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SUPPORTING COLOMBIA, AMERICA'S BEST FRIEND IN LATIN AMERICA

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. WELLER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. WELLER of Illinois. Madam Speaker, I rise to express concern about an action taken by the majority of this House this past week.

When the question is often asked, who is America's best friend in Latin America, no matter where you are in Latin America, they always say the democratically-elected government of Colombia is America's best friend.

This last week, the House of Representatives voted to turn its back on America's best friend. At a time when the autocrats threaten democracy, when democracy is at risk in Latin America by those who threaten it, such as the President of Venezuela, this Congress, this House, voted to turn its back on Latin America's oldest democracy, America's best friend in Latin America.

If you think about it, who else is Colombia? Colombia is also America's most reliable and strongest partner when it comes to addressing terrorism and addressing narcotics. Colombia has been there.

President Uribe, the President of Colombia, today is the most popular elected President in the entire hemisphere. This Congress has a 15 percent approval rating with the American people. Fifteen, 1-5 percent. President Uribe has 80 percent approval ratings with his own people. Why? Because he was elected to reduce violence. He was elected to bring security to his country, and today 73 percent of the Colombian people have said in a recent opinion poll that they feel more secure in Colombia. Seventy-two percent in that same poll said they believe President Uribe is making progress and at the same time protecting human rights. So President Uribe has made tremendous progress.

Today, violence has been reduced, kidnapping is down, murder rates are down. In fact, it is safer to walk the streets of Bogota, Colombia, or Medellin, once known as the most dangerous city in all the world, than it is to walk the streets of Washington, DC.

President Uribe with Plan Colombia and the support of his own people has made tremendous progress. They are reliable partners, reliable friends. And last week this House voted to turn its back on the democratically-elected government of Colombia. Think what message that sends to Latin America, about how the United States House of Representatives respects and treats our friends in Latin America.

We have before us a trade promotion agreement with Colombia. It is a good agreement. My friend and colleague from Ohio says it is all about oil. We don't need a trade agreement to buy oil

from Colombia. In fact, right now Colombian products, manufactured goods and farm products enter the United States duty free. There are no taxes on their imports. But U.S. products, such as construction equipment, the bulldozers that could be used in mining and various other economic projects in Colombia, face 15 percent tariffs. Our corn and soybeans and livestock products face tariffs of up to 40 percent, but Colombian agricultural products enter the United States duty free. We need a trade promotion agreement with Colombia to even the playing field.

We often hear from folks back home, you know, we need trade agreements that are fair and where we treat each other equally, so if they get access to our market, we get access to their's. Well, under the status quo, they have that. We need this agreement so we get access to their market.

Some say Colombia is not very important. Well, there are 42 million people there. It is the second largest Spanish-speaking Nation in the world. It is America's best friend. But we have a good agreement before us.

Some have said we need to oppose this agreement because there has been violence against union activists. The Uribe government has acknowledged that. In fact, they have done some incredible things. They have increased the budget for prosecution of violent acts by 72 percent. They have added almost 2,200 prosecutors and lawyers and others for the Prosecutor General to go after those who commit violent crimes.

When it comes specifically to labor leaders in Colombia, as the Washington Post has pointed out, the murder rate for labor leaders in Colombia is actually lower than the national murder rate, and any murder is unacceptable, whether it is here in Washington, DC or Bogota.

The bottom line is, Colombia is our friend. This House voted to turn its back on our best friend. We need to move forward on the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. We should bring that forward and give our best friend in Latin America what they deserve. They have earned it.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Indiana (Mr. BURTON) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. BURTON of Indiana addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. WATT) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. WATT addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

PRESIDENT SHOULD SIGN SCHIP BILL TO HELP WORKING AMERICANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. COURTNEY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. COURTNEY. Madam Speaker, I rise in the well today to talk about an event that occurred last weekend on Saturday in Tolland, Connecticut, which is a suburban town about 20 miles east of Hartford.

The Connecticut State Dental Society held an open free clinic under a program called Mission of Mercy, which is a group of dentists around the country that organize operatories and equipment to go into communities and basically open the doors and say anybody who needs dental care, come and we will take care of you. The advertising for this event in Connecticut was modest. There were some TV public service announcements, there were some small notices in the press.

The Dental Society had organized about 180 dentists, a number of hygienists and staff to be with the group that morning. Much to their amazement, people started lining up for this event at 6 o'clock the prior evening, Friday evening, and by 4 o'clock in the morning, when the dentists actually arrived to start setting up the operation, there were already 350 people waiting in line to get their care. By 5 o'clock in the morning, the crowd had grown to the point where the Connecticut State Police had to come out and actually turn people away.

