

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Signing the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009

February 4, 2009

All right. Please, everybody have a seat. This is good—this is good. Today, with one of the first bills that I sign, reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program, we fulfill one of the highest responsibilities that we have: to ensure the health and well-being of our Nation's children.

It's a responsibility that's only grown more urgent as our economic crisis deepens, as health care costs have exploded and millions of working families are unable to afford health insurance. Today in America, 8 million children are still uninsured, more than 45 million Americans altogether.

And it's hard to overstate the toll this takes on families: the sleepless nights worrying about somebody getting hurt, or praying that a sick child gets better on her own; the decisions that no parent should ever have to make: how long to put off that doctor's appointment, whether to fill that prescription, whether to let a child play outside, knowing that all it takes is one accident, one injury, to send your family into financial ruin.

The families joining us today know these realities firsthand. When Gregory Secrest from Martinsville, Virginia, lost his job back in August, his kids lost their health care. When he broke the news to his family, his 9-year-old son—where are you?—that's you? I thought so—*[laughter]*—handed over his piggy bank with \$4 in it and told his father, "Daddy, if you need it, you take it."

Now, this is not who we are. We're not a Nation that leaves struggling families to fend for themselves, especially when they've done everything right. No child in America should be receiving his or her primary care in the emergency room in the middle of the night. No child should be falling behind at school because he can't hear the teacher or see the blackboard. I refuse to accept that millions of our children fail to reach their full potential because we fail to meet their basic needs. In a decent society, there are certain obligations that are not subject to tradeoffs or negotiations, and health care for our children is one of those obligations.

That is why we have passed this legislation. These legislators have passed this legislation on a bipartisan basis to continue coverage for 7 million children, cover an additional 4 million children in need, and finally lift the ban on States providing insurance to legal immigrant children if they choose to do so.

Since it was created more than 10 years ago, the Children's Health Insurance Program has been a lifeline for millions of children whose parents work full time and don't qualify for Medicaid, but through no fault of their own, don't have and can't afford private insurance. For millions of children who fall into that gap, CHIP has provided care when they're sick and preventive services to help them stay well. This legislation will allow us to continue and build on these successes.

But, as I think everybody here will agree, this is only the first step. The way I see it, providing coverage to 11 million children through CHIP is a downpayment on my commitment to cover every single American. And it is just one component of a much broader effort to finally

bring our health care system into the 21st century. And that's why the economic recovery and reinvestment plan that's now before Congress is so important.

Now, think about this, if Congress passes this recovery plan, in just 1 month, we will have done more to modernize our health care system than we've done in the past decade.

We'll be on our way to computerizing all of America's medical records, which won't just—[*applause*]*—*it won't just eliminate inefficiencies, won't just save billions of dollars and create tens of thousands of jobs, but it will save lives by reducing deadly medical errors. We'll have made the single largest investment in prevention and wellness in history, tacking problems like smoking and obesity and helping people live longer, healthier lives. And we'll have extended health insurance for the unemployed, so that workers who lose their jobs don't lose their health care too.

Now let me say this. In the past few days, I've heard criticisms of this plan that, frankly, echo the very same failed theories that helped lead us into this crisis in the first place: The notion that tax cuts alone will solve all our problems; that we can address this enormous crisis with half-steps and piecemeal measures and tinkering around the edges; that we can ignore fundamental challenges like the high cost of health care and still expect our economy and our country to thrive.

I reject these theories, and by the way, so did the American people when they went to the polls in November and voted resoundingly for change. So I urge Members of Congress to act without delay. No plan is perfect, and all of us together, Democrats and Republicans, should work to make it stronger. But let's not make the perfect the enemy of the essential. Let's show people all over our country who are looking for leadership, who are desperate for leadership right now, that in difficult times we're equal to the task. Let's give America's families the support they need to weather this crisis.

In the end, that's all that people like the Secretsts are looking for: the chance to work hard and to have that hard work translate into a good life for their children. Now I'm pleased to report that the Secretst story had a happy ending. It turned out that Gregory's two sons were eligible for SCHIP, and they are now fully covered, much to his relief and his wife's relief. I think Gregory put it best when he said: "Kids look at us and think that we will take of them." That's—every parent here has the experience. You look at your children and you know that they're looking back at you and they're saying, "You're going to take care of me, aren't you?" That's our job: to keep them healthy and to keep them safe and to let them dream as big as their dreams will take them.

And that's what I think about when I tuck my own girls into bed each night. And that's what I want for every child, every family in this Nation. That's why it's so important that Congress passes our recovery plan so we can get to work rebuilding America's health care system.

It won't be easy; it won't happen all at once. But this bill that I'm about to sign, that wasn't easy, either. It didn't happen all at once, either. And yet, here it is, waiting for me to sign. The bill I sign today is a critical first step. So I want to thank all of the State and local officials, all the advocates and ordinary Americans across this great country who fought so hard to get it passed. I want to personally thank every single Member of Congress who is here, a bipartisan group who worked tirelessly for so long that we could see this day. And I want you all to know that I am confident that if we work together, if we come together, we can finally achieve what generations of Americans have fought for and fulfill the promise of health care in our time.

So thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:56 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. H.R. 2, approved February 4, was assigned Public Law No. 111-3.

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