth amendment that Senator Collins and you introduced [will] move forward unimpeded.

I believe that reflects the views of Vermonters of all political stripes.

I know the distinguished Senator from Texas and I and others want to help these greatly abused and abandoned children, and I hope we can continue to work to find a way forward.

I yield the floor, and I thank the Senator for his courtesy.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to engage in a colloquy with my colleagues—the Senator from Illinois, the Senator from Ohio, and I think we are going to be joined by the Senator from South Dakota and perhaps others.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, before I turn to Senator PORTMAN, I would like to put up a quote from one of the leaders of the anti-trafficking movement, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, who expresses my sentiments exactly, my frustration over a partisan filibuster of a piece of legislation which has enjoyed broad bipartisan support and how somehow partisanship has infected what should be a bipartisan commitment to helping the victims of human trafficking. She says, ''Senate Democrats are choosing a phantom problem over real victims.'' I think that expresses the facts and certainly my sentiment.

I want to turn to the Senator from Ohio first, who has been one of the leaders in this effort. He has offered an important piece of legislation which has already been incorporated in the bill which perhaps he will talk about but also has some additional amendments that I know he would like to get a chance to get a vote on to further improve the bill—in particular, his provision Bringing Missing Children Home Act with Senator SCHUMER, the Senator from New York, which is already in the base bill, and then with Senator FEINSTEIN, the Senator from California—they offered the Combat Human Trafficking Act, which is already included in the base bill.

So with that, I would yield to the Senator from Ohio for any remarks he would care to make, and then perhaps we could engage in a colloquy with our colleagues.

Mr. PORTMAN. I thank my colleague from Texas. I thank him for his leadership on this legislation, along with Senator KLOBUCHAR and others, in bringing this to the floor. Senator GRASSLEY, the chair of the committee, is with us. I appreciate the fact that these two bills which we have worked on over the last few years are included in the legislation the Senator mentioned.

Sadly, some of the most vulnerable youth are those who are missing or are in foster care, kids who end up being, unfortunately, exposed to human trafficking, sometimes sexual trafficking. So the idea of the missing children legislation is really very simple. It says: Let's help find these children as quickly as possible by having better information on them.

I will give one example of that. In Ohio we have had 71 kids who have gone missing since January 1. These are 71 children who are out there somewhere—minors. For those 71 children, we only have 22 photographs. This is since January 1. One thing this legislation does is it says: Let's get the data, including photographs, so all of us can have an opportunity to find these young people before they become subject to human trafficking.

In Ohio we, unfortunately, have this issue in all of our regions, including in some of our smaller communities as well as our bigger urban centers where we have sex trafficking. They say the average age of children who are getting involved in this is between 11 and 13 years old.

We have talked a lot on the floor over the last several days. I have been out here talking about these issues. These are the most vulnerable among us. These are crimes against children.

This is in the bill, and if we can pass this legislation, getting this additional information and better awareness and training of child welfare agency officials and better training for law enforcement is all part of this.

The other legislation the Senator mentioned is about increasing the penalties on those who are involved in trafficking. That is important because we haven't had a major bill on this for 15 years, and we have learned a lot in this process. What we have learned is there are better ways to give prosecutors and other law enforcement the tools they need to be able to take these cases, prosecute them, and stop this heinous crime.

There are some really good provisions in this legislation that I have worked on, on a bipartisan basis. As was said, one is with Senator FEINSTEIN with regard to increasing the penalties, and the other piece of legislation is with Senator SCHUMER on bringing children home. There are also a couple of amendments we would love to offer. In fact, we offered them, but we haven't been able to get votes on them because this week we haven't moved forward on the legislation.

I would urge my colleagues on the other side of the aisle to allow us to move forward with the process. Let's go ahead and start having votes. There might be disagreements on some parts of the bill. I thought because it had gotten out of committee by a unanimous vote that there wouldn't be disagreements, but if there are, let's have that discussion and debate. Let's not let the most vulnerable among us wait for us to work this out. Let's move forward on this legislation in a way that allows everybody to have their views heard.

Some of the legislation I talked about comes out of meeting with folks back home on this issue and talking to victims who have been through this horrible process and gone through the very difficult process of recovering from it. Some of the amendments we are going to offer would help with regard to that issue, help to respond to these young people—often children—who are involved in this.

It also comes out of the work that has been done right here in the Senate through a caucus we formed about 2½ years ago. Senator BLUMENTHAL and I cofounded this caucus, we cochair it, and we meet every month and bring people in from around the country who are experts on this issue. Some are experts on child welfare, law enforcement, people who are involved in trying to stop this. Others are experts because, unfortunately, they found themselves in very difficult situations. Among others, some have come forward and talked about how as a young girl they were taken in by a trafficker. Increasingly—this is true in Ohio, unfortunately—drug abuse is part of this, so they become dependent on the trafficker. It is, to me, a form of bondage because these are young people who become addicted. In Ohio it is typically

heroin now. So it is keeping these young people trapped in this dependency. The drug treatment and the drug recovery are tough, but so is the recovery from having been trafficked.

This is an opportunity for us to take the information we have received through this caucus we have formed. I think the Members who are involved in that caucus, including the Members here today, would agree it has been a good experience for our staff and for us to raise the awareness and consciousness on this issue. Now we have taken some of this information and put it in this legislation. Let's get it passed. We will have plenty of time for politics around here, trust me. We will have lots of that next week and the week after and over the next couple years. That is part of the process; we understand that. But there are certain issues where we should be able to move forward on not a bipartisan basis but I would say on a nonpartisan basis, and this is one of them.

I thank my colleague from Texas for allowing me to speak briefly and my colleagues from South Dakota and Illinois who are here to talk about this issue.

My hope is that even today we can begin the process of having votes, moving forward with amendments, and getting this good work done to help the most vulnerable among us.

Mr. CORNYN. Briefly, I thank the Senator from Ohio for his leadership on these issues. He has worked hard and long to address them and to bring us to the point where we are today.

I wish to emphasize one point the Senator made at the beginning, and that is that the average age of the people who are targeted for human trafficking are girls between the ages of 12 and 14. So this is a very vulnerable part of our country. I know we get wrapped around the axle up here about procedure, about politics, about a lot of different issues, but we ought to keep our focus on them, on the victims, these children, these girls who are the hapless victims of these pimps and johns and other people who make money selling their bodies. We ought to be trying to figure out what can we do to help them. They are the ones who will be the real losers. We get so balled up around here because of all of the political maneuvers, we take our eye off the ball. That is why our friends at the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women talked about a phantom problem over real victims. The focus should be on the victims.

The phantom problem—the shiny object they are trying to hold up and relitigate—is something that has been the law of the land since 1976. It has been included in a lot of pieces of legislation they voted for. This is a phony diversion from what should be our real focus, which should be the victims.

I wish to turn to the Senator from Illinois who has also been a leader on this issue. He has been a warrior in dealing with people who run some of these Web sites, backpage.com in particular. My friend is also trying to figure out a way to integrate some of our veterans who are leaving military service to lead the investigation of these crimes.

I turn to the Senator from Illinois for any comments he cares to make.

Mr. KIRK. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Texas for moving this legislation, especially including the text of the HERO Act, S. 575, which is bipartisan, thanks to the help of Senator BLUMENTHAL, that would also have us find wounded warriors to search on the Internet to find these exploiters.

With the amendment I was trying to offer earlier this week on the SAVE Act, I intended to go after backpage.com, which is the largest provider of slavery-related services in the country. They make about $30 million a year off of slavery. We really ought to be able to charge them to clean up the mess they have created.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Illinois. His focus is exactly where we ought to be having our focus, which is how to take the profit out of this modern-day slavery and redirect it to help the victims, and that is what this bill does. It ends some of the impunity that some of these purveyors of human flesh—the rewards they are reaping—and plows it back in to help the victims. I know the SAVE Act has been a particular focus for the Senator from Illinois.

Earlier I talked to Senator FEINSTEIN, the Senator from California, about this issue. She is very concerned about how the Internet is becoming integrated as part of the business model of some of these perpetrators of this crime.

I am also told—and the Senator from Illinois may be aware of this—that veterans will participate.

Mr. KIRK. Under the HERO Act, we have ICE hiring veterans to get on the Internet to find some of the slave dealers online.

We should thread the needle very carefully when it comes to matters such as backpage.com. Under the Communications Decency Act, freedom in America does not mean you have the freedom to enslave others.

With the victory in the Civil War—and I apologize to the Senator from Texas for mentioning it—we have established the real principle of the ever expanding rule of freedom here in the United States and that does not include human slavery empowered by the Internet.

Mr. CORNYN. I thank the Senator from Illinois, and I take no offense for talking about the fact that the South lost the Civil War.

Mr. KIRK. I believe a recent statement by my colleague referred to it as the recent unpleasantness.

Mr. CORNYN. I hold the Senate seat that was first held by Senator Sam Houston who actually resigned his seat as Governor of Texas rather than participate in secession. He was a Union man and believed in the Union.

I know the Senator from Illinois has worked very hard on a bipartisan basis with Mr. BLUMENTHAL, the Senator from Connecticut, and others on this legislation, and that is why I find this situation so baffling. What has been a uniquely bipartisan effort has now turned into a partisan filibuster and, frankly, I am perplexed by that. Maybe some of our friends on the other side of the aisle will come out and explain why they are filibustering the bill they voted for in the Judiciary Committee. We had a unanimous vote in the Judiciary Committee. We had 10 Democratic cosponsors. Yet the Democratic leader, Senator REID, now says they will not allow a vote on any amendments and they are going to kill this bill because they don't want to vote for a bill that has a provision they have voted for time and time again, and indeed has been the law of the land for 39 years.

I thank the Senator from Illinois.

We are joined by the Senator from South Dakota who is head of our Republican conference and has been very concerned about the dysfunction in this place. We actually saw this legislation as an opportunity to start demonstrating that we can do the people's business once again after coming off of a very tough election—tougher for our Democratic friends than it was for our side of the aisle. It was an election where voter after voter said they were sick and tired of the dysfunction here. We want to show we can be responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable people in our country.

I yield to the Senator from South Dakota for any comments he cares to make.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Texas for his leadership on this issue, as well as the Senator from Iowa, Mr. GRASSLEY, for moving this legislation to the floor.

As the Senator from Texas—who has authored and been involved with this legislation for a long time—knows, if there was ever an issue we have dealt with here in the Senate that goes beyond the line of partisan politics, it is this. We are talking about untold stories of thousands of American children and adults who are sold into modern-day slavery. Those stories are bone chilling and undeniably some of the most deplorable acts of humankind.

What the Senator from Texas' bill is designed to do is to start attacking this issue in a way we have not seen for a very long time. It gives law enforcement the tools in order to target these traffickers, bring them to justice, and provides the tools that are necessary to help restore the lives of the victims of these heinous crimes.

It is interesting to me that we are where we are. This is clearly a bipartisan issue. My understanding is when this bill was marked up, debated, and voted on in the Judiciary Committee, it came out unanimously. In other words, all the Democrats on the committee voted for it. Is that correct? Is that the way it proceeded from the Judiciary Committee?

