

## Rally combats attacks on women's bodies, issues



WASHINGTON (AP) — Under the banner of combating violence against women, a broad coalition of interest groups rallied Sunday on the National Mall, embracing a wide range of causes, from abortion rights to affirmative action.

The rally, organized by the National Organization for Women, was endorsed by more than 700 groups, including abortion-rights advocates, labor unions, gay and lesbian organizations, environmentalists, socialists and victims' rights advocates.

The rally was meant to "make the connection among the physical attacks on women, the anti-abortion terrorist attacks at clinics and the political attacks we're facing in Congress," said NOW President Patricia Ireland.

Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority, related domestic abuse to violence at abortion clinics and other forms of violence against women.

"Be it personal terror or political terror, it has just one purpose — control," Smeal told the crowd. "We are the majority. Our rights will only be taken away if we allow the terrorists to reign."

Coming at the end of the first 100 days of the new GOP-led Congress, the rally focused heavily on the conservative agenda of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., and fears that Congress would end abortion rights, curtail spending on welfare programs for women and children, and cut funding to prevent domestic violence.

## Gulf War syndrome researched

DURHAM, N.C. (AP) — Anti-nerve gas pills combined with anti-insect compounds may be the cause of a mysterious cluster of ailments known as Gulf War syndrome, researchers said.

Duke University Medical Center researchers tested nerve gas pills, insect repellents and insecticides given to U.S. troops during the Gulf War and discovered nervous system damage in laboratory animals, *The Herald-Sun* of Durham reported Sunday.

The team's lead scientist warned that no undisputed link has been established between the chemicals and insecticides and the ailments reported by about 37,000 veterans of the war. But that's where the preliminary findings point, said Mohamed Abou-Donia, deputy director of Duke's toxicology program.

"I'm confident we have more than a hypothesis," he said. "We have very solid data to demonstrate we have a plausible scenario of what could have happened in the Gulf War."

In every case, the lab animals — chickens — exposed to the combination of chemicals suf-

fered nervous system damage like that suffered by veterans.

Last month, the Pentagon's top doctor said no single cause of Gulf War syndrome had been found. Dr. Stephen Joseph released updated figures of a Pentagon medical evaluation program of Gulf War veterans showing that in 84 percent of cases a clear diagnosis of health problems could be found.

Of the 2,074 cases analyzed, Pentagon doctors were unable to diagnose about 16 percent in the study complaining of fatigue, headaches and sleep disturbances.

About 15,000 veterans are participating in the program.

Ross Perot, a longtime veterans advocate, gave the Duke researchers \$150,000 for the study that began last July.

Abou-Donia said the Department of Veterans Affairs has invited him to Washington to present his data.

"We're not saying this is what happened in the Gulf War," Abou-Donia said.

The next step, he said: understanding how it happens.

One possible reason some veterans got sick and others didn't is that each person's ability to deal with toxic chemicals varies. Also, some veterans may have been exposed to higher doses of chemicals, Abou-Donia said.

Another toxicologist said the Duke team's research will be hard to prove.

"It's a kind of scenario that is fairly easy to construct but difficult to prove," said Ernest Hodgson, head of the toxicology department at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. He isn't involved in the study.

"There are cases where interact, and there are cases where the toxicity of two chemicals is far greater than when given separately. ... So it's credible, but that's a long way from proof," Hodgson said.

The Duke researchers have compared the animals' blood samples with blood samples from about a dozen Gulf War veterans.

If the researchers can uncover a "biological fingerprint" in the blood samples, that could be used to diagnose veterans with Gulf War illness, Abou-Donia said.

## Government may restructure Social Security

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House is drafting plans to streamline Social Security by turning some work over to private business and by staggering the monthly mailing of retirement and disability checks.

Some critics say the blueprint overlooks Social Security's most pressing problem: looming insolvency for the national retirement system. Others say giving for-profit companies a piece of Social Security's \$381 billion budget is a privacy risk.

The proposed reforms are part of the Clinton administration's push to "reinvent government." The changes, which could save as much as \$1 billion over five years, are to be announced Wednesday.

According to documents obtained by The Associated Press, the Social Security Administration is considering letting large employers file a retiring worker's claims for benefits directly with the agency, by computer. However, an employee of a participating company could still choose to file for benefits directly with Social Security.

The agency acknowledges that several privacy issues must be resolved, but says the changes would reduce its workload.

Social Security keeps records on the earnings of almost 140

million working Americans, and the information is coveted by collection agencies, private investigators and information brokers.

H&R Block Tax Services Inc., the nation's largest income tax return preparation service, is already trying to get in on the action.

Social Security has promised to consider using the company and others like it to assist people with filing for all types of benefits, according to correspondence between H&R Block and the agency.

Discussions with specific companies, however, are beyond the scope of the overall policy changes being pushed as part of White House streamlining efforts.

Another proposed change involves staggering the sending of checks to retired and disabled recipients. The change would apply only to future retirees, and current beneficiaries who volunteer to switch payment dates.

Checks now go out on the third of the month to 49 million Americans, prompting more than 2 million calls during the first week of the month to the agency's toll-free phone number. The crush of callers ties up the lines and keeps some people from getting through with questions about their benefits.

Staggering the distribution of checks could even out the impact on financial institutions as well as Social Security's workload, particularly as the number of recipients grows to 76 million by the year 2020.

Under Social Security's proposal, three additional payment dates could be added, such as the second, third, and fourth Wednesdays of the month.

The later dates would cost some recipients a little interest on their benefits; less than 25 cents a month by Social Security's estimates.

Social Security also wants to require recipients who have bank accounts to have their checks automatically deposited, instead of mailed.

Among the other proposals being considered: closing five of the agency's 10 regional offices and assigning half of the 700 employees who would be affected to front-line operations dealing with the public. The rest of the jobs would be lost as the agency cuts its work force by 4,500 over the next four years.

As of September, Social Security had 66,207 employees working in its vast network of offices, including 1,301 field offices and 37 service centers. Ten percent of offices provide support services for local offices, but do not deal directly with the public.

"The purpose of these proposals is to provide better public service at less cost to the taxpayer," said spokesman Phil Gambino.

But some Social Security experts say the agency should be focusing its efforts instead on the system's long-range solvency.

David M. Walker, who was one of two public trustees overseeing Social Security's funds for the past five years, said it appears that the agency has "got the cart before the horse."

"This might be looked on as a smokescreen, when the real problem is how do you protect the financial integrity of the trust funds," added Warren Fretwell, executive vice president of an American Federation of Government Employees local that represents field office workers in upstate and central New York.

"We should be paying more attention to that, instead of tinkering with service delivery when the majority of people are very satisfied with the service," Fretwell said.

John Rother, legislative director for the American Association of Retired Persons, said the steps being outlined by Social Security "are designed to make the agency run better. Clearly, Congress's job is to figure out long-term solvency. That's not the commissioner's job."

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