At about 5:30 in the morning, the heavens opened up. There was thunder, lightning, and it rained, it was pouring rain, hard rain on the crowd, and none would leave, because they were terrified of losing their place in line and being deprived of the opportunity to get an extraction, to get a filling, to get their teeth cleaned, because they were so desperate to get dental care. Looking at the pictures in the press the following day of people literally huddled in the rain waiting to try and get an opportunity to get their teeth taken care of, it really made you wonder what country are we living in.

Tolland, Connecticut, where this is being held, is suburban Connecticut. This is not a distressed area. This is not an urban area with large pockets of chronic poverty. It is a suburban area with working families and working individuals who definitely earn a paycheck and provide a standard of living that would be described as middle class for themselves and their families. But when I joined the dental clinic later in the day around 1 o'clock in the afternoon, 800 people were at that point lined up to be served. They had turned away hundreds of others. People were waiting in the stands of a gymnasium, waiting for an opportunity to get their teeth taken care of.

Now, why am I talking about this on the floor of the United States Congress? The reason is because there is

legislation that has been sitting on the President's desk, the SCHIP bill, the children's health insurance extension, over which there has been a lot of fighting and debating going on in this Chamber over the last few months or so.

One of the overlooked parts of that legislation is that in addition to standardizing a 300 percent poverty threshold so that working families would have an opportunity to have their children covered by health insurance, it would also strengthen the dental coverage under the SCHIP program.

If you talk to any dentist or any healthcare provider in this country, they will tell you that under the existing SCHIP program, the dental coverage is inadequate. That is why in those stands in that high school gymnasium there were families with children who have never had their teeth cleaned, who needed in some instances to have their teeth extracted because of the fact that they have no other type of decent coverage for their dental care.

Unfortunately, President Bush has twice vetoed this legislation, legislation that has been endorsed by the March of Dimes, by the Catholic Hospital Association, by the American Medical Association, by the Pharmaceutical Association of America, a broad consensus of stakeholders in the healthcare system that have come together and said if there is one area of dispute that we ought to agree on as Americans, it is that children should have their health insurance covered. In particular, we should make that sure that oral and dental healthcare is done in a fashion to make sure they are going to have a lifetime of decent dental care. Because if you talk to anyone who is in pediatrics, they will tell you that dental care, dentistry care, is essential to making sure that a young person will grow and thrive.

Well, what we saw in Connecticut on Saturday is I think a perfect example of how broken the system is. What is frustrating to me, and I think so many others, is that we have an opportunity with a piece of legislation to make a real difference in the lives of young children in America, to make sure that they will not be stuck in the pouring rain and in thunder and lightning, so they can get access to what I think almost any reasonable person would describe as basic, fundamental, decent healthcare.

Madam Speaker, I have a copy of the Hartford Courant coverage of this extraordinary event that took place in Connecticut from the Sunday Hartford Courant edition which I am going to ask to be made part of the RECORD. I would just like to read the final passage of the article, which described a 67-year-old Stafford Springs woman, which is, again, a suburb of Connecticut.

"As she walked back to her parking lot with no umbrella, soaking wet from the rain, struggling to catch her breath

from the walk, the woman said she had come to get her tooth pulled, but already knew she would never get in. Like the others, she can't afford dental insurance." When she was asked what she was going to do, she said, "Just going to pray, I guess."

She should be able to ask for more than that. She should ask for real action by this Congress to pass healthcare legislation so that Americans will get the care they need.

Madam Speaker, I include the article for the RECORD.

[From Courant.com, April 13, 2008]

MANY TURNED AWAY FROM FREE DENTAL CARE CLINIC

(By Colin Poitras)

The line of taillights glowing in the pre-dawn darkness snaked back nearly a mile from the old Tolland High School on Saturday.

Closer to the school, people were walking along the side of the road, a steady stream of dark silhouettes rising out of the morning mist like refugees in a war zone.

There were elderly couples clutching their canes, hunched-over veterans, single mothers with young children in tow. A woman on crutches limping along.

It was 5 a.m., and they came by the hundreds, a throng of pilgrims with a common goal—free dental care.

Some heard about it on the radio, others saw it on TV or read about it in the newspaper. Connecticut's Mission of Mercy, the first ever single, large-scale free dental clinic to be offered in the state.