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I will respond to my friend from South Dakota to say he is absolutely correct, which is one reason I am so perplexed we find ourselves where we are today.

We have 10 cosponsors from the Democratic side for this underlying bill which was filed on January 13. It was marked up in the Judiciary Committee a month later and got a unanimous vote. I will add to that, in response to my friend's question, we also saw something we have not seen here in a long time on the Senate floor, and that is an agreement by all 100 Senators that we would proceed to consider this bill and begin the amendment and debate process without having to jump through all of the procedural hoops we traditionally have to do on cloture motions and the like.

What happened a couple of days ago when apparently some of our friends woke up and found out about this issue—what has been called a phantom problem—is very disturbing.

Mr. THUNE. My understanding is the bill itself is approximately 68 pages long. Is that correct?

Mr. CORNYN. I will say to my friend that he is correct. That includes the strikeout provisions of the substitute, so actually the text is roughly half of that.

The provisions our friends across the aisle suddenly woke up and discovered—apparently a couple of days ago—were written in plain sight and incorporate by reference a bill they voted for, which was the last appropriations bill we voted for in the lameduck session.

Mr. THUNE. This bill was filed on what date?

Mr. CORNYN. On January 13, I say to my friend.

Mr. THUNE. When was it marked up at the committee level?

Mr. CORNYN. I say to my friend, it was marked up or passed out of the Judiciary Committee roughly a month later.

Mr. THUNE. This legislation has been here in the Senate for weeks or months.

Mr. CORNYN. Months.

Mr. THUNE. It is 68 pages long. It was introduced back in January. It was reported out unanimously. All the Democrats on the committee voted for it when it left the Judiciary Committee. When it was brought up on the floor of the Senate, all 100 Senators, including every single Democrat, voted to get on this bill.

All of a sudden, here at the 11th hour, we are being held up on a piece of legislation that clearly has unanimous support, or at least I thought should have had unanimous support. They are now objecting because of the language in this legislation. Evidently it is only 68 pages long, which is not a lot to read.

ObamaCare was obviously a story where it was argued that after it was passed, we had to figure out what was in it, but that was several thousand pages long. This is a 68-page bill.

When the bill was filed, there was an opportunity for people to look at this when the bill went to markup. Countless staffers and Members of Congress have looked at and read this legislation. Now all of a sudden—at the 11th hour—there is an objection because there is language included in this bill which was voted on by 55 Democrats as recently as December. Is that correct? Was there a spending bill that came out of the Congress in December of 2014?

Mr. CORNYN. I say to my friend that was the so-called CRomnibus. It was the continuing resolution omnibus bill that passed in November during the lameduck session and it included the same or very similar language. It was actually incorporated by reference into the Justice for Victims of Trafficking bill. It is the same language our Democratic friends voted for then, and now they are complaining about it being in this bill for no apparent reason.

Mr. THUNE. Is it correct that that particular provision, referred to as the Hyde amendment, has been a part of spending bills dating back to 1976? So for literally 40 years the Hyde amendment language has been included in bills we have passed here, particularly bills that are appropriations bills and spending and funding bills?

Mr. CORNYN. I say to my friend from South Dakota, he is exactly correct. This has been the law of the land for 39 years. This is an area that has been very controversial—that is abortion, generally—and this has been a rare area of bipartisan consensus that no tax dollars be used to fund abortion.

Again, this is a red herring and a phantom problem, as it has been referred to here, and I can't believe our friends on the other side would throw their staff under the bus who were responsible to bring this language in the legislation to their attention, and I can't believe they would throw the victims who will benefit from this bill under the bus and say they should have to pay the price for this phantom problem they discovered. To me it is not plausible. It doesn't make any sense whatsoever.

Mr. THUNE. I say to my colleague from Texas, again, who has been so instrumental in getting this to the floor, that a 68-page bill is certainly readable. They have had several months to look at and read it. When a bill is reported out of a committee, it means it has been analyzed, looked at, and open to debate and amendments, and it came out unanimously. Every Democrat voted for it. They voted for a provision that literally has been a matter of policy and law in this country dating back to 1976 and was voted on as recently as December of last year.

We had 55 Democrats in this Chamber who voted for this language—very similar language—in December of last year and now they are objecting to a piece of legislation they reported out unanimously in the Judiciary Committee which does something to stop the brutal violation of the innocent in this country, and they are objecting to it over this language.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, if I could interject. The Senator from South Dakota is exactly right. I will add to that that not only does this enjoy broad bipartisan support within the Senate and Congress, we have more than 200 law enforcement and victim rights organizations that have endorsed this bill and they are begging us to pass it.

One of those groups includes the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. They know we need to focus on not only taking the profit out of this crime but, just as importantly, we need to get the services to the victims to begin to let them heal and get on with their lives.

As we said earlier, these are typically young girls who are 12 to 14 years of age. Can you imagine the scars, both physical and psychological, they bear having experienced this terrible crime?

Every day we delay in getting this bill passed because of the political shenanigans here is another day these victims of this terrible crime are denied access to the services they need.

Mr. THUNE. If they survive, imagine how messed up some of these young victims are going to be for the rest of their lives. We have an opportunity to do something about it.

The Democratic leader has described this as a sleight of hand. That is not what this is. This is a clear choice. This is a clear choice by Democrats to choose partisan politics over the victims of human trafficking. It is as simple as that.

I urge my Democratic colleagues to stop—stop the partisan politics, stop derailing this important opportunity to come together in a spirit of bipartisanship to end human trafficking. Putting partisan politics over the lives of 100,000 American children who fall victim to the brutal reality of human trafficking every year is absolutely wrong.

To quote our distinguished colleague from the State of Maryland, Senator MIKULSKI: ''Let's get it done and let's get it done now.''

I would say to my colleague from Texas, life is too precious. These crimes are too serious for this issue to be caught up in the crosshairs of Washington politics. This has to stop. This has to end.

This is a piece of bipartisan legislation that will help literally hundreds of thousands—millions, I would say—of Americans across this country. It is time we begin to right the wrongs of injustice by turning the tide in law enforcement's favor to help those who are trying to combat these terrible, heinous crimes to succeed and to help the victims of these crimes restore their lives.

I appreciate the good work of the Senator from Texas and others who have been involved with this.

I urge my colleagues to end this shenanigan, this charade that is going on

before the Senate. Let's get this bill passed and on the President's desk.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, how much time remains in our time?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There is no time limit.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I wish to express my gratitude to the Senator from South Dakota.

We have neglected perhaps the most important person in this process; that is, the Senator from Iowa, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, who responded to a letter written by all 20 female Senators, asking him to have a hearing on this important topic and to move this bill forward.

The Senator from South Dakota mentioned Senator MIKULSKI. She came to testify, along with Senator AYOTTE from New Hampshire and Senator KLOBUCHAR, and she talked about how important this was to all 20 of our women Senators and how proud they were of the fact that it moved forward. It wouldn't have happened without the Senator from Iowa, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, willing to take that challenge up and to move the bill to the floor in such a unanimous fashion.

I wish to close by saying that all Members of the Senate presumably came here to try to do something important—not just to march in place or fill up space. Presumably, they spend the time away from their families, they go through the rigors of political campaigns, they suffer the slings and arrows of partisan politics in order to try to do something good, to try to help people who cannot help themselves.

Here is a perfect opportunity to do exactly that. We are not asking people to do anything extraordinary. We are certainly not asking them to do anything they haven't done before, which is to vote on language that is included and has been the law of the land for 39 years and that they have voted on before. We are not asking to change the status quo. We are just asking them to focus on the victims.

As Ms. Gaetan, who is with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, said: ''Senate Democrats are choosing a phantom problem over real victims.''

Shame on us if we allow that to happen. Shame on us. We can do better. These victims deserve better. The people we work for in the 50 States around this country deserve better. Shame on us if we don't get this problem solved and if we don't pass this piece of bipartisan legislation and get it to the President's desk where he will gladly sign it.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. HELLER). The Senator from California.

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, our Republican colleagues say they are here fighting for women. If that were the case, then they wouldn't have snuck into this bill a provision that hurts women. It is not just me saying this; it is a story in the Washington Post. I ask unanimous consent to have this article printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Washington Post, Mar. 10, 2015]

ANTI-HUMAN-TRAFFICKING BILL GETS CAUGHT UP IN ABORTION POLITICS IN SENATE

(By Mike DeBonis)

Proving that there is virtually no issue that cannot get mired in partisan combat, an anti-human trafficking bill now under Senate consideration is in limbo after Democrats accused Republicans of sneaking anti-abortion language into the legislation before it hit the Senate floor.

The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, authored by Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.) and sporting a bipartisan stable of cosponsors, was supposed to be a turn toward comity after a couple of contentious weeks on Capitol Hill. What's not to like about a bill that would increase penalties for those convicted of slavery, human smuggling and sexual exploitation of children and provide for additional compensation for their victims?

On Monday, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) locked arms in calling on their colleagues to support the measure. ''I doubt if there will be problems on my side,'' Reid said, according to The Hill. ''If there is, I will work to clear them.''

But by midday Tuesday, the good feelings had eroded into a bout of finger-pointing, with Senate Democrats accusing Republicans of subterfuge in slipping language into the bill that would extend the longstanding Hyde Amendment barring the use of taxpayer funds for abortions to the new Domestic Trafficking Victims' Fund.

The word ''abortion'' does not appear in the trafficking bill, but there is language specifying that the victims' fund ''shall be subject to the limitations on the use or expending of amounts described in sections 506 and 507 of division H of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014 . . . to the same extent as if amounts in the Fund were funds appropriated under division H of such Act.''

That would apply the Hyde Amendment language to the new fund, which is supported by a proposed $5,000 assessment on those convicted of a wide variety of federal crimes related to sexual abuse and human trafficking.

Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) accused Republicans of ''trying to pull a fast one'' in inserting the abortion provision. Two Democratic leaders, Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) and Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), both said Democrats had been advised that it was not among the changes made to the bill since it was taken up last year by a Democratic-controlled Senate. Earlier in the day, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), ranking member of the committee that unanimously forwarded the bill, said Judiciary Committee Democrats were ''assured'' the provision was not included.

In an early January e-mail reviewed by the Post, a Republican Judiciary Committee staffer sent a Democratic staffer a summary of changes to the previous version of the bill, in seven bullet points. The abortion provision was not among them.

''This bill will not be used as an opportunity for Republicans to double down on their efforts to restrict a woman's health-care choices,'' Murray said. ''It is absolutely wrong and, honestly, it is shameful. I know there are a whole lot of us who are going to fight hard against any attempt to expand the Hyde Amendment and permanently impact women's health.''

But Republican leaders—including Cornyn, the majority whip—pushed back on the notion that the abortion language represented any kind of subterfuge. A Cornyn aide suggested that Democrats knew very well about the language before the committee vote—including, the aide said, Leahy staffers—and thus were being ''disingenuous.''

''It was out in the public domain for a month before it was marked up in Judiciary Committee on Feb. 26, and all members of the Judiciary Committee voted to support it,'' Cornyn said. ''So that leads me to believe that some of the suggestions being made now that there were provisions in the legislation that people didn't know about are simply untrue. That presupposes that none of their staff briefed the senators on what was in the legislation, that nobody read a 68-page bill and that senators would vote for a bill, much less co-sponsor it, without reading it and knowing what's in it. None of that strikes me as plausible.''

