

The President's Radio Address *April 17, 1999*

Good morning. Of all the duties we owe to one another, our duty to our parents and grandparents is among the most sacred. Today I want to talk about what we must do to strengthen the safety net for America's seniors, by cracking down on elder crime, fraud, and abuse.

For more than 6 years, we've worked hard to keep our families and our communities safe. And we've made remarkable progress, with violent crime dropping to its lowest levels in 25 years. For elderly Americans who once locked themselves into their homes in fear, the falling crime rate is a godsend.

But the greatest threat many older Americans face is not a criminal armed with a gun but a telemarketer armed with a deceptive rap. And our most defenseless seniors, those who are sick or disabled and living in nursing homes, cannot lock the door against abuse and neglect by people paid to care for them. So America's seniors are especially vulnerable to fraud and abuse. Therefore, we must make special efforts to protect them.

That is why the 21st century crime bill I'll send to Congress next month includes tough measures to target people who prey on elderly Americans. First, we must fight telemarketing fraud that robs people of their life savings and endangers their well-being. Every single year illegal telemarketing operations bilk the American people of an estimated \$40 billion. More than half the victims are over 50. That's like a fraud tax aimed directly at senior citizens.

Last year we toughened penalties for telemarketing fraud, but we should stop scam artists before they have a chance to harm America's seniors. My crime bill will give the Justice Department authority to terminate telephone service when agents find evidence of an illegal telemarketing operation or a plan to start one. This new law will send a message to telemarketers: If you prey on older Americans, we will cut off your phone lines and shut you down.

Second, we must fight nursing home neglect and abuse. Nursing homes can be a safe haven for senior citizens and families in need. To make sure they are, we've issued the toughest nursing home rules in history and stepped up investigations at facilities suspected of neglect and abuse.

But when one out of four nursing homes in America does not provide quality care to their residents, and when people living in substandard nursing homes have as much fear from abuse and neglect as they do from the diseases of old age, we must do more.

My crime bill gives the Justice Department authority to investigate, prosecute, and punish nursing home operators who repeatedly neglect and abuse their residents. With prison sentences of up to 10 years and fines of up to \$2 million, these new provisions make clear we will settle for nothing less than the highest quality care in America's nursing homes.

Third, we must fight health care fraud. Every year health care fraud costs American taxpayers billions of dollars, draining resources from programs that benefit our seniors. As Vice President Gore announced last month, my crime bill will allow the Justice Department to take immediate action to stop false claims and illegal kickbacks and give Federal prosecutors new tools to tackle fraud cases.

Finally, we must fight retirement plan ripoffs. My crime bill will toughen penalties for people who steal from pension and retirement funds. To borrow a line from Senator Leahy, who is working closely with us to strengthen the safety net for our seniors, the only people who should benefit from pensions are the people who worked for a lifetime to build them.

I look forward to working with Congress in the coming days to give our senior citizens the security they deserve. That is an important part of our efforts to protect our parents and our grandparents, to advance our values, and build a stronger America for the 21st century.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 4:45 p.m. on April 16 in the Roseville Recreation Center in Roseville, MI, for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on April 17. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on April 16 but was embargoed for release until the broadcast.