

Remarks in a Discussion at the Liberty Community Center in Liberty
June 14, 2004

The President. Thank you very much. Thanks for coming. We're glad to be in Liberty, aren't we? What a great town. Gosh, I want to thank the citizens for lining the street and waving to us coming in. [Laughter] I really appreciate it. Mr. Mayor—I know the mayor is here, Steve Hawkins. Mayor, thank you for—please thank the citizens of your city for being so kind, and it's really great to be here.

You're wondering why I'm on stage with some local citizens, important Washington, DC-type personalities—[laughter]—it's because we're going to talk about something really important that's happening in the country, and that is, we're going to talk about how to make sure our seniors get the best health care possible. That's what we're here to talk about. We've got some—this is going to be a very interesting discussion, one that I think you'll find to be educational, one that will help illuminate what's going on with a good piece of law in a practical way.

Before I do, I want to say something about my friend Sam Graves. Congressman Graves, thank you for coming. I asked him what he did to lose weight. [Laughter] He looks a lot prettier now than he used to. [Laughter] He said he quit eating sugar. But he is a fine Congressman. I really enjoy working with him. And I appreciate you being here, Sam. He's from a farming background. He's plenty capable and plenty smart. And I'm saying that because I want him to feel good as he gets back in the limousine. I'm giving him a ride on Air Force One back to Washington. [Laughter]

I'm with my friend Mark McClellan. I'll tell you about him in a minute.

Today when I landed, I met a lady named Ruth Blake. Where are you, Ruth? Yes, there she is. Ruth, thank you for coming. You're probably wondering why I'm introducing Ruth. The reason why is she's

from Shepherd's Center, which is a—[applause]—sounds like you brought your family. [Laughter] Ruth is a volunteer. She manages the adult education program that educates and empowers seniors. And the reason I bring that up is I just want our fellow citizens here in Liberty, Missouri, to understand that I know the great strength of the country is the heart and souls of the American people, that our greatest strength—[applause].

I see some of our military folks here. That's a strength of America. We'll keep the military strong. And we've got to keep the military strong to make the world—to help the world be a peaceful world. It's incumbent upon America to lead and work with other nations to spread freedom. Free countries are peaceful countries. And I believe we have an obligation to work toward freedom and peace, not only for our own security, not only because we must never forget the lessons of September the 11th but because, in this Nation, we understand that freedom is not America's gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty God's gift to each man and woman in this world.

Another strength of America is the fact that we're a wealthy nation, and that's important. It's important that we stay that way, so people can find work; they can put food on the table; people can do their duty as a mom or a dad.

But our true strength is the fact that we've got loving citizens who are willing to volunteer to help change America, one heart and one soul at a time. My call to our fellow citizens is to join the army of compassion, which exists in every neighborhood in every city of our great land. Make a difference by teaching a child or an adult to read, by providing food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, and together, we can make sure the great promise and hope

of America is extended to every corner of our great country.

I'm honored you're here. Thanks for coming. Thanks for representing the best of America.

Nearly 39 years ago, not far from here, President Lyndon Baines Johnson signed the Medicare law, the first Medicare law. And interestingly enough, the first Medicare card was handed to Harry Truman. You might remember him—[laughter]—a fine President, I might add. But Medicare, which had done a great job for many years, got stuck in the past. In other words, medicine began to change, but Medicare wouldn't change with it.

For years, politicians talked about modernizing Medicare. Nothing got done, though. As a matter of fact, as you might remember, it became, in political parlance, "Medi-scare." In other words, somebody would talk about it, and they'd use it against him as a political weapon. And it was time to get rid of that kind of talk because Medicare is too important a program for our seniors.

We were willing to provide money for operations, but we weren't willing to pay for the drugs that would prevent the operation from needing to happen in the first place. See, it was stuck in the past. The procedures were too old, and it required bureaucratic action to make sure that the modern medicine was available to our seniors. It kind of crept along. It wasn't doing its job. So we called Congress to task—I called Congress to task. I said, "Let's do our duty as elected officials to make the system work better on behalf of our senior citizens." Congress passed the law. I proudly signed it, and it's going to make a positive difference, a big difference in the lives of our seniors.

We're really in a three-stage process. We're going to talk about the first stage of Medicare modernization today, which is the issuance of drug discount cards. The second stage is what happens next year when Medicare begins to pay for preventiva-

tive medicine, maintenance, and screenings for seniors. In other words, for the first time in Medicare's history, we're now going to diagnose problems before they become acute. That seems to make sense, particularly if you're worried about taxpayers' money. In other words, if you act early to prevent problems from happening in the first place, it's good for the taxpayers. Medicare didn't do that in the past. We're going to do it now.

And starting in '06, for the first time ever, there will be a prescription drug benefit available for people in Medicare. It's a—by the way, one of the things I insisted on was that somebody who is happy with the current Medicare system doesn't need to change. I mean, I fully understand there's a lot of seniors who don't want to change. I know that. We needed to change the system to make sure there was a prescription drug benefit available. But for seniors who are happy with Medicare, plus the prescription drug benefit, you're in great shape. As a matter of fact, the program just got better in 2006. And if you're a poorer senior, the Government will help you afford the cost of doing—the cost of medicine.

For other seniors, there's going to be more choices—for all seniors there's more choices. I mean, if you're happy with Medicare, fine. If you like the current Medicare+Choice, which will be called Medicare Advantage, that's going to be more robust, more available. If you want other options available to you, I always felt it was best to trust people, not Government, in order to—in the decisionmaking process.

