

**Remarks on Signing the
Departments of Veterans Affairs and
Housing and Urban Development,
and Independent Agencies
Appropriations Act, 1997**
September 26, 1996

Thank you very much. Thank you, Tipper; thank you, ladies and gentlemen. To the Members of Congress who are here, all the advocates of the various profoundly important issues in this bill, thank you for being here.

This is truly a landmark day in our efforts to strengthen our families, our community, and our future. We have worked very hard here for 4 years to create in America a sense that there should be opportunity for everybody, responsibility from every citizen, and a strong sense of community. We should work together to help each other make the most of our own lives.

Today, with this legislation, we are truly upholding the basic American value of community. We're helping parents to care for their children, honoring those who have served our country in the military, encouraging our young people to serve in their communities, and living up to the duties we owe to one another. By ensuring 48-hour hospital stays for mothers and newborns, battling discrimination against mental illness, caring for children of veterans who suffer from a terrible disease, we affirm that we will do everything we can to strengthen our families and build a stronger future.

We also build a stronger future and a stronger community through service. I want to especially thank the Congress for reinforcing our national service initiative, AmeriCorps, in this bill. It helps young people earn their way through college, makes our streets safer, cleans our environment, and soon, with even greater focus, our AmeriCorps volunteers will be working with parents and teachers to make sure all of our young children can read.

We build a stronger community when we keep our environment clean and safe. This legislation gives the Environmental Protection Agency the resources to protect our air and water, to carry forward our brownfields urban toxic waste initiative, to build on our

record pace of toxic waste cleanups, to see to it that our children live near parks, not poison. We will continue to seek additional resources for these and a few other areas in our ongoing budget negotiations.

We also build a stronger America when we invest and create jobs anywhere in our country. This bill will expand the community development banks that help to start businesses in poor neighborhoods. They have worked all over the world; they have worked in America; they can work to bring free enterprise opportunity to people who have been denied it for too long.

The bill allows the Department of Housing and Urban Development to accelerate the demolition of the Nation's worst public housing projects as well and to replace them with more livable housing. It gives HUD the tools to evict gang members and drug dealers so that public housing is available only to those who are law-abiding citizens of our country. And I want to thank Secretary Cisneros for his historic efforts in all these areas as well as in battling the homelessness problem in our country. Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

This bill reinforces our American community by enabling the Federal Emergency Management Agency to do its job for people in tough times. It helps us to chart new horizons by enabling NASA to continue the work of space exploration. It helps our families to grow stronger as well by requiring better access to health care.

We are making progress on that front, as we all know. Last month I was pleased to sign here the Kennedy-Kassebaum bill which guarantees that Americans do not lose their coverage if someone in their family has been sick or if they change jobs. This bill goes further. As has been said, it does end drive-through deliveries. Parents may rush to the hospital, but they shouldn't be rushed out of it unless it's the medically right thing to do for the parent and the child.

This law is common sense and now it will be the law of the land. I want to thank Congress for passing this important legislation. I thank, especially, Senator Bradley and Senator Frist; I thank Congressman Dingell and the other Members of the House who were involved in this important effort.

The second thing this bill does is to require insurance companies to set the same annual and lifetime coverage limits for mental illness that now apply to physical illness. No more double standards; it's time that law and insurance practices caught up with science.

I think that the last statement Tipper Gore made in many ways is the most important. I am convinced that the more we deal with this issue, the more we will come to see all kinds of medical problems as part of a seamless web, not easily divisible into mental and physical categories. The more we learn, the more we will know that.

Today, we try to bring our institutional response to those challenges up to what we now know and what we also know is morally right. I want to thank Tipper Gore for her passionate, persistent, unrelenting advocacy of this position to the President and others. When I walked up here—you know, there's always a marked contrast when you see someone happy and you see someone sad. I know no one in whom the contrast is more marked. I would do anything to see Tipper Gore as happy as she was today. *[Laughter]* She has fought for all of you who believe in this position.

I would also like to say a very personal word of thanks for the quiet and courageous dignity with which Senator Domenici and Senator Wellstone have brought to bear their own life's experience on this great endeavor. They have made a profound impact on me and on their colleagues and on our country at some considerable effort to themselves, and I thank them very much for it. Thank you.

Finally, I am very, very proud that this legislation will protect the families of Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange, for too many of these brave soldiers have suffered illness as a result of their service, and now we know that, for many of them, the health effects were also passed along to their children. That is more than anyone can ask in terms of service to nation.