Republicans and Democrats are also sparring about the impact of the abortion language. Adam Jentleson, a spokesman for Reid, called it a ''significant expansion of the scope of the Hyde amendment'' by applying it to fees and fines, not just taxpayer funds. He also said the rider in the trafficking bill would be permanent—unlike the Hyde Amendment, which must be continually attached to each year's appropriations—and thus ''could lead to a dramatic expansion of abortion restrictions in future years.''

Cornyn took to the Senate floor late Tuesday to rebut that notion, noting that the 2009 health reform law included a similar restriction. ''Democrats have supported legislation consistent with the Hyde Amendment for a long, long time,'' he said. ''My hope is this: that members of the United States Senate will rise above this—this agreement, this posturing, this attempt to try to play gotcha at the expense of these victims of human trafficking.''

Reid said debate would continue Wednesday on the bill, and a Democratic aide suggested the tiff could be overcome if McConnell allows a vote on an amendment removing the abortion language from the bill—an amendment that is likely to fail.

''You can blame it on staff, blame it on whoever you want to blame it on, but we didn't know it was in the bill,'' Reid said. ''And . . . this bill will not come off this floor as long as that language is in the bill.''

Mrs. BOXER. The article states in part:

In an early January e-mail reviewed by the Post, a Republican Judiciary Committee staffer sent a Democratic staffer a summary of changes to the previous version of the bill, in seven bullet points.

Guess what. They left out the change they made to women's reproductive health.

Now, I have been around here a long time and I thought there was trust in this body, but don't stand up and say it is a phantom problem when the Washington Post confirms it. They have the email that proves this change was made and was not told to the Democrats on the committee. If it had been told to the Democrats on the committee, we would have worked this out.

If they want to fight for women, take the provision out that harms the victims of trafficking. If they want to help women, bring up Loretta Lynch for confirmation—a fantastic woman, qualified—held up by the Republicans longer than any other Attorney General nominee ever. If they want to help women, those are two ways to do it.

Solve this problem. Don't stand up and say it is a phantom problem when the Washington Post saw the email.

We know the bill before us has an extremely worthy goal. We want to help victims of human trafficking. I wish to ask rhetorically, How does it help women who have been brutally trafficked when we don't let them access their legal right to end a pregnancy that resulted from their enslavement? A woman is enslaved. She becomes pregnant. Shouldn't she have the ability to get the same kind of health care as any other woman? But, no, in this bill, they say she can't use that victims compensation fund for that legal right.

Republicans are doing this all over the place. They attached immigration to the homeland security bill. They are threatening to attach the Keystone Pipeline to a highway bill. Now they include abortion in a human trafficking bill. And then they tell us we are seeing phantom problems? I don't think so. They have been in charge for more than 8 weeks and all we see is them taking hostage after hostage after hostage legislatively to get their way on their philosophy.

Roe v. Wade is the law of the land. If they don't like it, why don't they just propose doing away with it. Let's have that out. This bill singles out and hurts vulnerable women—women who have been the victims of a heinous crime. Women who face deplorable conditions, ripped out of their homes, taken advantage of, treated brutally, women who many times are forced into pregnancy by their captors, and in an unprecedented manner, because of sneaking this language into this bill, the bill imposes abortion restrictions on private funds—private funds that have been collected from the criminals and the perpetrators of these unspeakable acts.

Don't these women deserve better? Shouldn't these victims have access to services that are guaranteed to them by the Constitution?

My friends on the other side don't like it. They want to tell women what to do. They want to get into the most personal decisions that women and their families make. Let them do that for their families. But if they want to change the law of the land, Roe v. Wade, and tell women they are criminals—and doctors, make them criminals too—then why don't they just have the courage to bring it to the floor directly, not sneak it into a bill and have the staffers write a note to their colleagues saying, Oh, they are silent. Oh, we didn't do anything on that. Oh, no.

I will tell my colleagues there is one advantage to being around here for a long time. One has a sense of what used to be decent around here, when one's word was one's word and one's bond was one's bond. Thank goodness we have proof. We have proof that the Republicans left this out of a memo in which they told the Judiciary Committee the changes that were made. We have proof. Don't call this a phantom problem because we have it in writing.

This is a clear path of injecting these unrelated, extremely politically charged provisions into key pieces of legislation. I have not seen it. We used to have a little bit of an understanding around here that if we agreed on a piece of legislation, we would keep out the poison pills. We wouldn't put them into bills, whether they were written by Democrats or Republicans. We know at the end of the day what happens. Everybody gets hurt because nothing gets done. If this is the new way it is going to be around here, it is a bad way for the people.

We should be working on a bill that protects the victims of the most heinous crime: human trafficking. We should be protecting our society's most vulnerable people and making sure they are not denied their rights. The Republican provision that was added in secret and tried to be kept quiet would hurt every single woman we are trying to help. They inserted language that was not in the same bill last year that was supported by Democrats and Republicans. They added the new language quietly, hoping nobody would notice, and then we would all march down there—I put my name on this bill, by the way, because my staff trusted the Republican staff when they said there wasn't any change in abortion language. How awful it was for my staff that they said to me, Senator, we feel terrible. We took their word. So I got my name off this bill.

Why on Earth would anyone want to single out these victims of human trafficking and take away their constitutional rights?

At least own up to it, I say to my Republican friends. They got caught. We have the email. Don't get up here and say it is a phantom problem. Don't make these speeches about how Democrats want to hurt women, when they put a poison pill in the bill, hurt the very women they say they want to protect, did it in secret, and then call us out for it as if we are doing something wrong.

The American people were not born yesterday. They are pretty darn smart. If I stopped one of them on the street—I don't care if they are a Republican or Democrat or what their view is on abortion—and I said to them: If a friend tells you they have made no changes to a letter you asked them to write, and you took their word for it and signed the letter and later found out there was something in that letter that they knew would hurt you, would you be angry, they would probably say: I don't even want to deal with that person anymore; they can't be trusted.

One thing I have learned around here is your word is your bond, and the relationships we have with one another across the aisle are precious. They are important.

So let's not make these phony arguments. Let's fix the problem. Let's remove this offending language. Let's come together, for once. Let's pass a bill that helps these victims.

Then my colleague says: Well, all the groups want this bill anyway. Let me quote from one of them, the Polaris Project: ''The bipartisan support to address modern slavery should not be held up by a separate debate on partisan issues.''

That is a direct quote.

If ever there was a partisan issue, it is the right to choose. That is a partisan issue.

Then there is a letter from the National Network For Youth: ''This legislation is desperately needed and we cannot let this moment pass us by because of the addition of partisan and divisive provisions.''

Let me read that again: ''This legislation is desperately needed and we can't let this moment pass us by because of the addition of partisan and divisive provisions.''

Again, we are offering Republicans a simple solution: Remove the language. Go back to the same language that was in the bill last year which enjoyed broad support.

If Republicans do that today, we would pass this bill today.

I know this is the Democratic time to talk, so I am going to allow Senator HIRONO to continue. We need to end this sneak attack on women's health so we can get the victims of human trafficking the services and support they need.

We are ready, willing, and able to sit down and work with our friends on the other side to drop this provision. The Senate is not going to get things done if the Republican majority continues to insist on putting politically charged, extreme measures on bills that should pass with bipartisan support. I hope my colleagues will work with us. I certainly want to be able to trust the staffers again and trust my colleagues again, and it would start with removing this provision.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Hawaii.

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, I wish to associate myself with the remarks of my friend from California, Senator BOXER. I rise today to speak against attempts to turn this bill—the Justice for Trafficking Victims Act—into a political football. While there are many issues that may divide this Congress—and certainly the issue of choice for women is one of them—human trafficking should not be one of those divisive issues.

This bill started off as a bipartisan bill, but along the way a provision was added to the bill that brings me to the floor today in opposition to that provision. Not only do I oppose the substance of that provision, but I very much object to how the provision was added to the bill unbeknownst to the sponsors of this bill such as myself. Buried in this bill is a provision that allows government to dictate a woman's health care options, and this provision would limit choices for women

who have been victimized by human trafficking.

Women are often forced to endure rape and violence on a daily basis. That is what human trafficking is. This is an unprecedented and, I have to say, appalling expansion of government's role in women's health care decisions. The provision is anti-women and anti-victim. This body should be working to help these victims of trafficking violence, not playing politics with their lives. But that is not what we are seeing today.

The truth is there are some in this body who have time and again put their own ideological agenda and need to score political points ahead of consensus-driven legislation.

We have seen this before. A few weeks ago Congress came close to shutting down the Department of Homeland Security—the third largest Department in the Federal Government—because a few Members wanted to hold funding national security priorities hostage to score points against the President's immigration actions. We saw it during the shutdown. We saw it during the debate over the Shaheen-Portman energy bill. We saw it during Congress's drawn-out debate over the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, yet another issue that should be free of partisan politics.

This body shouldn't let ideological grandstanding on divisive issues stall and kill bipartisan legislation that will make a difference for people—particularly for the most vulnerable people in this country, victims of trafficking.

This bill is no exception. A bill on human trafficking should not be a method of expanding the government's powers to dictate women's personal choices, women's health care decisions.

I join my colleagues in urging the Senate to stop using this legislation and others like it to advance an ideological agenda, and help the women, men, and children who are being trafficked across this country.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa.

Mr. GRASSLEY. I don't seek the floor to speak now because I think I am infringing upon some other Democrats who wanted to speak before I spoke. I assume they are on their way.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, yesterday I came to the floor with a very clear message for my Republican colleagues: A bill about combatting human trafficking is no place for partisanship. It is not an opportunity to try to get a political victory for your base, and it absolutely should not be a vehicle for policies that would roll back a woman's right to make her own choices about her own body. Instead, a bill like the Justice for Trafficking Victims Act should be focused only on protecting the rights and the safety and the health of survivors of sex trafficking, who have faced truly extraordinary violence and hardship.

I called on Republicans to work with Democrats to ensure this legislation gets back on track as the bipartisan effort it should be—by simply removing a provision that would expand the so-called Hyde amendment, allowing politicians to interfere even more with the most deeply personal health decisions a woman can make.

I am disappointed that so far my Republican colleagues have said no and continued to push for a completely unnecessary fight over women's health. So today I am back on the floor, joined by several of my Democratic colleagues, to tell the other side of the aisle that we are not taking no for an answer. We Democratic women believe a bill intended to help women should be about helping women, period.

There is no reason for a political restriction on women's health in the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, just as there wasn't a reason for Republicans to threaten the government with a shutdown over Planned Parenthood funding back in 2011 or try to jam through reproductive health riders on spending bills.

The women Senators who have joined us on the floor today have seen this kind of inappropriate, disappointing political stunt geared at rolling back women's rights before. Republicans are going to get the same response they have gotten every other time: not on our watch.

Right now the ranking member of the Committee on the Judiciary is working on alternative legislation that would take out the divisive, harmful expansion of the Hyde amendment and keep this effort focused on survivors who need support and deserve justice. Democrats are laying out a path to keep this bill bipartisan and get it done.

