

VIII. SPECIAL INITIATIVES

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VETERANS ROUNDTABLE MEETING WITH CHAIRMAN JEFF MILLER

BACKGROUND

On October 19 2012, Dr. Benishek co-hosted a public veterans' meeting with Congressman Jeff Miller (R-FL), the Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. This event, which was held at the AmVets Center in Elk Rapids, was aimed at providing local veterans with insight into the work and focus of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. Other participants in the discussion included: David Leonard, Director of the Department of Veterans Affairs Detroit Regional Office, Major General Mike Lehnert, Vice-Chair for the Student Veterans of America, Jason Allen, Michigan's Senior Deputy Director for Veterans Affairs, and Tom Brown, Senior Vice Commander of AmVets Post 114.

On The Issue...

"Chairman Miller and I were pleased to learn more about their views on how we can improve the VA system and ensure our nation's heroes get timely access to the benefits they have earned."

--Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Dr. Benishek and VA Committee Chairman Jeff Miller host a special veterans' public meeting in Elk Rapids, Michigan on October 11, 2012.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ Dozens of local veterans and Veterans Service Officers (VSO) attended the roundtable with Chairman Miller in Elk Rapids on October 19.
- ✓ At the public meeting, veterans were able to express their concerns—ranging from issues with the VA system in general to personal health problems—directly to Chairman Miller and Dr. Benishek.
- ✓ Staff members worked with Major General Lehnert following the conclusion of the roundtable conclusion to ensure all questions were adequately answered and addressed.
- ✓ As a result of the roundtable, ten new casework files were opened by Benishek district staff to assist veterans with the VA bureaucracy.
- ✓ During the roundtable meeting, Dr. Benishek was also able to answer additional questions regarding his pending legislation, the "Surplus Property for Veterans Act of 2012."

STATUS

Following the veterans meeting with Chairman Miller, Dr. Benishek and his staff are continuing to develop an action plan to address the concerns raised by veterans in the meeting. Specific casework issues were addressed by Dr. Benishek's casework staff in attendance at the meeting.

NORTHERN MICHIGAN JOBS FAIR

BACKGROUND

On February 24, 2012, Dr. Benishek hosted a joint jobs fair with Rep. Reid Ribble (WI-08) in Marinette, Wisconsin, directly across the Menominee River from Menominee, Michigan. The goal of the job fair was to match the many qualified job seekers in Northern Michigan with job providers hoping to find applicants to fill needed positions.

The jobs fair was held at UW-Marinette's campus and contained two breakout sessions that allowed participants to gain advice specific for midcareer professionals and individuals new to the workforce.

On The Issue...

"With far too many people out of work in Northern Michigan, I see this job fair as an excellent opportunity to connect employers with the many talented job seekers in our area."

--Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Dr. Dan Benishek attends the joint job fair in Marinette/Menominee he hosted with Rep. Reid Ribble.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ Approximately 400 area job seekers attended the February 12 Jobs fair.
- ✓ At the jobs fair, 57 job providers had representatives present. Some of these employers included: Cliff's Natural Resources, Engineered Machined Products, Inc., Grede, LLC, Hannahville Indian Community Island Resort and Casino, Marmen Computing, Inc., Marquette Branch Prison, Michigan Works! The Job Force Board, Northern Michigan University, Northern Star Industries, Inc. / BOSS Snowplow Company, Oldenburg Group Inc., Tendercare Health Center, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center, US Special Delivery, Inc., and Walmart Stores.
- ✓ Speakers at the jobs fair breakout sessions included Jim Golembeski from the Bay Area Workforce Development and Robert Micheau, from the Michigan Works! Job Force Board.
- ✓ Anonymous surveys after the jobs fair indicated that participants were very satisfied with the results. Comments included: "Very well organized. I found jobs meeting my qualifications" and "very well was very organized and well run."
- ✓ Survey results indicated that job seekers spoke with an average of 13 employers during the event.

STATUS

Before and after the Northern Michigan jobs fair, Dr. Benishek's main priority in Congress has been to support policies that will improve the economy. As a result of the jobs fair, 20 individuals were hired and many others received interviews.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE MEETINGS

BACKGROUND

On October 11th and December 10th of 2012, Dr. Benishek held a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Roundtable with key stakeholders from the Marquette and the Houghton areas to discuss public/private partnerships and initiatives to inspire STEM workforce in the 21st Century. Representatives from local high schools, businesses, and higher educational institutions discussed the aspects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in school curriculum in an effort to provide students with the education they need to better their futures.

