

Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Business Meeting
Washington DC
May 16, 2012

Good morning. The meeting will now come to order. On our agenda today is one nomination, five bills and three postal naming bills.

One of the first bills we will consider is S. 1910, the “Domestic Partnership Benefits and Obligations Act,” which Senator Collins and I introduced to bring greater fairness to federal employee benefits and frankly the best people to federal service.

This bill appears on this agenda a week after the President’s call to legalize same-sex marriage – so I’m sure people will link the two. But this timing really is coincidental. This bill has been introduced by me and others since 2006, was reported out of the Committee this year, we actually intended to bring it up earlier in the year but the STOCK Act and Postal Reform took precedence, so it ends up on the agenda today.

S. 1910, is in fact, substantively, not about same sex marriage. It is about equal pay and equal benefits for equal work. In fact, many people who oppose the legalization of same sex marriage, including myself, strongly support this equality in employee benefits for domestic partners.

Under S. 1910, federal employees in same-sex domestic partnerships would be entitled to the same employment benefits available to married federal employees and their spouses. Among those benefits are health care; retirement and disability plans; family, medical, and emergency leave; group life insurance; long-term care insurance; worker’s comp; and death and disability benefits.

Federal employees and their domestic partners would also incur legal obligations under this legislation such as having to abide by the same employment requirements that married employees and their spouses are subject to, such as conflict of interest provisions, anti-nepotism rules, and financial disclosure requirements.

We are not blazing a new trail. In fact, we will be putting the government on what is now a well trodden path. Today, almost 10,000 private-sector companies of all sizes provide benefits to domestic partners, and that includes 60 percent of all Fortune 500 companies.

And over the years, those numbers have grown, not only steadily but rapidly.

The same is true for the governments of 24 states – including my home state of Connecticut – and about 154 local jurisdictions, and 300 colleges and universities.

So correcting this situation that allows for unequal treatment among federal workers not only fixes a fundamental unfairness in the current system, it will help the federal government recruit and retain talented employees who might otherwise reject federal service because of they can get fairer benefits packages from other private or public sector employers.

The federal workforce, we know, will shrink in coming years because of budget pressures, so in my opinion it is more important than ever that the federal government be able to recruit the best employees to federal service.

Considering the benefits of S. 1910, I think the costs of it are well worth it and probably less most people would guess. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the average annual cost of this bill would be less than \$70 million a year. And I want to put that in context. The annual total compensation budget for federal employees is almost \$400 billion.

That's two hundredths of a percent increase in the total compensation package for working and retired federal employees.

S. 1910 pays for this cost increase by authorizing the federal government to recover money paid by Federal Employee Health Benefits program – FEHB – for medical expenses when the FEHB participant has also received reimbursement from a third party for the same medical expenses.

The Office of Personnel Management concludes that the savings resulting from this new provision will not just equal but probably be greater than the cost that comes with establishing a fairer federal benefit system.

I hope my colleagues will support this bill.

We will also consider a substitute amendment to S. 1515 – the “Secret Service Retirement Act” – that would allow approximately 130 Secret Service Agents and uniformed officers hired between 1984 to 1986 to transfer from the Federal Employees Retirement System into the District of Columbia Police and Firefighters’ Retirement and Disability System.

This settles a long-standing dispute concerning appropriate retirement coverage for agents hired in those years who were told when they were being recruited that they would be allowed to join the DC Retirement System, but were then placed in the federal system when the FERS Act was passed in 1986.

Agents and officers who opt to join the DC System will not be allowed to double dip by getting full benefits from both systems. They will forfeit all agency contributions made to their Thrift Savings Plan accounts. And they will pay the difference between what the federal government would have to pay into the DC Retirement System to cover those agents for the next decade and what the benefit payments would be under FERS.

The DC Retirement system does offer more generous retirement benefits than FERS so we hope this will be an inducement to keep some of our most experienced and qualified Secret Service personnel on the job, rather than leaving for the private sector.

And I want to stress that no one eligible to benefit from this change is connected to the incident in Cartagena, Columbia.

Another bill we will consider today that I want to touch on briefly is S. 2218, the “United States Fire Administration Reauthorization Act of 2012, which is a modest, bipartisan bill I introduced with Senators Collins, Carper, McCain, and Brown.

The U.S. Fire Administration – or USFA – is a small but important agency that provides valuable assistance to first responders around the country, including training, data collection, and research. Last year, for example, USFA training courses reached more than 113,000 first responders.

This bill reauthorizes the USFA for five years, freezing the authorization at the FY2012 level. It also makes several small changes to make the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act, which created USFA. For example, the bill changes the Act to reflect the fact that USFA is now a component of FEMA, not the Department of Commerce.

This bill has the support of the major fire service organizations and will enable USFA to continue to do its valuable work. I urge my colleagues to support it.

Senator Collins, would you like to make a statement?