This legislation says that the children of those veterans exposed to Agent Orange who have the birth defect known as spina bifida will receive health care and rehabilitation under our disability system. The children of our soldiers should not have to suffer for the

sacrifice of their parents. I want to thank all the Senators who are here who worked so hard on this. I want to thank Representative Lane Evans of Illinois and Senators Daschle and Rockefeller, who were also active in that endeavor.

This is a very good thing we do today, but it is long overdue. And I thank the representatives of all the veterans' groups who are here today as well for their service and their persistence in this matter. This legislation proves that we can make progress when we all put politics aside and join across party lines to get the job done for our country.

Before I sign the bill into law, I want to give you some more good news that proves if we all work for opportunity, responsibility, and a stronger American community, we'll be a better country.

Just before I came out here this morning, the annual census study of incomes for 1995 was released. The news is remarkably good, and I'd like to share it with you. In one year, median household income was up \$898 after inflation. That's the biggest increase in a decade. Over the last 2 years, the typical American family has seen its income rise \$1,600 over inflation. After two decades of increasing inequality, these gains were finally shared by people at every income level for the second year in a row. We have had the largest decline in the inequality of incomes in America in 27 years.

There are also 1.6 million fewer people in poverty. That is also the biggest drop in 27 years. Poverty among elderly Americans has fallen to its lowest level in history. Poverty among African-Americans has fallen to its lowest level in history. With 10½ million new jobs, the lowest unemployment in 7½ years, a 60 percent reduction in the deficit, the lowest combined rates of unemployment, inflation, and mortgage rates in nearly three decades, it is clear that we are moving on the right track.

Today it is clear that more and more of our people are sharing in that prosperity. We are growing and growing together, and I am convinced that for us to keep the American dream alive into the 21st century for all Americans, we must grow and grow together. That, too, is good news for our American community.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, let me say again, I thank all of you who are responsible for this legislation. I thank all the hard-working Americans, the business leaders, the labor leaders, the working people of this country. I thank our economic team and others who have worked to construct an economic direction for America that will permit us to grow together. This is a good day for our country.

If we keep our economy strong, if we educate our young people, if we protect our environment, and if we fulfill our responsibilities to one another, then we will build that bridge to the 21st century I've been talking about, and our best days are still ahead. No one who heard what was said today and saw these families and looked at these Members of Congress standing together and working together for America's benefit could be anything but optimistic about that future.

It is now my honor to sign this legislation. And I'd like to ask the Members and the families who are here to join us up here on the platform so we can sign the bill.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:25 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. H.R. 3666, approved September 26, was assigned Public Law No. 104-204.

**Statement on Signing the
Departments of Veterans Affairs and
Housing and Urban Development,
and Independent Agencies
Appropriations Act, 1997**
September 26, 1996

Today I have signed into law H.R. 3666, the "Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, FY 1997."

The Act provides funding for the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Science Foundation, and several other agencies. This Act will fund vital environmental, veterans, housing, community development, science, and space programs.

I am pleased that the Congress has responded to my call to include three bipartisan provisions aimed at eliminating a range of health care crises that thousands of Americans face every year. These include: a mental health parity provision that prohibits health plans from establishing separate lifetime and annual limits for mental health; the Newborns' and Mothers' Health Protection Act of 1996 that requires health insurers to let all new mothers and their babies stay in the hospital for at least 48 hours following normal deliveries; and my proposal to assist the children of Vietnam veterans who are born with the birth defect, spina bifida.

The Act provides funding for a number of my high-priority investment proposals, including the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) fund. The National Service initiative gives young people an opportunity to obtain funding for a college education while serving the country in areas of great need, such as education, environment, public safety, and human services. If Congress had provided my request, an additional 6,000 young Americans would have had the opportunity to help their community through AmeriCorps. Funding for CDFI will increase the flow of capital to distressed neighborhoods and their currently underserved, low-income residents, and provide financing for neighborhood redevelopment and revitalization efforts.

The Act provides \$6.7 billion for the EPA, or 4.5 percent less than my request and will enable the EPA to adequately enforce our environmental laws and provide for the continued cleanup of hazardous waste sites.

I am, however, concerned about the levels provided for EPA's important implementation of the recently enacted safe drinking water and food quality legislation, continued progress on the U.S. global climate change Action Plan, Montreal Protocol efforts to prevent ozone layer depletion, and Boston Harbor clean-up. I will continue to press the Congress to provide more adequate funding levels for these and other important priorities as my Administration negotiates with the Congress over an omnibus appropriations bill to resolve remaining fiscal 1997 funding issues.