I hope our Republican colleagues will reconsider the partisan approach they have taken and work with us. I hope they will think about why it doesn't make sense to choose partisanship over trying to just address a truly horrific problem in our country, especially one we all agree needs to be solved. I hope they will commit to putting the politics aside and join us to make this bill the bipartisan effort we all hoped it would be.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, we just heard Members of the minority party complaining there are things in this bill nobody knew anything about. On our side, I think we have done a good job of refuting it.

I am going to suggest again they ought to read the legislation. They had plenty of time to read the legislation. But it is kind of remindful of the story about Speaker PELOSI saying after the 2,700-page ObamaCare bill was written that you have to pass it to find out what is in it.

Obviously this legislation before us isn't law. It is a proposal. But it is just like people evidently don't read this legislation before it gets out of committee with a strong bipartisan vote of 20–0. The fact is this legislation was on the Web site several weeks before it was voted out of committee, and this language was in it. So you have to wait until a bill gets out of committee before you read the language? No. There are 20 people on the Committee on the Judiciary who had an opportunity to read this legislation before it ever got out of committee. There were no concerns about this language that we hear from the minority of the Senate that they have all of a sudden found obnoxious and somehow it was sneaked into a piece of legislation, which is not true. That is what I am going to speak about.

As one example of what I referred to, yesterday we heard from the Senator from Vermont—my friend, the distinguished ranking member of the committee and former chairman of the committee—that an organization called ATEST is urging that we strike the Hyde amendment language in this bill. ATEST is one of many organizations that had the opportunity to review and comment on this legislation prior to the committee markup of this bill. They met with my staff in February to discuss this bill and never raised any concern with the Hyde amendment at that time. So now I can legitimately question why they are coming forward with this concern only now, weeks after the Senate Committee on the Judiciary reported this legislation.

Then we also heard the Senator from California comment on emails. I want her to know there are emails that clearly show the other side was aware of the Hyde provision, and it is not our majority saying the Democrats are raising a phantom problem. The Senator from California is criticizing a human trafficking advocate who is saying that very point.

It is pretty bad around here when you have Senators attacking anti-trafficking advocates. We learned last week that law enforcement officials in Texas arrested 29 people in an online trafficking sting. As reported in Texas in the Waco Tribune-Herald on March 10:

> The sting was designed to catch suspects seeking underage escorts for sexual acts or trying to become ''pimps'' by trafficking underage prostitutes.

This is only the latest in a string of news stories showing that the commercial exploitation of children is a problem in the United States. The reality that adolescents are victims in many of these cases makes the situation all the more wrenching.

It is vital that we act now to pass legislation to further protect these and other domestic victims of human trafficking. These reports are reasons why this bill should not be stalled by the minority Members of the Senate, particularly when we in the majority pledged, as a result of the last election, that we were going to have an open amendment process.

This bill is under the open amendment process so anybody who doesn't like this language ought to offer an amendment, and let us see where the votes are—whether their side prevails or whether the people who want to pass an antitrafficking bill prevail.

I take this opportunity to again urge my colleagues to support this Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, which would establish strong antitrafficking measures that target predators who exploit innocent, young people. The measure focuses both on sex and labor trafficking. It would benefit both children and adult victims of these despicable crimes.

The legislation would equip law enforcement with new tools to fight trafficking, enhance services for victims, and increase penalties for perpetrators. The bill would help fight demand for domestic sex trafficking by ensuring that any person who is trafficking an adult or purchasing a child for sex will be punished under the full force of law. In other words, it goes after the demand side as well as the supply side of these terrible crimes. So it is a meaningful solution that is supported by a large bipartisan group of Senators and more than 200 outside organizations.

The other day, one human trafficking advocate characterized the concern raised by the minority with the Hyde amendment provision in this bill as a phantom problem, and I agree.

The minority leader is focusing on a provision that passed the Senate Judiciary Committee in February unanimously, after committee members debated the bill and had the opportunity to even strike this provision that they find so obnoxious at this particular time. Not only has this language, called the Hyde amendment language, been in a part of this bipartisan bill for months, it is the law of the land today—a consensus measure adopted in 1976. It has been included in appropriations bills every year for decades.

As I mentioned yesterday, it has been included in authorizing legislation on occasions as well.

Why, when we have agreed on the inclusion of Hyde amendment language in bills on so many prior occasions over a 39-year period of time, would we at this time be unable to agree to its inclusion in a bill to help human trafficking victims?

It is fitting that this bill includes such Hyde amendment language. The bill creates a Federal victims fund, and money in the fund will derive from fines imposed on human traffickers. The fund will be a federally administered program.

If the fund is used to support abortion services, then it constitutes Federal funding of abortion. Including the Hyde language is consistent, then, with what we have always done in such cases. This is not the appropriate time or place for the minority party Members of the Senate to seek a rollback of consensus legislation that was adopted as far back as 1976 and has been extended every year since that time.

I urge my colleagues to find another place and another time for congressional debate on taxpayer funding of abortions—not to do it on a bill that has broad, bipartisan support and definitely not on a bill that was reported out of committee 20 to 0, which means 11 Republicans and 9 Democrats supported it.

The argument that this Hyde amendment language was included by—you have heard these words—''sleight of hand'' is simply disingenuous. This bill, after its introduction, was put into the public domain—not after it was voted out of committee, not just 1 day before it was in committee, but weeks before the committee considered it. So it was in the public domain. Nobody could say it wasn't there. So you could read it and know this Hyde language was in it.

It was distributed by email to numerous organizations and congressional offices for their input. It has been posted for 2 months on the U.S. Government Web site, accessible to any congressional staffer or member of the public. So we have people who come to the Senate saying they didn't know this was in there. Well, then, did they not read the bill? Did they not have their staff read the bill? For a long period of time it has been right out there where 300 million people could access it on the Web site.

If lawmakers then are asserting that they did not know the Hyde amendment was included in the bill, then it means they simply didn't read this legislation.

I again call on my colleagues to support the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, focusing on helping survivors of trafficking heal and protect others from becoming victims of such a terrible crime.

It is a meaningful solution that is supported by large bipartisan groups of Senators. We have a real opportunity to provide survivors of trafficking with the kind of support that is essential to their recovery and future success.

Working together, in a bipartisan way, we can restore dignity to survivors. That is why we need to pass this act right now.

It also gives this Senate an opportunity to do what I hear from the people of grassroots Iowa so often in my town meetings, such as Saturday when I was in Truro, IA, and 33 people showed up. I was in Norwalk, IA, and 66 people showed up. At those meetings they keep asking: Why can't you Republicans and Democrats get together?

This is one of those bills where Republicans and Democrats are getting together. Now we find some people—who evidently don't read legislation until the midnight hour—coming to the floor of the Senate saying something along the lines of: We snuck something into the bill.

Snuck something into the bill when the bill has been out there on the Web site for a couple of months already? No, that is disingenuous. So the bill is not moving along. But when this bill is brought up for a final vote, the people will see that Republicans and Democrats can work together if we can get over this hurdle of the stonewalling by the minority party of the Senate, holding up this bill for a disingenuous reason.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. FISCHER). The Senator from Nevada.

Mr. HELLER. Madam President, I rise today in support of the bill that is currently pending before us, the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act. I commend the chairman for his hard work and effort on this piece of legislation and for ushering it through the Senate.

I also thank and commend the senior Senators from Texas and Minnesota for coming together in a bipartisan fashion on this vitally important human rights legislation.

Because this is such a bipartisan bill—frankly, a nonpartisan issue—I am frustrated that we are at an impasse on moving this bill forward with an open debate.

Let me repeat. This is a nonpartisan issue. I encourage my colleagues across the aisle to move forward with an open debate on this vitally important human rights legislation.

Every day countless innocent victims are bought and sold into modern-day slavery in America. All too often, many of these victims are children.

As the father of four and a grandfather of two, I believe every child should have the opportunity to grow up in a loving and safe environment. I know the Presiding Officer agrees with that. I know everybody in this Chamber agrees with that today. Unfortunately, that is not the case for too many children.

Recognizing this is an important issue. My home State of Nevada has taken action over the past several years not only to assist victims of trafficking but also to ensure these victims have the opportunity to seek compensation for their traffickers. Given Nevada's unique location, especially southern Nevada, this is a crime that is all too prevalent within my home State. Just to give us an idea, 2 years ago the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department reported that 2,144 sex

trafficking victims under the age of 18 were rescued in Las Vegas since 1994. That is an average of 126 per year. Even more daunting, that is 1 person rescued every 3 days. This is one city in one State. More than half of these victims were from Nevada, and the rest of them were trafficked through the State.

While Nevada is taking important steps forward in providing restitution of victims of trafficking, much more needs to be done to stop this crime from occurring in the first place. All too often, trafficking is a crime that is hidden from plain sight. It occurs in every single State. That is why it is vitally important to recognize the warning signs of someone who may be a victim of human trafficking, as well as those who are committing these crimes.

I am pleased to see this underlying bill recognizes this need, especially for local law enforcement, especially for health providers, and especially for first responders.

The bill, however, fails to recognize the important role of our Nation's ports of entry and how they play into our Nation's domestic and international transportation system, and the opportunity they provide for human trafficking. That is why I filed an amendment to this legislation, to ensure that victims of human trafficking and perpetrators of this crime will not be able to pass through such places without additional law enforcement awareness.

My amendment requires the Department of Homeland Security to train TSA, CBP, and other relevant departments' personnel to effectively deter, detect, and disrupt human trafficking. Recognizing the different needs of States and the critical role of local law enforcement in combatting human trafficking, it also allows DHS to provide training to any State, local or tribal government or private organization in order to establish a human trafficking awareness training program.

Finally, this amendment requires DHS to keep records of the number of human trafficking cases reported or confirmed and to report these numbers annually to Congress. That way we can measure progress in our efforts to end human trafficking.

Instead of creating another layer of bureaucracy, my amendment simply complements and enhances the current efforts by DHS to equip its personnel with effective strategies to combat human trafficking at our Nation's ports of entry and other high-risk areas.

Earlier this year, I was pleased to see similar legislation pass the House of Representatives with unanimous support.

I think most of us can agree that this issue of human trafficking is not a partisan issue; it is a human rights issue. Whether one is a parent, a sibling, a child or a relative, this issue is real. That is why I am so pleased to see this Chamber come together in a bipartisan manner to bring this bill to the floor. Once again, I only hope we can come together and move this debate forward.

As I tell Nevadans back home, I came to Washington, DC, to work. I work with Republicans and I work with Democrats. There are issues we may at times have to agree to disagree on, but moving forward on a bipartisan bill such as this should not be one of them.

We need to do all we can to end this disgraceful and disgusting crime once and for all. We should move forward in providing much needed help to these victims, including children.

There is more work to do on this bill and ways to make it a better product through the amendment process, but we should be moving forward instead of stalling out.