On The Issue...

“It’s essential we give our students a quality education so that they are prepared to pursue the jobs of the 21st Century.”

-Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Dr. Benishek takes part his STEM Roundtable meeting at Michigan Tech in Houghton on December 10, 2012.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ Participants at the science and tech roundtables included: Northern Michigan businesses (like Cliffs Natural Resources, Rio Tinto Eagle Mine, CMS Energy & Oldenburg Group), K-12 public schools from throughout the Upper Peninsula, Michigan Technological University, and Northern Michigan University.
- ✓ The science and tech roundtable meetings were inspired by several hearings that Dr. Benishek took part in with the Committee on Science, Space and Technology. Some of these hearings included: “STEM Education in Action: Local Schools, Non-Profits, and Businesses” (April 18, 2012), and “The Role of Research Universities in Securing America’s Future Prosperity: Challenges and Expectations” (June 17, 2012).
- ✓ Dr. Benishek listened to all stakeholders—from local and national business owners and operators to school superintendents and university professors—join in a common complaint. While more and more students are committed to STEM and technical education, the common core curriculum requirements established by “No Child Left Behind” leave little room for technical education.

STATUS

Following the Dr. Benishek is committed to finding solutions to allow for increased access to local control in the classroom. Dr. Benishek continues to develop an action plan and will work with his colleagues on localization methods during the 113th Congress.

PROTECTING NORTHERN MICHIGAN'S FARMERS

BACKGROUND

In the early part of 2012, a series of warm weather episodes followed by a late freeze in the Lower Peninsula resulted in one of the worst fruit crop damages many farmers have faced in a lifetime. Estimates indicated that more than 90 percent of Michigan's apple, cherry, and peach crops may have been lost in this freeze. More than 85 percent of juice grape crops were also lost and as much as 10 percent of the asparagus crop was lost or damaged. It was estimated that the economic loss due to this fruit and vegetable damage exceeded \$200 million.

On The Issue...

"My office is here to help our farmers and their families obtain the disaster relief they need."

-Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Dr. Benishek and Rep. Dave Camp tour damaged fruit farms in Lower Michigan due to warm weather followed by a hard freeze in the spring of 2012.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ Immediately following news of the spreading crop disaster in the spring of 2012, Dr. Benishek joined Rep. Dave Camp on a tour of farms impacted by the freeze.
- ✓ After returning from the tour, Dr. Benishek led the Michigan Congressional delegation in sending a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack encouraging him to release much-needed disaster assistance for affected farmers.
- ✓ Throughout the summer of 2012, Dr. Benishek continued to visit with farmers and agribusiness owners to discuss their concerns.
- ✓ Dr. Benishek advocated for a long-term farm bill on behalf of Michigan farmers and agribusinesses. Unfortunately, the 2012 Farm Bill did not come before the floor of the House during the 112th Congress. However, as a new member of the House Committee on Agriculture, Dr. Benishek looks forward to advocating for a long-term farm bill on behalf of his constituents in 2013.

STATUS

Following the crop freeze, Governor Rick Snyder signed legislation that allocated up to \$300 million in low-interest loans for affected framers. This assistance was in the form of low interest loans that were previously allocated funds and did not increase federal spending. Dr. Benishek's office encouraged area farmers to contact their local USDA Farm Service Agency office to apply for loan assistance.

U.S. SERVICE ACADEMY DAYS

BACKGROUND

As a Member of Congress, Dr. Benishek had the privilege to nominate young people from Michigan's First District to the various United States service academies in 2012. Every Member of Congress may have up to five cadets and midshipmen from their district at each of the service academies at one time. The service academies accepting congressional nominations are the U.S. Air Force Academy, U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, U.S. Military Academy, and U.S. Naval Academy. The U.S. Coast Guard Academy does not accept nominations as it has its own process for selecting candidates.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ In May 2012, the Service Academy Nomination process was announced by Dr. Benishek's office by contacting high schools throughout Michigan's First District.
- ✓ Accepted applications from May 15, 2012, through October 26, 2012. In total, the office received 10 applications from qualified young people throughout the district.
- ✓ Held three Service Academy Days in Grayling, Marquette, and Sault Ste. Marie with young students and representatives from the Military Service Academies.
- ✓ Assembled a Service Academy Advisory Board composed of current and former members of the military in Michigan's First District
- ✓ On November 28, 2012, the Board convened in Dr. Benishek's Gaylord and Marquette district offices to interview the applicants.
- ✓ In mid-December 2012, the selected applicants were notified that their names were submitted to the service academies for consideration.

