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FINANCE COMMITTEE STATEMENT FOR SENATOR DOLE

SSI EXTENSION TO PUERTO RICO, VIRGIN ISLANDS, AND GUAM

Mr. Chairman, I was necessarily absent yesterday because of my participation in the Conference on the Farm Bill, but the interesting discussion that took place here concerning Title II of H.R. 7200 has been reported to me. I wish to speak on behalf of the provision in the House bill, which would extend the benefits of the SSI program, on a limited basis, to Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam and to attempt to clear the record of some of the questions raised.

Currently, Puerto Rico labors under the old Aid to the Aged, Blind and Disabled (AABD) program which no longer applies to the fifty states and the District of Columbia. It has been superseded by SSI which is a more efficient means of aiding these people. Functioning under AABD Program, Puerto Rico spends only about \$4 million per year for its aged, blind and disabled which it derives from its participation in the AFDC program. But by using that \$4 million for AABD, it needlessly takes essential money from the AFDC program which we have also limited by requiring a 50/50 mandatory participation requirement for Puerto Rico. Under the current AABD program, the individual payment is about \$17 per month. This amount must be compared to a \$177 a month received by individuals on the mainland under SSI. That is simply neither a fair nor livable amount.

The House measure would still limit the participation of Puerto Rico in SSI by tying payments to a formula so that each eligible Puerto Rican would receive only \$102 a month and not the full \$177 received on the mainland.

SSI deals only with the aged, blind and disabled -- people who even in the United States mainland would not have to work nor pay Federal taxes. Therefore, we cannot exclude these American citizens from participating in this program because as Puerto Ricans they do not pay taxes -- they would not pay taxes under any circumstances even on the mainland, nor do their counterparts in the mainland pay taxes since they are indigents with little or no income. Furthermore, those Puerto Ricans eligible for SSI might have paid their normal Social Security taxes if they had been able to work either on the mainland or in Puerto Rico. Payment of taxes is not the issue here.

We never tell the Puerto Ricans that they cannot serve in our Armed Forces and die and be disabled for this nation. In fact, I heard testimony on this measure a few weeks ago that Puerto Rico ranks 14th in terms of number of men and women who have been in uniform for this nation in this century. That is a fantastic figure, and yet we will deny the weakest elements of the Puerto Rican society their fair and just coverage under this program.

This initial extension of SSI coverage to Puerto Rico would encompass about 135,000 eligible recipients out of a total population of 3 million. That is a ratio of participation to total population of about 4% which compares almost precisely to the mainland SSI participation ratio of about 4%.

By extending SSI to Puerto Rico, we are not opening the floodgates of participation to those who should otherwise be able to work. We are addressing the needs of a fixed, unfortunate segment of the population and, perhaps too, we are providing a real incentive for these covered categories of participants to remain in Puerto Rico rather than having to migrate to the mainland for the benefits of a program for which they should be covered in Puerto Rico. The beneficiaries of this program will have to meet certain qualifications and the Social Security Administration will have to pass upon each case to determine eligibility.

The total cost of this expanded coverage would be about \$136 million for these territories. This money is provided in the first concurrent budget resolution. It is not an overwhelming amount when you think that the current recipients in Puerto Rico receive a mere \$17 a month average and we would be raising that figure to a fair and livable \$102 a month. It is time to extend SSI coverage to all Americans.