I hope I have the opportunity to call up my amendment, and I would urge my colleagues to support my amendment so we can ensure that DHS personnel are properly trained to prevent the serious threat of human trafficking. Help is almost there for these victims. I hope we can come to a resolution today to move forward on this bill.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

Ms. COLLINS. Madam President, I support S. 178, the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act. The bill supports law enforcement officers and prosecutors in their efforts to prevent, respond to, and combat human trafficking. Of particular importance, the domestic trafficking victims' fund created by this legislation would help States and localities develop training and services for survivors.

In February, I was proud to join all the women in the Senate in requesting that the Judiciary Committee hold a hearing on human trafficking. I appreciate the work of Chairman GRASSLEY and Ranking Member LEAHY in quickly scheduling that hearing and thank them for inviting Senators MIKULSKI, AYOTTE, GILLIBRAND, and me to testify before the committee on behalf of all of the women in the Senate. I applaud the committee's bipartisan work in shining a light on some of the darkest stories imaginable.

No State is immune from the evils of sex trafficking. Traffickers lure vulnerable victims with the promises of a better life and use violence, threats, lies, money, drugs, and other forms of coercion to trap them in a life of commercial sex. Many criminals who once worked in drugs have now turned to sex trafficking because it is more profitable.

The stories of victims are shocking. Just this past January, police in Bangor, ME, arrested a man and woman for allegedly forcing a 13-year-old girl into prostitution. This child, who was listed as a missing person, was being sold for sex through ads on the Internet. Unfortunately, there are many horrific cases like this occurring across the country.

The policies and tools for law enforcement, prosecutors, and survivors included in S. 178 are important pieces of a strong Federal response to human trafficking, and I commend Senators CORNYN and KLOBUCHAR for their work on this legislation.

I also hope the Senate will adopt an amendment I have cosponsored with Senator LEAHY that would reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs, which provide critical preventive and treatment services that help homeless youth around the country. Runaway and homeless youth are especially vulnerable to becoming victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. A meaningful response to the very serious problem of human trafficking must also ensure that those most vulnerable to human trafficking—including our Nation's homeless youth—have the resources they need. The preventive measures provided by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act programs can help stem the tide of potential trafficking victims.

The State of Maine is doing its part to end the scourge of human trafficking, where the Not Here Justice in Action Network and other partnerships between law enforcement and service providers are helping to raise awareness and help victims. Our health care workers in Maine are also tremendous partners. St. Joseph Hospital in Bangor, ME, for example, has focused its efforts on educating and training clinicians, nurses, and emergency medical providers to recognize the signs of human trafficking among their patients. With the proper tools and training, these nurses can intervene. They are learning how to identify victims and how to ask the right questions, which are critically important to keeping these atrocities from continuing.

The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act offers important supports for victims and enhanced tools for our law enforcement. I urge my colleagues to support the bill.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maine.

TRIBUTE TO GEORGE AND DONNA GUNNING AND BURT TRUMAN

Mr. KING. Madam President, I rise to share some good news from my home State of Maine. It is the story of veterans helping veterans—of three people from Maine who have positively impacted the lives of thousands of veterans in my State and have done so in a unique way. They make personalized wooden canes with a bold and intricate bald eagle head carved into the handle for any Maine veteran who wants one.

I have some pictures that show a large number of the canes and a close-up. As I noted when one of these canes appeared in my office recently, this eagle has an attitude and he is positive about the future of this country.

About 8 years ago, George and Donna Gunning from Windsor, ME, heard about a project in Oklahoma called the Eagle Cane Project. The mission was to help post-9/11 veterans who had trouble walking because of leg disabilities due to combat-related action by providing them with a unique hand-carved cane.

As a Navy veteran, George and his wife Donna Gunning, who grew up in a Navy family, were both intimately familiar with the sacrifices and difficulties that accompany military service. This project touched their hearts and they quickly recognized it as an opportunity to give back to veterans in Maine. They brought their own version of the project to our State, offering a personalized eagle cane to any Maine veteran who had served anywhere in the world in any conflict across the globe.

It wasn't long before the Gunnings were joined by another fellow named Burt Truman from Hallowell, ME, who spent two decades in the military, in the Navy, Army Reserve, and the Air National Guard. The trio worked together on each cane they made—crafting them, painting them, personalizing each one by etching the veteran's name and molding medals to show their branch of the service and any honors they received.

As impressive as each of these masterpieces is, the number that these three people have produced is what is astounding and remarkable. The current count is 2,474 of these personally hand-made canes, made free of charge and funded for Maine veterans entirely through donations.

For all their hard work and dedication, the trio remains adamant that they deserve no special recognition, although I am giving it to them here today. Instead, they would rather the attention and admiration and thanks of all of our people be directed toward the veterans who are receiving these canes, who have borne so much for our country.

That is the true magic of this project. It is about recognizing our veterans, supporting them, and giving them something to lean on, both literally, physically, and emotionally.

In recent months, as the Presiding Officer knows, there have been a number of efforts in the Congress to further support our veterans—to improve their access to care and support services. While the Choice Act, which was signed into law last August, made progress in this area, more work needs to be done. To ensure that provisions of this legislation we all voted for and supported last year are implemented in accordance with our intent, Senator JERRY MORAN, Senator SUSAN COLLINS, myself and others have introduced a bill to improve how the VA determines eligibility for the Choice Program.

Currently, veterans can only use their Choice cards if they cannot get an appointment within 30 days at a VA facility and face an excessive burden of travel, such as a body of water, or if they live more than 40 miles as the crow flies from any VA facility, regardless of whether it provides the type of care they need.

In my opinion this isn't what Congress intended. In rural States such as Maine, as the crow flies is not a good definition of distance. We have to take into account whether the VA facility in question can provide our veterans with the specific care services they require. So the bill sponsored by Senators MORAN, COLLINS, myself, and others offers a fix by requiring the VA to use its existing authority to offer community care to veterans who live more than 40 miles driving distance from the nearest VA facility that provides the type of care they need.

I hope in the coming weeks the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and the similar committee in the House will hold hearings on this issue so we are able to provide a path forward and correct what I think is certainly a fixable portion of the Choice Act we passed last year.

As we look for that path, and as we think about veterans' issues, I think these eagle canes provide some inspiration. The bald eagle of course is a national symbol of freedom and independence, and with these canes it has also come to symbolize in Maine the debt of gratitude we owe to our Nation's veterans. Each cane is a treasured reminder that someone cares, someone notices, and someone appreciates what they have done.

I have seen firsthand the powerful effect these canes have. Earlier this month I was meeting with members of the Maine Veterans of Foreign Wars and one of the gentlemen who sat right next to me in my office had with him this beautifully carved eagle cane. Thinking it was the only one of its kind, I asked him where he found something so unique and interesting and powerful. He said: Well, it was made right here in Maine, and I am not the only person who has one. It was one of thousands made in a Windsor, ME, workshop.

Even more telling was how quickly and enthusiastically the VFW members, also in my office that day, jumped in to explain where the canes came from and how glowingly they spoke of this project and what it has meant to veterans in Maine. They knew the history of the project, they described the meticulousness of the craftsmanship—which we can see here—and they quickly gave me George Gunning's name. Their enthusiasm underscored their true appreciation for the support and recognition this Eagle Cane Project in Maine had given to them and their fellow veterans.

Burt, George, and Donna's work is a true testament to the strength of our veterans community in Maine, and that is what it is all about.

Good news from Maine, Madam President. Good news about our commitment to each other and our commitment to our veterans. It is often said that Maine is a big small town with very long streets. We know each other, we care about each other, and in this case we deeply care about our veterans.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Madam President, I come to the floor incredibly disappointed that we can't seem to move forward on what should be a noncontroversial, powerful, and bipartisan effort.

I think we can all agree in the Senate that we must do more to combat human trafficking and help the victims of this heinous act, and I was looking forward to, I believe, Senator CORKER offering an amendment on legislation that passed out of the Foreign Relations Committee that would establish a private, nonprofit grantmaking institution known as the End Slavery Initiative Foundation to reduce the worst forms of forced labor and sexual servitude around the world. I was looking forward to having a serious debate about this important issue, and it is truly unfortunate that the debate has been sidelined by matters that are not to the core of the trafficking issue.

I rise to specifically address an amendment that I understand is pending to attempt to hijack our debate about human trafficking. This amendment is out of place and out of step with everything I believe we stand for in the Senate. It is an amendment to a bill that seeks to amend the Constitution of the United States. It is an amendment offered by a Republican colleague that grows the government and increases taxes. It is an amendment to a trafficking bill that could make people more likely to be trafficked.

I am talking about the amendment to eliminate birthright citizenship and end the people's right to be citizens by being born on American soil.

Birthright citizenship is a bedrock principle found not in law but in the Constitution. The 14th Amendment states clearly that ''all persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.''

For 115 years the obvious and plain meaning that people born on American soil are American citizens has been affirmed before the Supreme Court and can only be changed by a constitutional amendment. My colleague from Louisiana instead presents a bill and tries to argue with the Supreme Court and the English language by claiming undocumented immigrants are not subject to the jurisdiction thereof. Is he suggesting, for example, that if an undocumented immigrant was brought to court, he or she wouldn't be subject to the court's jurisdiction? Clearly not. And the civil rights leaders who drafted the 14th Amendment didn't think so either.

Instead, the 14th Amendment was adopted after the infamous Dred Scott

decision to make sure the United States never has an unequal class system. This principle, that America isn't a country club, is a profound American value. If my friend from Louisiana wants to change the Constitution, he should abide by the framework our Founding Fathers set up.

If a Senator wants to make a monumental change to how our Nation defines citizenship in the Constitution, he or she must go to the constitutional amending process our Founding Fathers set up to make sure we have widespread and overwhelming consensus. That is why the Founders created a process in which amending the Constitution needed a broad swath of the American population to say, yes, that is worthy of changing the Constitution that has worked so well for us for so many years. We are here to protect the Constitution, and the 14th Amendment is sacrosanct and too important to be defined by the political and discriminatory impulses of any Member of Congress.

But beyond trying to change our Constitution with a piece of legislation, my friend from Louisiana's amendment to a human trafficking bill could make human trafficking worse. Eliminating birthright citizenship would create a perpetual class of undocumented immigrants, ironically growing the undocumented population by ensuring that undocumented children, and their children born here, would become undocumented, and their children and their children's children could never come out of the shadows and be equal under the law.

This new permanent underclass would inevitably lead to some without any citizenship in any country; in other words, they would be stateless. This new underclass would be subject to the worst forms of exploitation, including, for some, becoming victims of human trafficking themselves.

But the irony doesn't stop there. For the party of limited government and low taxes, my friend from Louisiana proposes an amendment that would put the Department of Homeland Security in every delivery room and require the creation of a brandnew, extensive bureaucracy with burdensome procedures. It would also create a de facto birth tax for people to have to go back and prove their citizenship.

My friend from Louisiana tries to justify all this by saying it will prevent people from coming to the United States solely to give birth, but I don't even know if he truly believes that explanation. It ignores the plain fact that the practice he describes is already illegal under the law.

If he wants to get into a discussion about enforcing the existing law, I am always willing to talk about the need for more resources for the men and women in law enforcement in order to be able to do that. This amendment wouldn't make the practice he describes one bit more illegal, but it would change the Constitution of the United States by a simple passage of the Senate, not as an amendment to the Constitution.

