

## Lobbyists Take To Capitol Hill

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- GPO/WEP Laws Addressed - Marking the next step in our battle to repeal the dreaded Government Pension Offset (GPO) and Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) laws, the Association has recently traveled to Washington to meet with federal officials on the issue of Social Security benefits.

The

Association's legislative liaison, Shawn Duhamel, has been working the halls of Congress in an attempt to generate new interest in the issues. Duhamel has been joined by Washington lobbyist Rich Fitzsimmons of Lussier, Gregor, Vienna and Associates. Fitzsimmons, who has years of Capital Hill experience as a Congressional staffer, is well versed in all issues relating to Social Security.

Our

legislative team has met with key staffers in the offices of Massachusetts Congressmen Neil, Frank, Capuano, Lynch, Meehan, and Delahunt along with the staff of Senators Kerry and Kennedy. These meetings have proved to be quite productive.

"It

is obvious that our members have made a significant impact on the Massachusetts Congressional delegation. They have been reading the letters and hearing about the calls from retirees, so the message has been getting through," said Duhamel. "Every staff member knew the ins and outs of the issue and explained what their respective boss has been doing to get the law changed.

"There

is no question that repealing either the GPO or WEP is going to be next to impossible, given the current fiscal and political climate in Washington. However, people are talking about both issues and are actively looking for a solution."

As

has been previously reported in the Voice, the cost of repealing one or both laws would be an expensive proposition. For instance, a full repeal of both the GPO and WEP is estimated to cost \$65 billion over 10 years. A partial repeal, while less expensive, would cost \$32 billion.

Florida's Shaw Is Key

With

control of the US Congress firmly in the hands of the Republican Party, any move to repeal or otherwise alter the GPO or WEP must occur with the blessing of the Republican leadership in the House and Senate. For this reason, the Association has been actively working to build positive relationships with key Republican members of Congress.

Central

amongst these members is Florida's E. Clay Shaw (R-Ft. Lauderdale), who is the chairman of the House Subcommittee on Social Security. It is this committee in which all House bills relating to the GPO or WEP have been sent for review. In addition to controlling the flow of legislation from the Committee, Shaw has filed his own GPO reform proposal, which would allow those who qualify to collect Social Security through their spouse to keep a larger portion of their benefit before being impacted by the GPO.

In

addition to encouraging members living on Florida's Gold Coast to contact Rep. Shaw to ask for his support, the Association has met with the Committee's staff to discuss possible solutions.

During

his visit to Capital Hill on October 14, Duhamel and Fitzsimmons met with Kim Hildred, who is Chairman Shaw's chief-of-staff. Hildred is well known in retirement circles for her in-depth knowledge of the Social Security system. She is also respected for her fair approach to difficult issues, such as the GPO and WEP. Spearheading the meeting was LGV&A's Jim Miller, who is a retired Georgia teacher and a close associate of Hildred.

"I came away

from the meeting with Kim Hildred comfortable in that she is someone who cares about the issue and is truly trying to find a solution. She listened to what we had to say and offered an inside perspective on what has been taking place to resolve the problem," explained Duhamel.

"While she could not commit to any one course of action, Kim did explain Chairman Shaw's position.

"The

general message was that while interest in the GPO and WEP is growing amongst members of Congress, no one has yet to figure out how to pay for the changes. Shaw seems most interested in addressing the GPO first, due to the high number of poorer women who are being hurt."

## Senate Eyes Reform

At

the same time the House explores its options, members of the US Senate appear to be nearing a point of action on the GPO. Following a dramatic hearing before the Senate's Government Affairs Committee, in which compelling testimony was heard on both the GPO and WEP, a bipartisan coalition of Senators is poised to take action.

Spurred

by the hearing, which was organized by Republican Senator Susan Collins of Maine, a number of key Senators have crossed party lines and are working together in an attempt to find a solution.

While

a number of Senators are on record as being in favor of a GPO/WEP reform, a small group has come together at the forefront of the issue. Joining Collins in a push for Senate action are Senators Diane Feinstein (D-CA), Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), and George Voinovich (R-OH).

This

group of Senators has actively explored various means by which to pass a reform measure this session. Due to the high cost, the group has focused on a modest overhaul of the GPO law.

"In

a perfect world, we would want to see a total repeal of both the GPO and WEP. However, given the circumstances that exist in Washington right now, a total repeal is just not possible," says Duhamel. "Again the GPO is getting the most attention because of the disastrous effect it is having on retirees. Both laws hit retirees hard, but the GPO is simply wiping people out."

Both

Massachusetts Senators Ted Kennedy and John Kerry have been actively lobbying for reform as well. Kerry has filed his own bill, S 1011, while Kennedy is said to be using his considerable clout to bring the issues to the forefront for debate.

With

Kennedy's active support key to any effort put forth in the Senate, the Association has kept in close contact with the Senator's Washington

based staff. Former Worcester County Treasurer Michael Donoghue has been instrumental in gaining Kennedy's support.

Donoghue

has been asked by the Worcester Regional Retirement Board, on which he serves as chairman, to work closely with the Association on this issue.

"Mike

Donoghue has been a go-to guy for our Association many times over the years. He always delivers and is very highly regarded by our Congressional delegation. He has offered to jump into the fray on the GPO/WEF, and we are more than happy to have his help on these important issues," said Association President Ralph White.

"We

are keeping a very close eye on Washington as things develop. The lines of communication are open with our Congressional delegation and they are keeping in close contact with us," added Duhamel. We need to keep the pressure on and urge our members to remain proactive."