

## *Senator John D. Rockefeller IV*

Recipient of the 2001 Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind

There is, in many societies, a concept that holds that those of position or wealth owe a debt to the community in which they live. The French have a phrase for it—noblesse oblige. Surely no better example is Senator John D. Rockefeller IV, this year's recipient of the Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter Award for Humanitarian Contributions to the Health of Humankind.

Heir to one of the nation's most famous fortunes, Senator Rockefeller came to West Virginia, a state with one of the lowest per capita personal incomes in the nation, as a young man of 27 years of age to serve in the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program. He had earlier served in the Peace Corps working in the Philippines.

As a VISTA volunteer, Senator Rockefeller went to Emmons, a small mining community. Working to improve life in Emmons was not easy, the Senator recalls. But in the two years he was there he worked to build a park, a community center, and then a library using building materials salvaged from an abandoned school house in the southern part of the state. The community center became a source of pride and a gathering place for the townspeople. The library provided facilities to encourage both children and adults to improve their reading skills.

Senator Rockefeller says he did not intend to stay in the state. But his two years with the VISTA program changed his mind, and he has made West Virginia his home ever since. In 1966, he decided to run for public office. Running on the Democratic ticket, he made a successful bid for the West Virginia House of Delegates and in 1968 was elected Secretary of State. Following his term in that office, Senator







Rockefeller ran for Governor but was defeated, partly because of his stand on environmental issues that included opposition to strip mining. He then served for three years as President of West Virginia Wesleyan College in Buckhannon. In 1976 he ran again for Governor, this time successfully and was re-elected again in 1980. Four years later, in 1984, he was elected to the US Senate and he has been re-elected twice since then.



Senator Rockefeller always has worked hard for West Virginia. His term as governor was characterized by some of the darkest years for the state. Coal mines were closing and the economic recession of the 1980's hit the state particularly hard. The experience taught Senator Rockefeller the need to diversify the state's economy and to look for broader investment opportunities. He succeeded in attracting international companies to build facilities in West Virginia. An example was the decision by Toyota to build a new engine plant that employs 300 people. He also worked with companies already in the state to keep them there and to expand their West Virginia operations.



But his efforts went beyond stimulating new businesses. He sponsored legislation to improve the lives of workers. In 1992 Senator Rockefeller was a leader in passing what is known as the "Coal Act." This legislation requires union and non-union coal companies to pay for the cost of the United Mine Workers health care trust fund. More recently the Senator has been working on additional legislation to ensure its continued solvency, says Senator Robert C. Byrd, the senior Senator from West Virginia.



Health care has long been a major concern of the Senator. He is a senior member of the Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicare, Medicaid,

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and other health care issues. He serves as the ranking member on the Subcommittee on Health Care and is a member of the Committee on Veterans Affairs. This committee oversees the largest health care system in the nation. He helped to win enactment of legislation authorizing the Department of Veterans Affairs to pay benefits to veterans disabled by the so-called Gulf War Syndrome.

In the late 1980's Senator Rockefeller was co-chair of the Bipartisan Commission on Comprehensive Health Care—known popularly as the Pepper Commission, which drew national attention to the cost burden of long term health care. The commission recommended reform of what it

termed the fundamentally flawed Medicaid-based system of long term health care financing. The Commission's report came out in 1990 and, although its major recommendations have yet to be adopted, Congress did approve legislation, written by Senator Rockefeller, that expanded Medicaid to cover home and community health care services. Further improvements in long-term care financing certainly will be an issue in the new Congress. Senator Rockefeller supports legislation to require Medicare to pay for prescription drugs, another issue certain to be a concern of the new Congress.

Senator Byrd cites other health legislative issues on which his fellow Senator has worked. They include:

- Increasing the number of general physicians practicing in smaller, rural states;
- Legislation to reform the way in which physicians are paid under Medicare;
- Preserving Medicaid for pregnant women, children, and the disabled;
- Championing a 1996 bipartisan bill to require insurers to issue policies to persons with pre-existing conditions who do not qualify for Medicaid;
- Efforts to restore Medicare funds cut too deeply by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997.

Reaching beyond Capitol Hill, Senator Rockefeller established the Blanchette Rockefeller Neurosciences Institute, dedicated to the research and treatment of neurological diseases that affect cognitive function. The Institute is named in honor of his mother who, in her last years,



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suffered from Alzheimer's Disease. "As the world population ages, the research into these diseases will benefit substantially more of the world citizens," says Dr. Robert M. D'Alessandri, vice president for Health Sciences, West Virginia University School of Medicine in Morgantown.

"Throughout his career, Senator Rockefeller, has championed the health care interests of working people, children, and senior citizens. He has held innumerable meetings and discussions in the state to make sure their voices were heard. Jay Rockefeller has been front and center in every health care policy debate in the US in the past two decades and remains one of the most passionate and well-informed national leaders on these issues," says Dr. D'Alessandri.