This isn't the time and this isn't the place for an amendment attacking birthright citizenship. A bill isn't the place or the venue to change the Constitution. A bill on human trafficking isn't the time for a measure that might increase human trafficking.

Frankly, for someone who wants limited government, they shouldn't put the Department of Homeland Security in the delivery room. This is just another attack on immigrants that is against American values and in this case against our Constitution. We can do far better than that.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. HOEVEN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. HOEVEN. Madam President, I rise today to speak in support of the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act legislation that has been drafted and introduced by my good friends Senator JOHN CORNYN of Texas and Senator AMY KLOBUCHAR of Minnesota. The bill helps survivors of human trafficking and child pornography and aids law enforcement in discouraging demand for these serious crimes.

This is a bill they originally introduced in 2013. I was a cosponsor of that bill, and I am also an original cosponsor of this bipartisan legislation which was introduced earlier this year because I believe it is very important legislation. It is important because it not only compensates victims of human trafficking and other crimes of exploitation for their injuries but also provides resources to help law enforcement prevent such crimes in the future by targeting demand.

The need for this bill is real and it is troubling. Every year across America, children and adults are bought and sold for reprehensible purposes. According to the National Center For Missing and Exploited Children, at least 100,000 American children each year are the victims of commercial child prostitution and child trafficking. It is not just a big-State, big-city problem. Every State in the country is facing this issue, including my home State of North Dakota, but we currently have trouble addressing this problem because of the many needs, including the need for resources.

After consultation with the attorney general's office, we learned that North Dakota has had difficulty applying for anti-human trafficking grants because to be eligible, the Department of Justice requires at least 2 years of local data on human trafficking. In recent years, North Dakota has been the fastest growing State in the country in terms of both population and income growth. Consequently, North Dakota has only recently seen a sudden increase in human trafficking issues. To remedy that, I have offered an amendment to the Cornyn-Klobuchar bill to make sure it does not mandate a required time period of collected data. The proposed amendment clarifies that a local or State government with a worthy trafficking initiative will not be precluded from receiving funds under the Cornyn-Klobuchar legislation because they, like North Dakota, have only recently begun collecting data on human trafficking. They only have to demonstrate a valid need, which is, of course, significant and growing across the country.

Here is what a group of victims support groups and law enforcement organizations had to say:

> Women and children, especially girls, are advertised online where buyers purchase them with ease, anonymity, and impunity. This happens in every city, in every State.

There are few issues that we as a governing body can be more unified on than that our children are precious and that it is our duty to protect them. For this reason, the Cornyn-Klobuchar bill has strong bipartisan support in the Senate, and I believe it will also be supported in the House. While it may need some amending here and there, we all recognize we could be doing more to help victims of human trafficking, child pornography, and other crimes of exploitation against children and vulnerable adults. These often-invisible victims not only need to be rescued from their situation, but they also need medical, mental health, housing, legal, and other important services.

The Cornyn-Klobuchar bill addresses the need to do more head-on. It establishes the Domestic Trafficking Victims' Fund, which is paid for through fines on persons convicted of child pornography, human trafficking, child prostitution, sexual exploitation, and human smuggling offenses.

Under current law those convicted of child abuse, trafficking, and related crimes must pay just a $100 special assessment fee. Under this legislation that fee is increased to $5,000 for every individual convicted of human trafficking, child pornography, and other forms of child exploitation. Those funds go to the Domestic Trafficking Victims' Fund, which will be used to increase the Federal resources available for human trafficking victims by $7 million a year over a 5-year timeframe, for a total of $35 million.

Funding will be awarded as block grants to State and local governments under the Victim-Centered Human Trafficking Deterrence Block Grant Program. The purpose of these grants is to develop and implement victim-centered programs that train law enforcement to rescue trafficking survivors, prosecute traffickers and pornographers, and help to restore the lives of their innocent victims.

In addition, the Justice for Victims of Human Trafficking Act does a number of things, including making sure that victims get restitution and witnesses get rewards for cooperating with law enforcement before others, encouraging prosecutors to get training on restitution in human trafficking cases, and giving law enforcement greater authority to seize the assets of convicted human traffickers.

It protects victims and witnesses by requiring human traffickers to be treated as violent criminals for purposes of pretrial release and detention pending judicial proceedings.

It ensures that Federal crime victims are informed of any plea bargain or deferred prosecution agreement in their case and clarifies that the ordinary standard of appellate review applies in cases concerning Federal crime victims' rights petitions.

It recognizes that child pornography production is a form of human trafficking and ensures that victims have access to direct services at child advocacy centers to help them heal.

It allows State and local human trafficking task forces to get wiretap warrants within their own State courts without Federal approval. That will help them to more effectively investigate crimes of child pornography, child exploitation, and human trafficking.

In addition, the bill improves nationwide communications so that law enforcement can better track and capture traffickers and child pornographers. It ensures regular reporting on the number of human trafficking crimes for purposes of the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program. It also requires law enforcement to upload photos of missing individuals into the National Criminal Information Center database and notifies the National Center For Missing and Exploited Children of any child reported missing from foster care.

Finally, it strengthens the current law to reduce demand for human trafficking by encouraging police, prosecutors, judges, and juries to target all persons involved in the buying and selling of human trafficking victims. It is wrong to prosecute victims and to fail to prosecute those who prey on them.

The value and importance of this bill are reflected in the broad coalition of victims' rights and law enforcement organizations that support it. It has been endorsed by nearly 200 groups, from the Fraternal Order of Police, to the National Center For Missing and Exploited Children.

We need to pass the Cornyn-Klobuchar legislation because crimes such as human trafficking and child pornography target the most vulnerable among us in a most despicable way. I urge all of my colleagues to pass this bill to put an end to modern-day slavery and to help victims get the support they need.

Again, I would like to close with my request to our colleagues on both sides of the aisle that we be allowed to proceed on the bill and again reference the importance of including my amendment, which ensures that all States, including those that have seen a recent real increase in human trafficking, have access to funds so that they can truly help victims in their State combat human trafficking in their State in conjunction with local law enforcement.

With that, Madam President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Louisiana.

Mr. VITTER. Thank you, Madam President.

All this week I have come to the floor to talk about this issue of birthright citizenship and to offer my amendment that would end that policy. I come to the floor again on that issue.

I have an amendment pending on this bill to change that policy, to end birthright citizenship. I would like to read a statement on the subject:

> The American people are upset, and I think they have a right to be upset, but they are upset for a reason. Our immigration policies, regulating all aspects of entry to the United States, have simply ceased to function in the national interest. ''Immigration policy'' and ''national interest'' are terms that are rarely heard in the context of immigration. We seem to have lost sight of the fact that it is a public policy and, like all public policies, our immigration policy should serve the public interest. But they do not.
>
> Let us talk about legal immigration.
>
> We now admit the equivalent of a major city every year, without having the vaguest idea of how we will educate all the new children, care for the sick, provide housing, jobs, build infrastructure, or attend to any of the human needs of the newcomers or those already here.
>
> Mr. President, each year, we admit—I repeat—the equivalent of a major city. We admit more people each year than make up some of our States. We admit a new State with legal immigrants every year.
>
> At a time of huge budget deficits and severe financial constraints, we have no idea of how these huge costs will be borne. We just do it.
>
> We admit the equivalent of a major city without any assessment of whether these newcomers are likely to be contributing members of our society. Only a tiny fraction of those admitted each year enter because they have skills and abilities that will benefit our country. The rest come merely because they happen to be relatives of other recent immigrants. The result of this so-called policy is that there is now a backlog of almost 3½ million people—the population of a city the size of Los Angeles—who have a claim to immigrate to the United States for no other reason than they are somebody's relative. Is this really a way to run immigration policy?
>
> If making it easy to be an illegal alien is not enough, how about offering a reward for being an illegal immigrant? No sane country would do that, right? Guess again. If you break our laws by entering this country without permission and give birth to a child, we reward that child with U.S. citizenship and guarantee full access to all public and social services this society provides. And that is a lot of services. Is it any wonder that two-thirds of the babies born at taxpayer expense in county-run hospitals in Los Angeles are born to illegal alien mothers?

This is not my statement. This is Senator HARRY REID's statement on the floor of the Senate, including his strong support for an end to birthright citizenship, that he gave on September 20, 1993, to which I refer my colleagues' attention.

In closing, I thank Senator REID for his prior words in strong support of what he yesterday called, quote, VITTER's stupid amendment.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SASSE). The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business for up to 15 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

WILDFIRE PREVENTION

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, this morning, in the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, there was a very valuable hearing on a bipartisan piece of legislation called the Sportsmen's Act, obviously designed to promote hunting and fishing activities which are so important to Oregonians and something our people just enjoy immensely.

I was not able to sit through the whole hearing because we had important business in the Finance Committee, but I got a flavor of it by listening to parts of it here and there. When it came to my turn to ask questions, I pointed out that one cannot go into the woods and hunt and fish if the woods are burning up. My sense is—particularly after what I learned last weekend—that is exactly what we are going to be facing, particularly in the West, and we are going to be facing it sooner rather than later.

We all know the Senate left on Wednesday in order to avoid the snowstorms, so I basically flew all night to make it to Medford, OR, for a fire briefing on Thursday. The idea that we would need to have a fire briefing in March was pretty much unheard of years ago. The fire season was something we faced in the summer or maybe in the early summer we would have a briefing on the challenges and what resources the local officials and Forest Service would need, such as tankers and the like.

Fires are now a year-round proposition. They are getting bigger, hotter, lasting longer, and they are infernos.

What I was told last week in my home State in Medford is that they are facing the driest fire season in 25 years. They took out the map and showed us California, which looks bone dry. After that eye-opening briefing, I went on to Lane County, which is closer to Portland. It is further up the valley. They said they had the least snow in 10 years and so they were just as concerned as Medford.

Malheur County has already asked our Governor to declare a State drought emergency due to record low snowpack and below average water runoff, and these drought declarations usually don't come until months and months later.

One of the reasons I wanted to come to the floor is to highlight how serious this fire season is going to be. This ought to be a wake-up call for all Americans because this is going to put pressure on scarce resources, in my view, like we have never seen before.

These firefighters, as the Presiding Officer knows, are incredibly dedicated and patriotic people. But when we have fires in multiple areas, trying to move resources around quickly becomes a huge challenge, and it is particularly challenging when the system of fighting wildfires in America is broken. I can't describe it any other way than it being essentially broken and badly in need of repair.

The heart of the problem is that Federal policy has consistently shorted the prevention accounts. So what they need to do is go in there and thin forests out and deal with underbrush, such as small trees that pose the greatest risk of fire, and those accounts have been shortchanged for quite some time.

It gets hotter and drier on the forest floor. We can have a debate about why that is. I happen to think climate change is a part of it, others will cite other considerations, but what is indisputable is what is happening. It is hotter, drier, and in our part of the country there are frequent lightning strikes which can cause an inferno that leaps across Federal and State and private lines.

