

100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
GHENT BAND

HON. JOHN E. SWEENEY

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 5, 1999

Mr. SWEENEY. Mr. Speaker, I rise to congratulate Ghent Band on their 100th Anniversary in entertaining the communities of Columbia County, located in the heart of the 22nd Congressional District, which I proudly represent.

Founded in 1899 by 15 members, the Ghent Band continues to make history while other bands in New York have become history. Inspired by nationally touring bands like John Philip Sousa, the original 15 members gathered old, second hand instruments and began rehearsing weekly at the Old Ghent School House. To this day, the band plays on, serving as Columbia County's only full-fledged village band.

Mr. Speaker, for a full century the Ghent Band's music has filled the hearts of the young and old, creating lasting memories at the many parades and concerts at which they play. The Ghent Band holds a special place in my own heart as they were present at the inauguration celebrating my swearing in to the House of Representatives.

Given the diversity of age and background of the band's members, as well as their strong ties to the local community, I have no doubt that the Ghent Band will continue on for an additional 100 years.

Mr. Speaker, the Ghent Band is America at its best, representing all that is good in this nation. I wish its members and their families the best as they celebrate 100 years of serving and entertaining the Village of Ghent.

FAIR CARE FOUNDATION CALLS
ATTENTION TO DANGERS OF
HMO TAKEOVERS

HON. FORTNEY PETE STARK

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 5, 1999

Mr. STARK. Mr. Speaker, as the conglomeration and monopolization of American health care continues, State Insurance regulators must do a better job of questioning the quality of plans entering their states.

I thought the following article from the September 18, 1999 issue of the Delaware News Journal by former utilization review nurse Mary Ellen Gaspard and A.G. Newmyer, head of the Fair Care Foundation (an HMO watchdog group), made some excellent points about the "quality danger" facing Delaware.

[From the News Journal, Sept. 18, 1999]

BLUE CROSS TAKEOVER NEEDS SKEPTIC'S EYE
(By Mary Ellen Gaspard and A.G. Newmyer III)

Few Americans can name their state insurance regulator. The majority of regulators are appointed and remain largely invisible. By reputation, they care more about the health of insurers than the health of the public.

Delaware may be different. We've never met Insurance Commissioner Donna Lee Williams. But like the minority of regulators

who are elected rather than appointed, she has a reputation for caring about consumers rather than for genuflecting before insurance executives. Now she has a real opportunity.

Hearings begin Tuesday on the plan by CareFirst—a Blue Cross plan based in Maryland—to take over the Delaware plan. The commissioner must determine, among other things, whether the deal would hurt Delaware policyholders.

In our view, CareFirst has redefined predatory behavior by health insurers. Perhaps the company's claims handlers were trained to echo the mantra, "Just say no." Cases handled by volunteers at the Fair Care Foundation, in helping patients in CareFirst's market, suggest that the delays and denials don't even pass the laugh test. Sadly, there is a mean-spiritedness evident in the treatment of the sick and their families that CareFirst management has taken to new heights.

We can't imagine why Donna Lee Williams would want to put Delaware's 200,000 Blues subscribers under CareFirst's heel. Like their claims handlers, she should just say no.

CareFirst, of course, disagrees. With a sensible regulatory structure in CareFirst's back yard, the facts would be apparent to Delaware regulators. But Steve Larsen, the appointed insurance commissioner in Maryland, has a reputation among consumer groups as being affable and ineffective. When CareFirst took over the Blue Cross plan in Washington, questions arose concerning whether Larsen had evaluated the Maryland plan's treatment of policyholders. His so-called market conduct study was reduced to one sentence.

That's one more sentence of oversight than the D.C. regulator could muster. At hearings on the proposed merger, it became clear that the Washington insurance commissioner had never conducted a market study of the Blues during all the years that his office had jurisdiction.

Delaware should just say no pending an investigation that is truly independent and thorough. We've seen no indication that Maryland or Washington regulators are capable of either. Their pre-merger hearings were a pro-forma joke. After consumers sued an appeals court ruled that the Blues had cozied up to the regulator in illegal ex-parte sessions, where they re-wrote conditions of the merger.

The proposed Blues merger in Delaware is complicated. CareFirst has to call the merger an "affiliation" because under the law, a merger would be a "conversion" of the non-profit assets of the Delaware plan. That would require that the Delaware assets be set aside for health care of residents in the state. But CareFirst wants the money. So the architecture of the deal is intentionally opaque. Delaware will effectively lose all local control of its Blue Cross plan. We suspect the results won't be pretty.

Donna Lee Williams has a vital opportunity. If the state chooses to wink at the predatory practices of CareFirst, then our hearts go out to the 200,000 Blue Cross subscribers in Delaware.

TECHIES DAY

HON. JOHN B. LARSON

OF CONNECTICUT

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 5, 1999

Mr. LARSON. Mr. Speaker, as Congress continues to debate next year's budget, America continues to face two mounting problems: a growing information technology worker

shortage, and a persisting "digital divide" between the information rich and the information poor.

Reports estimate that there are approximately 350,000 unfilled technology jobs available in America, a shortage that threatens the future growth of the sector that is responsible for driving America's unprecedented economic success. Clearly, the demand for highly-skilled information technology workers vastly outweighs the supply.

Further confirmation of this problem came in the Department of Commerce's July report entitled, "Falling Through the Net," which highlighted a persisting "digital divide" characterized by a disparity of race, gender, wealth, and geography.

It is, thus, with the intention of focusing public attention on these two problems, that I lend my support today to the first national "Techies Day" being held today. Its goal is to reverse these trends by inspiring more of America's youth to enter science and technology fields.

To mark this day, the Association for Competitive Technology, an alliance of Information Technology businesses, will bring technology professionals to the Kids Computer Workshop in Washington, D.C., an after-school technology program that works with underserved kids in the District. By showing youth that technology careers are within their reach, these "techies" will bridge the gap for kids who find themselves on the wrong side of the "digital divide" and begin to reduce America's information technology workforce deficit.

Mr. Speaker, if the private sector is recognizing its role in bridging the gap between the information "haves" and the "have-nots," I believe Congress should recognize its role too. It is my hope that through efforts such as Techies Day, Congress will realize that it can, and should, make a difference.

REST OF THE TRUTH IN
TELEPHONE BILLING ACT OF 1999

HON. EDWARD J. MARKEY

OF MASSACHUSETTS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 5, 1999

Mr. MARKEY. Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce the "Rest of the Truth in Telephone Billing Act of 1999." The title of the bill reflects the fact that some of the "truth in telephone billing" has already been proposed in a bill by two of my esteemed Commerce Committee colleagues, Chairman BLILEY and Telecommunications Subcommittee TAUZIN. I offer the "rest of the truth" to point out that a listing of fees and taxes only provides half the story. The other half of the story is the subsidies in the telecommunications marketplace, which I believe need to be made just as explicit on a consumer's bill as the fees and taxes in order to fully inform consumers of what they do and do not pay for when they subscribe to telecommunications services.

Mr. Speaker, the telecommunications marketplace is rife with such subsidies. Many of these subsidies are quite noble in intention and help to pay for affordable telecommunications service for the poor and for rural consumers. Yet many of these subsidies reflect a historic monopoly marketplace and should be revisited as the marketplace changes. For instance, some of these subsidies may still be