"This shows we have a broken system and have to find some way to correct it," said Dr. Bob Schreiber, a Glastonbury pediatric dentist and one of the Connecticut mission's organizers. "This is not a solution. This is a stop-gap measure to address people's immediate needs. This points out there is a huge need even in this, the richest state in the country."

Inside the school, more than 190 volunteer dentists were waiting along with 800 volunteers. Free fillings, check-ups, extractions. No questions asked.

The high school's cafeteria and gym were outfitted like a field hospital, with 60 dental chairs shipped in from the Midwest, portable X-ray machines and boxes upon boxes of latex gloves and sterilized dental tools.

The crush of patients was so large that by 7 a.m., people were being turned away.

When Carol Dingledey, executive director of the Connecticut State Dental Association, arrived to set up at 4 a.m., there were already 350 people outside the door. Some came the night before and camped out. Others drove hours in the dark hoping to be seen.

"It just goes to show you how many people don't have dental insurance," said Mary, a 70-year-old woman, standing in a line of about 100 people outside the school at 5:30 a.m.

Leaning on her cane, Mary, who didn't want to give her last name, said she spent her entire life working and raising nine children and grandchildren. Now on limited income, she can't afford dental insurance, never mind pay fees out of her pocket. She hasn't been to a dentist in eight years. Her teeth hurt. She needs a filling, and a cap had come off.

"I've never been on welfare; I've never had to struggle to get by," Mary said. "But here it is. This is the bottom of the line. I'm just trying to get by."

About a half-mile away in the parking lot of the new Tolland High School, where orga-

nizers had set up a shuttle parking area, Rhonda Slattery, 54, sat in her motorized wheelchair waiting for her husband, Joe. They had just finished the hourlong ride from Barkhamsted and weren't sure the school bus shuttling people to the make-shift clinic was handicapped accessible.

"I'm just amazed at the number of people here at this hour of the morning," said Rhonda Slattery, whose limited Social Security disability income makes it difficult for her to afford dental care.

As she spoke, the sky opened up and it started to rain. Hard.

Inside the school at 7 a.m., what could be the largest waiting room in Connecticut was packed to its 700-seat capacity. The auditorium was full of people: more retirees, working people, college kids, entire families. Some huddled under blankets. Others sat quietly, waiting for their number to be called, many of their faces swollen or creased in pain.

In the triage area just outside the auditorium, dentists peered into people's mouths with portable flashlights. Nurses and dental assistants hustled about—checking blood pressures, taking X-rays, injecting Novocain.

In the gymnasium, down the hall the high-pitched whine of dental drills floated above the crowd as dozens of dentists treated patients. Those awaiting care sat in the bleachers, then moved to metal folding chairs before reaching the dental chairs. A squad of stand-by dentists stood off to the side, scrubbed and ready, waiting to replace their peers when their hands cramped and they needed a break.

The two-day clinic opened at 5 and the work would not stop until 5 p.m. Today it continues from 5 a.m. to noon.

Sitting among the throng were Susan and Brian Boyce of Eastford, both 41, who came to the clinic with their seven children—from age 12 down to 11 months. (The baby was just along for the ride.) Brian is an executive director at the Porter and Chester Institute. Susan is a registered nurse who stays home with the kids.

But they don't have dental insurance and with annual dental check-ups costing more than \$1,000 a year, paying for even routine dental care is difficult, they said.

"The dentists don't take payment plans, they want the money up front, and that's a big chunk of money when you try to go every year," Susan said.

Shortly after 7 a.m. the clinic was maxed out. Organizers began turning people away at the door. The backlog was so deep that it would take the rest of the day just to treat those already there. Later in the morning, the clinic reopened briefly, and another 100 or so patients were let in. It abruptly closed again by 10 a.m.

For some, the clinic is a blessing, a reprieve from their aches and pain. But for those who didn't get inside, the struggle continues. Many in the pre-dawn dark turned back upon seeing the long line.

"It's pretty bad," said one 67-year-old Stafford Springs woman, as she walked back to the parking lot with no umbrella, soaking wet from the rain. Struggling to catch her breath from the walk, the woman said she had come to get her tooth pulled at 5 a.m. but already knew she'd never get in. Like the others, she can't afford dental insurance.

As she climbed into her car, the woman was asked what she was going to do. Water dripped off her hair as she wearily shook her head.

"Just going to pray, I guess."

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. MCHENRY) is recognized for 5 minutes.