

Rep. Peter Welch supported and the House passed legislation Thursday to help 11 million senior citizens and disabled people avoid a significant increase in their Medicare Part B premiums.

The Medicare Premium Fairness Act (H.R. 3631) will ensure that seniors, who are not expected to receive a cost-of-living adjustment to their Social Security benefits in 2010, do not face the additional hardship of increased Medicare premiums. The legislation will help roughly a quarter of Vermont's seniors.

H.R. 3631, of which Welch was an original co-sponsor, passed on a vote of 406 to 18.

More than a quarter of the 42 million Americans enrolled in Medicare Part B are due to see their premiums increase next year from \$96.40 a month to between \$110 and \$120 a month. This increase would especially harm new enrollees and retirees – as well as state governments, which are obligated to pay premiums for many low-income seniors.

H.R. 3631 will freeze payments at \$96.40 a month for 2010.

“Seniors already facing stagnant Social Security benefits next year should not be forced to shoulder the additional burden of increased Medicare payments. These are difficult economic times for all Vermonters, but they are especially hard for seniors living on a fixed income who struggle every day to make ends meet,” Welch said. “This legislation will serve as a critical lifeline for Vermont's most vulnerable seniors.”

The bill meets PAYGO requirements and is fully paid for by the Medicare Improvement Fund.

On Monday at Burlington's Heineberg Senior Center, Welch announced his support for a change in the Social Security cost-of-living formula so that it more accurately tracks costs faced by seniors. That bill, H.R. 2429, would ensure that Social Security cost-of-living adjustments take into consideration the rapidly rising cost of health care for seniors.

Forecasters expect Social Security benefits will not increase for three years.