On The Issue...

"Our region is home to many high caliber men and women who will make excellent candidates for our nation's Service academies."

-Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Members of Dr. Benishek's Service Academy Advisory Board conduct applicant interviews in Gaylord on November 28, 2012.

STATUS

Based on the Board members' recommendations, Dr. Benishek submitted 10 nominations to the service academies on December 17, 2012. The Service Academy Advisory Board members and nominees from Michigan's First District will be announced in February 2013 once all Congressional nominations have been submitted to the academies. The respective academies will then notify a majority of the appointees by late April 2013.

BREAKING THE VETERANS DISABILITY CLAIMS BACKLOG

BACKGROUND

Michigan's veterans are not receiving their benefits in a timely manner. During 2012, 66 percent of VA disability compensation claims are backlogged (over 125 days old). In the Detroit Regional VA Office, which processes disability claims for Michigan veterans, the average time it takes to complete a claim is 15 to 18 months.

In response, Dr. Benishek released a plan in May 2012 called "Breaking the Backlog" that is aimed at ensuring our nation's heroes have timely access to the benefits they have earned. As a doctor who worked at VA hospital for 20 years, Dr. Benishek knows firsthand the frustrations for working with the VA bureaucracy.

On The Issue...

"Making sure our veterans have timely access to the benefits they have earned should be a top priority of Congress."

-Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Dr. Dan Benishek meets with a veteran from Northern Michigan during the return of an Upper Peninsula Honor Flight in May 2012.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ In May 2012, Dr. Benishek released his detailed "Breaking the Backlog" action plan that included three important steps. These steps included: 1). Ensuring soldiers leaving the military must have a seamless transition into the VA system, 2). Streamlining the claims process by adopting 21st Century solutions, such as full implementation of digital records, electronic disability benefit questioners, and giving the VA access to electronic databases housing veterans' records of military service, and 3.) Improving access for our veterans at any regional VA facility.
- ✓ To get feedback on this action plan, Dr. Benishek held a set of public listening sessions with veterans in Northern Michigan in May 2012. These sessions were held in Charlevoix and Iron Mountain.
- ✓ In 2012, Dr. Benishek introduced H.R. 6297: "Reducing Barriers to Veterans' Benefits Act." This legislation will help ease the overall backlog by allowing the VA to more quickly process hearing loss and tinnitus claims, which will free up needed resources to develop the more complicated claims.

STATUS

After the introduction of the "Breaking the Backlog" plan, Dr. Benishek continues to explore legislative ways to help improve the disability claims backlog during the 113th Congress. As a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Dr. Benishek will continue to work with his colleagues in the coming term to find solutions for Northern Michigan's veterans.

PROTECTING MICHIGAN'S GREAT LAKES

BACKGROUND

Michigan's First Congressional District has over 1,600 miles of shoreline—the most in the continental United States and is the only District with shoreline on three of the five Great Lakes. As a lifelong resident of Northern Michigan, Dr. Benishek knows how important the Great Lakes are to the region and has been actively working to help protect this resource for future generations of Michiganders.

The Great Lakes currently face threats from invasive species, lower lake levels, and harbor maintenance issues. Dr. Benishek has been working to learn more about these issues and find solutions to address them.

On The Issue...

"As a lifelong resident of Northern Michigan, I know firsthand how important it is to protect our Great Lakes and waterways."

-Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Asian carp, pictured above, are an invasive fish species that pose a significant threat to the Great Lakes.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ Dr. Benishek authored a letter to his colleagues in the House on January 30, 2012, expressing his strong support for the "RAMP Act," a bill designed to mandate all money collected for the federal Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund be used to maintain and dredge harbors and ports.
- ✓ On December 4, 2012, Dr. Benishek attended and spoke at a Great Lakes Task Force briefing on lake levels, including recent analyses of historically-low levels and policy considerations to help the problem.
- ✓ On August 22, 2012, Dr. Benishek cosponsored the "Asian Carp Prevention Act of 2012," authored by Rep. Mike Rogers (MI-08), directs the Secretary of the Army to coordinate and spearhead efforts to prevent the spread of Asian carp into the Great Lakes by taking such actions as installing new barriers, improving locks in the Great Lakes region, and blocking the spread of the carp at the Brandon Road Lock in Illinois.
- ✓ On January 4, 2013, Dr. Benishek introduced legislation that will designate as "wilderness" 32,000 acres of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in the Lower Peninsula.