When we have a huge fire on our hands, often what happens is the government runs out of money to fight that megafire, and the handful of others like it, so the government then—really the agencies—borrow from the prevention fund in order to put the fire out, and the problem just gets worse and worse and worse.

What Senator CRAPO and I have proposed in the Senate—and there is a similar bipartisan effort in the House—is to change that. What we have said is that it is time for the government to fight these megafires—just the 1 percent or so of megafires—from the disaster account and not shortchange the prevention fund because that is how we prevent these infernos from taking place. We go in there and do the thinning, we deal with the small trees and underbrush, and we prevent those big fires.

The budget office has actually given us an analysis that this is pretty close to a wash from a budget standpoint, because if we only fight those megafires—the 1 or 2 percent—and we get solid, substantial benefits from prevention because we have prevented a megafire, we really have not added to the budget.

By clearing away the fuels and reducing both the number and intensity of future fires, reducing the amount of fuel on the ground simply makes it easier for our courageous firefighters to stop a fire in its tracks.

I brought this poster to the floor this afternoon. It is not too hard to tell what the benefits are when we actually go out and receive these fuel treatments. It is clear this is a useful tool for holding down the damage for communities and taxpayers. These fuel treatments can be particularly beneficial for reducing wildfires and protecting our populated areas.

My hope is that now we are finally starting to see what this fire season is going to be like, that focusing on prevention and not raiding the prevention fund to deal with those 1 percent of the megafires will help us get out ahead of the problem instead of spending substantially more money and trying to play catchup as the infernos rip their way through the West.

I will close by saying that I think the bill Senator CRAPO and I have introduced is not the only answer to what we are going to be dealing with this fire season, but it is an important one. Another approach I think makes a great deal of sense is the Forest Service Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Programs because, again, these help bring together people of differing political views and differing philosophies to clear flammable materials from our forests while producing saleable timber for the mills.

In the Malheur National Forest in my home State, for one, the Southern Blues Collaborative Project is a real success story. The stewardship contracts there not only helped clear the forests of unhealthy snags and hazardous wildfire fuels, they helped to bring the Malheur Lumber Company mill back from the brink of closure at least once.

There is an effort at the U.S. Department of Agriculture to encourage these collaborative partnerships across the country. I commend the Department of Agriculture, Chief Tidwell in particular, for these collaboratives because they are vital to the health and vitality of our country's forests, and they are a solid foundation for wildfire response.

I would also like to thank the President and the Forest Service for supporting the bipartisan efforts of Senator CRAPO and me, and a similar one that is underway in the House. To me, the bottom line is if we can pass the legislation I have described here today and shore up our priority as being prevention while, at the same time, making better use of existing money by saving the megafires we deal with for the disaster fund, that gets us off to the races in terms of having a more sensible system for fighting wildfires; then, if we support the collaboratives I have just described that are really floundering across the country, and we are seeing more of them, we are seeing bigger collaboratives; that is the kind of policy that helps us get out in front of what is going to be, in my view, another dangerous fire season. If we are just crossing our fingers and hoping somehow this fire season isn't going to be as bad as I was told last week in Medford and in Eugene—that doesn't make any sense to me, particularly given some of the other activities in the Senate that have been bipartisan priorities.

That is why I felt compelled to come to the floor this afternoon because of the hearing this morning on sportsmen. We want to have those opportunities for sportsmen and fishermen and all of the people who want to use our great natural resources. They are part of our heritage and they are a big shot in the arm economically as well. We are not going to be able to go into those woods this summer to hunt and fish if they are burning up.

So I am very hopeful we can quickly pass the bipartisan legislation to change the way in which we fight wildfires, that we can shore up our collaboratives which, dollar for dollar, are about as useful as anything that is done in the natural resources area. I encourage my colleagues this afternoon, given what is looking us in the eye with respect to this fire season, to join me in fixing the wildfire budget and encouraging collaborative partnerships that get us out in front of the fires and end this catastrophic growth of wildfires, particularly in the Western United States.

Mr. President, I note that one of my colleagues is ready to speak.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

Mr. MURPHY. Mr. President, I thank my colleague for yielding.

AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

My good friend from Wyoming was on the floor yesterday, I believe. He is a frequent critic of the Affordable Care Act. He made a pretty simple point that was reported in the press yesterday critical of the administration for holding so many events talking about the success of the Affordable Care Act.

His suggestion was that we shouldn't be celebrating—the administration shouldn't be celebrating—the success of the Affordable Care Act in terms of the number of people who are gaining access to it, the stabilizing cost curve of health care expenditures all across the country, and the number of people whose emotional well-being is much better today because they don't have to worry about ever losing their health care simply because they get sick, or losing all of their savings simply because their child comes down with an expensive illness.

I guess I would beg to differ because I talk to people all across my State of Connecticut who are celebrating today because the ACA works. They are celebrating because their lives have been transformed by the fact that we now have finally made a commitment as a nation to make sure that if someone's son gets sick, they won't lose their savings, their college 529, their house, their car, just because of an illness.

I think the Affordable Care Act is something to celebrate because a lot of my constituents believe the same thing. Betsy from Litchfield, CT, said that without the Affordable Care Act, she would not have health insurance at

all due to her preexisting condition. One month before the ACA was implemented, she was sick with stage 4 cancer and her insurance company gave her 2 weeks' notice that it was going to end her coverage early. Luckily, Betsy was able to resolve that issue. But she says: ''The bottom line is that before the Affordable Care Act, health insurance could and did kick sick people off of their rolls and 'pre-existing conditions' left many uninsured indefinitely.''

She says:

If you are not insured and have to pay the outrageous costs of U.S. health care out-of-pocket, you will quickly spend all of your retirement savings. That was the situation I was facing in December 2013 and it was an unsettling prospect.

Linda from Winsted, CT, says she is grateful for affordable health care because she has multiple chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and osteoarthritis. She was unable to buy health insurance at any price because the health insurance companies were charging her more because of her preexisting conditions. In Linda's view, this issue boils down to people having basic rights, the freedom to be healthy, the freedom for her to live a life in which she knows she is going to be able to afford coverage for herself.

She said this in an email to me: ''There is no freedom in poverty and certainly none in needless human suffering.''

So Betsy is celebrating today. Linda is celebrating today. There are millions of others like them all across the country who know the Affordable Care Act is working.

But it is not just those individuals, it is newspapers, from the New York Times to USA TODAY, and the Washington Post on down, that are saying with a clear voice: ''The Affordable Care Act has achieved nearly all of its ambitious goals,'' and ''11.4 million Americans are now signed up for health care.''

This is a success story all across the country, but a success story that is at risk. It is at risk because of a Supreme Court which is considering an evisceration of the Affordable Care Act that would be a stunning act of judicial overreach if the plaintiffs were to succeed in the King v. Burwell case. Their contention is simply that it was the intent of Congress to only provide insurance subsidies to States that had State exchanges and not Federal exchanges. I haven't found a single Senator or Representative who voted for that law who says it was their intent to punish States that didn't establish State exchanges by withholding subsidies from millions of Americans. In fact, there is no way to plainly read the statute without coming to the conclusion that subsidies were not just intended but written into the law to go to every single State, no matter what kind of exchange they decided to establish. The law says that because it specifically states that States that don't choose to set up their own exchange will have a Federal exchange take the place of that State exchange.

The totality of the law is clear as well. If the Federal Government had intended to give subsidies only to States that had State exchanges, they would have also made the insurance reforms contingent upon those State exchanges being established. Instead, the insurance reforms are nationwide, meaning that, clearly, the statute was set up to make subsidies nationwide, because the insurance reforms cannot exist—cannot exist—without those subsidies being available to people to be able to buy affordable insurance.

It is not just the individuals who voted for this law who are clear that subsidies should be available; it is the Congressional Budget Office. The Congressional Budget Office reads statutes we pass, independently interprets them, and then assesses a cost to the laws we pass. Doug Elmendorf was before the Appropriations Committee yesterday and I asked him a simple question: When you independently reviewed the Affordable Care Act, did you come to the conclusion that it allowed for subsidies to go to State and Federal exchanges? His answer was clear: Yes. We read the Affordable Care Act as to provide insurance subsidies to both State exchanges and Federal exchanges and, thus, we priced the bill accordingly.

The law is clear. The law's intent is clear. The voices of those who voted for it are clear. The independent Congressional Budget Office is clear. The Affordable Care Act only works if subsidies flow to both States that have Federal exchanges and States that have State exchanges.

For families such as those of Betsy in Litchfield, CT, and Linda in Winsted, CT, who continue celebrating the success of the Affordable Care Act on the ground floor for the millions of lives that have been transformed, this body needs to continue to stand up for the premise that the Affordable Care Act continues to work. That is absolutely something to celebrate.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Wyoming.

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, I would ask my friend and colleague from Connecticut—we have worked closely together on a number of items—a question or two relating to the fact that the CBO report recently came out—just on Monday—and mentioned that the benchmark policy next year is going to be up 8 percent across the board. The benchmark policy will go up 8 percent, meaning higher premiums not just next year, but the year after that, another 8 percent, and then another 8 percent. I would like to know, as a Senator representing people and as a doctor, how many people in his State believe that is actually a good deal. The President promised the people from his State that premiums would drop by $2,500 per family. NANCY PELOSI, the Speaker of the House—and my friend from Connecticut was a Member of the House at the time—said premiums would drop for everyone.

So we are talking about specifically people buying policies on the exchange. Yet the numbers that came out Monday that the President of the United States is celebrating—and my friend and colleague has a sign up about how this health care law is supposedly working—how that works for people when next year they are going to pay 8 percent more and the year after that 8 percent more, and these are people who are actually getting subsidies who are buying the benchmark insurance through the exchange.

I know we are running short on time, but I would ask my colleague to address that specific component because I hear about it every day.

Mr. MURPHY. I appreciate my friend's question and I will be quick in the answer because I know we are running short on time.

I actually asked the CBO Director a question very similar to the one the Senator from Wyoming proposes. I said: Explain to me why your report actually says the Affordable Care Act is going to cost 10 percent less than you originally estimated and explain to me why the insurance subsidies are going to cost 20 percent less than you originally estimated.

His answer was very clear: It is because premiums have come in lower than CBO initially estimated.

In fact, this year, Kaiser reviewed premiums within these exchanges all across the country and said the average premium increase from last year to this year is 1 percent all across the country. In Connecticut, our biggest insurer increased their premiums by 1 percent. One of the other offerers on the exchange decreased their premiums by 10 percent. The reason the Affordable Care Act is costing much less today is because our actual experience—not our estimated experience into the future—is that premiums are being stabilized in large part because of the reforms in this act.

So if we want to talk about actual experience—what is happening on the ground today—it is that we are seeing premiums coming in almost exactly where they were last year, this year, in comparison to 5 years ago and 10 years ago when we were seeing double-digit increases in premiums from year to year.

So part of the reason I am celebrating this law, quite frankly, I say to my good friend, is because the actual experience from this year to last year is that premiums are remaining stable and in some places like Connecticut are actually coming down, and the Affordable Care Act is costing less money than was initially estimated by CBO, in large part because premiums are lower than expected.

