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Vt. lawmakers get A+ for poverty voting record

March 11, 2008

By DANIEL BARLOW Vermont Press Bureau

Vermont's congressional delegation received extremely high marks for their voting records last year on poverty issues, according to a new report, just as most of those bills failed to get the support necessary to pass the U.S. Senate.

A 40-page report from the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law gave both U.S. Sen. Bernard Sanders and U.S. Rep. Peter Welch an A+ for their voting record while U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy received an A.

Vermont joined Hawaii, Massachusetts and Rhode Island as the only four states whose Washington delegation received all A marks on their voting record on poverty bills, according to the report.

Yet, despite the fact that most of the members in the U.S. House and Senate received passing grades on their poverty voting records, most of these proposals did not muster up enough votes to actually pass both chambers, especially in the Senate where the threat of a filibuster from Republicans forces supporters to seek a minimum of 60 votes to end debate.

"That's something I don't think the America people understand," said Sanders on Monday, adding Republicans are "obstructing" the work of the Senate. "A lot of these votes were not yes or no on the specific bill. They were yes or no to end a filibuster."

Poverty has not been an attractive issue for politicians to talk about in recent years, but the 2005 hurricane tragedy in New Orleans made people realize "we had taken our eyes off the ball for a few years," according to John Bouman, the president of the Poverty Center, which released its report on Monday.

"Katrina woke a lot of people up," he said.

Former Sen. John Edwards, a North Carolina Democrat who made poverty the focus of his recent bid for president, spoke to reporters about the scorecard during a phone conference Monday. He called poverty a "moral issue" the country must face.

He said that many of the bills, such as increasing the minimum wage and making it easier for workers to unionize, that failed in Congress last year would have easily helped pull Americans out of poverty. These policy changes reflect the belief that if you are working full-time, you shouldn't be struggling to pay the bills, Edwards said.

"People who are working ought to be able to provide for their family," he said. "People who are working full-time should not be in poverty."

Progress will only come with political leadership, warned Edwards, who quickly added that the top two Democrats still in the presidential race — Illinois Sen. Barack Obama and New York Sen. Hillary Clinton — told him they would make poverty an issue in the campaign and a focus of the White House if elected.

"We can get the national leadership and we can get the congressional leadership we need," Edwards said. "But first voters need to be educated as to who is doing the work and who is not."

Daniel Lesser, the project manager of the poverty scorecard, said 21 bills and amendments relating to poverty — ranging from increasing the minimum wage to boosting funding for a popular children's health insurance program — were looked at for the study.

Thirty-seven senators and 225 members of the House all scored As for their voting records, Lesser added, but only a handful of the initiatives passed because of the need for 60 votes in the Senate and the threat of a veto from President Bush.

Interestingly, high rates of poverty can be seen in states whose delegation often vote against anti-poverty bills, Lesser said. He pointed to Mississippi as an example, which has the highest poverty rate in the country and a delegation that was ranked 39th toward the bottom in terms of their voting records.

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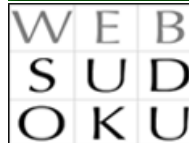
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Sanders, a Vermont independent, said the scorecard is interesting, but only tells half the story. There are many proposed bills that would do a lot more to fight poverty that never get a hearing, such as one that would enact a nationwide universal health care system.

But he placed the blame for a general lack of progress in boosting Americans out of poverty on the Bush administration's doorstep. Since Bush took that office, five million more Americans slipped into poverty and the country still has the highest rate of child poverty anywhere in the industrialized world, Sanders said.

"That gap between the wealthy and everyone else continues to grow wider," he said.

In Vermont, lawmakers have been struggling with how to combat poverty since last summer. The Vermont Child Poverty Council held public forums in all of the state's counties throughout the fall and winter and now members are working on a report of their findings.

Rep. Ann Pugh, D-South Burlington, the co-chair of the council, said members are now working on the second draft of a report that will include specific recommendations to fellow lawmakers. With one deadline for the report already passed, Pugh said she is not setting any deadlines to finish this one.

"The first report draft was a bit too academic," Pugh said. "We're looking at improving the odds for kids and the first attempt wasn't working. We're redoing it."

Sen. Doug Racine, D-Chittenden, the other co-chair of the council, said one issue that members are narrowing in on is the so-called benefits cliff, such as when a low-income Vermonter gets a better job or a raise and suddenly loses much-needed benefits because of that wage increase.

"We're looking instead at step downs instead of a cliff," Racine said. "We don't want them to lose it all while they are working."

That change will require some changes to state law and a waiver from the federal government, Racine noted. Other areas that will be addressed in the report include the discrepancy between test scores of children from low-income families compared with middle-class families and ways to shift some job training resources toward low-income workers.

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