STATUS

During the 113th Congress, Dr. Benishek will continue to work with his colleagues and other members of the Great Lakes Task Force to enact policies that will help protect Michigan's fresh water and ensure our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy the Great Lakes for generations to come.

FIGHTING FOR COUNTY ROAD 595

BACKGROUND

County Road 595 in Marquette County is a proposed, new 21.4 mile primary road, running north-south between U.S. 41 and County Road Triple A. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has requested the EPA remove their objections.

The road project has been extensively analyzed by the DEQ, the EPA, and the Marquette County Road Commission. The proposed route has been modified to avoid local wetlands and significantly reduce any environmental impacts.

On The Issue...

“We can’t let new jobs in Northern Michigan be blocked by federal red tape and bureaucratic roadblocks.”

--Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



Rep. Benishek and State Senator Tom Casperson meet with local officials to discuss the County Road 595 Project in Marquette on November 5, 2012.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ During the year, Dr. Benishek voices his support for the County Road 595 project. On August 2, 2012, a representative of Dr. Benishek speaks at the CR 595 public hearing in Marquette in support of the project.
- ✓ On September 17, Dr. Benishek speaks with Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Director Dan Wyant after the State of Michigan requests the EPA remove its objections to the project.
- ✓ On November 5, 2012, Rep. Benishek led a joint effort in Congress to promote Northern Michigan jobs by sending a letter urging the EPA to take action and allow for the construction of County Road 595.
- ✓ In Marquette on November 1, Dr. Benishek and State Senator Tom Casperson met with Marquette County local officials to discuss what can be done to advance the road project.
- ✓ On December 5, 2012, Dr. Benishek’s office requests to meet with the EPA, MDEQ, and Marquette Road Commission. The EPA eventually delays the meeting.

STATUS

On January 3, 2013, the MDEQ announced they would not be granting a permit for County Road 595. Dr. Benishek stated he was “very disappointed” by the decision and has announced he plans to hold a Congressional field hearing to further investigate the situation.

KEEPING THE CHEBOYGAN HOSPITAL OPEN

BACKGROUND

In the first few months of 2012, the Cheboygan Memorial Health Center (CMH) temporarily closed its doors and left residents of the area without access to medical care. Following a financial dispute with the federal government, on March 1, 2012 the hospital officially filed for bankruptcy. The hospital was the area's largest employer.

Dr. Benishek and his staff worked closely for months with the Cheboygan Memorial Hospital, CMS (Medicare), and local stakeholders to prevent its closure. Unfortunately, the hospital facility did close. However, after months of work, Dr. Benishek was pleased that McLaren Health ultimately purchased the Cheboygan Hospital and was able to retain some medical services at Cheboygan.

On The Issue...

"As a doctor for nearly 30 years, I understand the importance of local access to health care for Cheboygan's citizens."

--Rep. Dan Benishek M.D.



A view of the Cheboygan Memorial Health Center in 2012.

KEY ACTIONS TAKEN

- ✓ On March 20, Dr. Benishek urged CMS (Medicare) in a letter to do everything possible to keep the Cheboygan Hospital open.
- ✓ On April 9, Dr. Benishek's office sent a letter to CMS requesting officials from their agency attend meeting in Cheboygan regarding bankruptcy proceedings, as well as representatives from CMH, McLaren, and Sen. Levin and Sen. Stabenow's offices.
- ✓ On April 10, Dr. Benishek visited Cheboygan and held a meeting with all stakeholders to discuss hospital closure and what could be done to help the situation. Dr. Benishek also visited the hospital facility.
- ✓ On April 23, during a rally to reopen the hospital, McLaren Health announces it has reached a deal with CMS to purchase the hospital.
- ✓ On April 30, Dr. Benishek's staff confirmed with McLaren Health, concerning the sale of the hospital.

STATUS

On April 30, 2012, McLaren Health purchased Cheboygan Memorial Hospital and was able to reopen some medical services at the facility for the residents of Cheboygan.