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, I would point out to my friend that the actual reason which he never addressed

is that they are going up next year. CBO has suggested they are going to go up 8 percent next year, and 8 percent the year after that, and 8 percent the year after that.

The other issue, as he says, is the amount of money spent is because fewer people are signing up. People realize it is not a good deal. I think the CBO at one point thought there would be 14 million people signed up by this point and now it is only 11 million. So the fact that people are deciding to not sign up—to not sign up—is one of the reasons the government, while still spending more money than they were in the past, is spending not quite as much as they thought they might have to, had all the people the President thought would sign up for his idea signed up. So that seems to be the situation, when we actually go into the CBO report.

I agree the total dollar figure is less than the high figure anticipated. It has come down some, but it is because fewer people have actually chosen to participate which is because the health care law continues to be unpopular. Many people think it is not a good deal for them; that even though they have subsidies, they can't afford to meet their copay, meet their deductible. Many have insurance, but they can't see a doctor. They have lost their doctor.

Those are some of the issues that I think were highlighted in that CBO report that the President ought to be honest about with the American people. The reason for the celebration I think is very premature and actually in error because so many people have been harmed by this law.

Mr. MURPHY. Mr. President, I think I might not be alone, I say to my good friend from Wyoming, in suggesting that most people probably would not suggest that 11 million people signing up for health care means the law is unpopular. Indeed, we have seen a reduction by 25 percent in those across the country who do not have insurance, in a year's worth of time. I think that is a pretty stunning uptake, and it shows how desperately people wanted insurance. But, again, I asked the same question to the CBO head yesterday. His review of why there has been a slight differential—it is a pretty small one between what they initially estimated and why people signed up—is because more companies are maintaining their own health care insurance, less cancellations are happening, and, thus, there are fewer people who are uninsured. So this second argument as to how the sky was going to fall after health care reform, that you were going to see mass cancellations of policies, the CBO Director is saying the reason the number is coming in slightly below where it was initially estimated—albeit 11 million people have insurance because of this law—is because employers are holding on to their insurance, even though we heard from many detractors of the law there was going to be a mass exodus of private insurance plans. Twenty-five percent fewer people have no insurance today. That is the bottom line. In Connecticut, 50 percent fewer people have no insurance. There is just no way to argue that we have not made a big dent in the number of uninsured because of this law's passage.

Mr. BARRASSO. I ask unanimous consent that 10 minutes be reserved for Senator CORNYN.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BARRASSO. I point out that on Saturday, I am going to be in Buffalo, WY, at a health fair. As a doctor, I continue to attend health fairs around the State which are designed to bring low-cost health care screenings to people. I know I will hear from folks there who are concerned with the fact that the CBO has come out and said the premiums are going to go up 8 percent next year, and 8 percent the year after that. Some of them are actually going to be on the ObamaCare exchange. I know some of them are people who had insurance that worked well for them before the President passed his law, and their insurance was canceled.

The President and the Senator from Connecticut may list them as successes, but they don't believe it is that way. They had insurance. They had insurance that they liked. It worked for them, and it worked for their family. They had the benefits that were important for their family, things for which they needed insurance. The President, on the health care law, came out with this mandate that everyone buy health insurance, and not just what worked for them. The President described it as essential benefits. I described them as excessive benefits, because there is a lot of insurance they are forced to buy, according to the law, that they do not need, do not want, cannot afford, and it does not even apply to their families. They have no choice in the matter.

They have had to lose insurance that worked for them and buy insurance that the President said they had to buy, even though it wasn't what was best for them and their families. They know what is best for them and their families, not President Obama.

I expect while I am in Buffalo, WY, visiting people, listening to what they have to say at a health fair, I will hear stories such as that because I do every weekend in Wyoming. People are concerned about the cost. Even those who have been getting subsidies through the exchanges are noticing that deductibles are higher than their previous insurance, and copays are higher. They are paying more. They are paying more and getting less, which is why this health care law continues to be unpopular across the country.

Take a look at any of the national numbers that are coming out, and you are going to find many more people who feel they were harmed by the law than helped by the law. There is a ratio of more people who think they were harmed than helped. More people want it repealed than continued. That is what we are seeing across the country with this health care law.

The President and I would say we should listen to the American people who have these stories to tell. I was on the floor yesterday, and I talked about a woman from Maine. There was an article in the paper in Maine. She found the whole experience that she has been going through now frightening, and she has insurance through the exchange. She said it is a frightening experience. She did her taxes and found out that she ended up owing a lot of money in taxes that she didn't know she was going to owe because of mistakes that were being made and the way the bookkeeping works. That is what is happening. H&R Block, the insurance folks who do the calculation to help people file their policies, are saying, on average, half of the people filing their returns this year are finding they are getting shocked and surprised that their amount of money coming in to the returns is a lot less, by an average of $530, according to H&R Block. This is across the board.

There are a lot of disgruntled people who are disappointed in a President who made promises to them about a health care law, people who can't keep their doctors, high deductibles they can't afford. A study came out yesterday that many people with insurance can't afford anything close to the deductibles they are forced to be paying under the President's insurance that they had to buy, many of whom lost the insurance they liked. We see these problems, and the amount of government waste in this program is incredible.

Oregon earlier this week shut down their exchange. The State of Oregon spent $248 million putting together their own State exchange, and the Governor just signed something saying we are done with it. They have not signed up one single person on the Oregon computer exchange ever—$248 million, taxpayer dollars, gone. Gone. The only people who could sign up in Oregon had to do it by filling it out with paper and pen. This is supposed to be—I heard President Obama—as easy as shopping on Amazon; insurance is cheaper than your cell phone; keep your doctor if you like your doctor. That is not what happened under this health care law. People lost their doctors and can't afford their policies. It is a very complicated situation related to this. Then you get Washington State. It is State after State—13,000 people had too much money taken out of their checking account as just part of the regular process of the monthly withdrawals.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

NOMINATION OF CHRISTOPHER A. HART TO BE CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

NOMINATION OF THO DINH-ZARR TO BE A MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to consider the following nominations, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read the nominations of Christopher A. Hart, of Colorado, to be Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board for a term of two years; and Tho Dinh-Zarr, of Texas, to be a Member of the National Transportation Safety Board for the remainder of the term expiring December 31, 2018.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, there will be 30 minutes of debate equally divided in the usual form.

Who yields time?

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum, and I ask unanimous consent that the time be divided equally.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. NELSON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. NELSON. Mr. President, I want to speak on a number of issues. I rise in support of the nominations of Christopher Hart to be chairman and Bella Dinh-Zarr to be a board member of the National Transportation Safety Board.

The National Transportation Safety Board helps keep all of us safe. When a terrible crash happens, we watch on television or read about the crash and wonder what happened. But it is the National Transportation Safety Board that steps in. During those first moments, they get in, preserve evidence, sift through the debris, and then figure out what went wrong.

They play a difficult role. They must put aside all differences between jurisdictions, politics, and partisanship to get the job done. In the last month alone, the board has launched investigations into a ship collision in Texas, a plane veering off the runway in New York, two terrible and fatal train crashes in New York and California, and a tragic incident in DC where smoke filled one of the Metro tunnels and resulted in a passenger dying.

They are also helping with an oil train derailment in West Virginia and one in Illinois that sparked fires and an evacuation. Their work plays a critical role in guiding our decisions about safety and their recommendations have influenced safety improvements. They have played a role in everything from drunk driving and seatbelt laws to the amount of rest that pilots and truck drivers should get, and they are also helping to shape the safety requirements of travel in the future.

In October of last year, a test flight for commercial space flight ended in tragedy when an experimental spacecraft broke apart in midflight over the desert in California.

The National Transportation Safety Board stepped in to investigate the tragic accident. They are still conducting the investigation, and the results are going to help us better address the future safety of commercial space flight to and from the edge of space, which is what that spacecraft was designed to do. This is why it is so critical that we select people with technical knowledge and human compassion to put the pieces of these tragedies back together.

We have two great nominees. Christopher Hart is a dedicated public servant with an extensive career in transportation safety. He has served as Vice Chairman of the NTSB for 5 years; and since April 2014, he has served as the Acting Chairman of that agency.

Like Mr. Hart, Dr. Bella Dinh-Zarr has a distinguished career in transportation safety. She currently serves as the director of the FIA Foundation, which is dedicated to promoting safe and sustainable transportation.

Previously, Dr. Dinh-Zarr worked in various safety capacities with the Make Roads Safe campaign, the American Automobile Association, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

They are both good leaders, and I ask the Senate to join me in supporting their nominations.

TAKATA AIRBAGS

Mr. President, I wish to provide the Senate with an update on what every Senator has had their attention called to—the Takata airbag recall. We have seen five deaths. We have seen a spate of serious injuries related to these defective airbags. One of the deaths occurred in my home State of Florida.

Through my position of working with Chairman JOHN THUNE of the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, I have been pushing Takata and the automakers to speed up fixes for these defective airbags.

People are driving around with a lethal bomb in their steering wheel. If it is defective and it goes off, they are filled with shrapnel. That has killed five people. It is documented in this country that it has killed five people.

Nobody ought to be driving, therefore, a car for months when, in fact, they have a known defect that can seriously kill them.

Well, it is just not acceptable, and the progress has been painfully slow. We received a letter from NHTSA noting that only 2 million of the vehicles recently recalled—2 million of 17 million—are all that have been repaired as of the end of last year.

That letter notes that Takata has continued to stonewall NHTSA's request for documents related to the defect. It is now being fined $14,000 a day until they start cooperating fully. They have also failed to produce a number of critical documents that the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee has requested as part of its investigation into this mess.

Earlier today, Senator THUNE and I sent a letter to Takata again requesting that they turn over these documents to the committee as soon as possible so that we can complete our investigation into how this mess happened and, very importantly, how we can get people's cars fixed so they are not driving around with this bomb about to explode in their steering wheel. Safety can't wait.

BOB LEVINSON

Mr. President, sadly, this week is the eighth year that Bob Levinson, a retired FBI agent who disappeared on a tourist island in Iran called Kish Island, has not been seen or heard from. He has a wife and seven children.

A couple of years ago, the family received a video. A few months after that, they received a photo.

In these extensive discussions with Iran over matters of war and peace as to whether Iran is going to be willing to step down and not have a nuclear weapon, one of the discussion items also is not only the three known Americans in captivity in Iran but Bob Levinson, who has been missing for 8 years.

Only the Iranian Government can produce the evidence of what has happened to Bob and where he is, and we continue that vigil.

I yield the floor.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, later today, the Senate will vote on two nominees who are critical to ensuring the safety of our Nation's transportation network: Christopher Hart, to be Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, also known as the NTSB, and Bella Dinh-Zarr to be a member of the Board.

Mr. Hart has a distinguished career in aviation safety and has served with distinction as acting chair in recent months.

Dr. Dinh-Zarr has a distinguished career in auto safety and will bring an important perspective and background to the board.

Right now, the NTSB only has three members, with one—Mr. Hart—serving as Acting Chairman. Today's vote will add another member and ensure Mr. Hart is Chairman in an official capacity. It is imperative that we have a strong, long-term team at the helm. As a member of the Commerce Committee, I know there is much important work ahead for the agency.

The NTSB is charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States as well as