

By Rep. Peter Welch

Each weekend I'm home, folks from all around Vermont tell me the same thing: increasing costs of fuel, child care, health care, and education are making it harder and harder to make ends meet. Vermonters are getting squeezed.

I hear from Vermonters about their anxiety when the fuel truck turns up the driveway. They have to keep their kids warm, but can't afford another \$1,000 bill to heat their home. I hear of medical bills so large they put Vermont families into bankruptcy. And I see young Vermonters taking on a mountain of debt as they pursue the education they need to succeed.

As a nation, we have always been at our best when we've focused on building a strong and prosperous middle class. As Vermont's representative in Congress, my goal is to help Vermonters improve their economic security and gain opportunities to get ahead. Taking on this challenge means working together to fundamentally change America's priorities.

Over the next few weeks, Congress will consider legislation to boost the nation's economy. I will be working to help quickly enact a bipartisan economic stimulus package for lower and middle income citizens, putting money directly into their pockets. But this short term action must not be a substitute for the long term legislation that we need to create ongoing economic opportunities for Vermonters.

Congress should pass The Middle Class Opportunity Act. I have sponsored this bill to restore middle class economic concerns to the top of our nation's agenda. This legislation gives families a tax break for necessities like child care and education. It would double the existing child tax credit from \$1,000 to \$2,000 the first year it is claimed, raise the income threshold for the dependent care tax credit from \$43,000 to \$75,000, and extend the credit to include care for parents or grandparents who are incapable of caring for themselves. This bill also stops in its tracks a tax increase on 42,000 middle income Vermonters from the Alternative Minimum Tax, extending the one year fix Congress enacted last year.

But we also have to get to the root of the problem: skyrocketing costs faced by consumers

whose wages aren't keeping up with expenses.

Health care costs are crippling family budgets. As one step toward making health care more affordable, I voted in favor of legislation that will result in cheaper prescription drugs for seniors by requiring the federal government negotiate fair prices for Medicare. I also support broader reforms to expand health care coverage to all Americans while cutting costs.

To help relieve the pressure Vermonters feel from soaring fuel bills, I co-authored legislation to close "The Enron Loophole," which has allowed energy speculators to drive up the price of heating fuel for Vermonters and Vermont businesses. This market manipulation costs the average Vermont family between \$800 to \$1,000 in home heating fuel alone. This special interest loophole must be closed.

To help reduce the cost of higher education, Congress passed the College Cost Reduction Act with bipartisan support. When it became law last fall, it represented the greatest commitment to higher education since the GI Bill passed in 1944. It will provide Vermonters \$61 million in additional financial aid and cut student loan interest rates in half, extending an average savings of \$4,370 per student.

Another impediment to restoring a middle class agenda is the enormous price tag of the war in Iraq. At \$10 billion a month, not only is this war a tragedy in loss of life and its diminished American standing in the world, it is diverting scarce resources from domestic priorities. I will continue to support the most aggressive policies to end this terrible war and will only support funding to safely bring our troops home. It's time to pay attention to our needs at home.

It's never easy to stretch a family budget, but there are things that Congress must do to help. I am committed to tackling the challenges we face today, turning them into opportunities to realign our priorities for tomorrow.