And so we're moving down the road to make sure the system is modern and to make sure the system works. But today we're going to talk about the issuance of cards, drug discount cards that are now available to our seniors. And we've got some problems. One problem is there's misinformation about these cards. Another problem is, is that people—they feel like

it may be too complicated, the procedures may be too complicated to get a drug discount card. Some of them say, "Well, it's not going to matter anyway." They've heard political promises before, and a lot of times they fall empty. So today we're going to talk about how to make sure our seniors understand that the drug discount card works.

We're going to talk to two folks who have used their card. As a matter of fact, I witnessed Wanda going to the pharmacy, local pharmacy here, and putting her card down, and her drugs—I think which would have cost her \$19, cost her \$1.70, something like that, just about the range we're talking about. I may not have the numbers exact.

Wanda Blackmore. That's about right.

The President. Yes, I didn't pay for it. [Laughter] The receipt is in her purse, I know. [Laughter] It was something like that.

And that's what we're here to talk about. I want our seniors to understand—and this will be repeated several times—that if you have any questions about the drug discount card, there is a way to get information that will help you, or there's a way for your son or daughter to get information to help you, and that is to call 1-800-MEDICARE. That's all you've got to do: Pick up the phone, 1-800-MEDICARE. And people will answer the phone—is it 24/7—24/7. In other words, that means 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, somebody will be there to help and answer questions.

You're going to hear Mark talk about what the Federal Government is trying to do to make sure that you understand this information is available. There's other ways to—you can log on, if you happen to be a high-tech person, and use the Internet. You can go to www.medicare.gov. It's not all that hard, and there will be all kinds of information available to you.

And you're going to hear that there's a lot of different choices. You bet. That's what we want. We want there to be

choices, different cards available. That's how you meet different needs. We don't want a "one size fits all." That's not a consumer-driven system. That's a Government-driven system. A consumer-driven system is one that allows consumers to make the choices on what's best for them.

So there's different cards, is what I'm telling you, to meet your needs. And I understand, for some that's going to be—it's going to be complicated, and some people just don't want their lives complicated. And—but you've got to know there's help. And just because it may seem complicated, that's not a good—I think people should not use that as an excuse to participate, because you're going to find there's good discounts; there's good savings. Fifteen percent on brand-name drugs, minimum. Isn't that right? Is "minimum" the right word to use—minimum? Thirty percent on generic drugs. Those are the drugs that, after a patent has expired, that do the exact same thing as the brand-name drug but at a much cheaper cost.

And by the way, he was the head of the FDA before I put him in this position, and his job was to speed up generic drugs to the markets. People shouldn't be afraid of using generic drugs. They accomplish the same thing, and you're going to save a lot of money. They asked Wanda—they said, "This is a generic drug, Wanda." She said, "Fine, let me have the generic drug. I know it's going to do the same thing as the brand-name drug, but it's going to cost me a heck of a lot less."

In other words, this discount card is going to save our seniors a lot of money. And I'm just about running out of air—[laughter]—you'll be happy to hear. [Laughter] Want me to keep talking? Okay. [Laughter] But she can tell it better than me.

But first, I want to start off with my friend Mark McClellan. He is a doctor and a Ph.D. He's from Texas. [Laughter] And he is the Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. That's his

job. His job is to make sure the Medicare system works well and that as the law kicks in—in other words, as the system becomes more modern, his job is to make sure it happens for the benefit of our seniors. I picked a smart guy to do this. He understands health care, and he understands the task. And the task is to make sure our seniors get the best health care possible and our taxpayers get the best deal possible as our seniors get the best health care possible.

And so, Mark, welcome. Thanks for coming. As I mentioned to you, he at one time was the head of the FDA, and he did such a fine job there that I gave him a tougher job. And so, Mark, thanks for coming. Share some stuff with us. Tell us what's on your mind. Tell us how our seniors can benefit from this program.

Mark B. McClellan. Thank you, Mr. President. It's a real pleasure to be here with you, with all of you here in Liberty, and especially to be working with Medicare at such a critical time. It's just 6 months since this new Medicare law was passed, and we already are having the opportunity to get drug costs down for seniors that need help right now and who have been waiting too long. There's been a lot of talk for a long time. We're actually implementing steps right now that are getting those costs down.

And that's coming about through a couple means. The cards is a start, but with the cards, you get a chance to band together, to stick together to get lower prices on your drugs, just like people who have had insurance for their drugs have been able to do for a while. That gets negotiated prices down from manufacturers, and that leads to savings. And on top of that, we're giving people more information on where they can get the best prices so they can comparison shop more easily.

You talked about the fact that consumers can really help us find better deals for Americans in many areas, but that's been tough in drugs. It's been hard to get prices

and hard to know exactly what you can—what kind of deal you can get at different pharmacies and through different means available, through mail order, through other options like that. And we're going to put all that information in front of you with this program.

And as you said, Mr. President, what we're seeing through the drug card program is now savings of, very often, 15 to 30 percent or more off the list prices for brand-name drugs and much larger savings for generic drugs. And we'll also tell you about the generics when they're available, so you can find out about more ways to save through using generics, whenever they are available.

And some seniors have been able to get a little bit of help. They've been trying hard to find good deals. But often when you go to your neighborhood pharmacy, the best you can get is a pharmacy discount card that may give you a few percent off the drug store prices but don't let you negotiate to get those much lower prices. And that's where these real savings are coming from.

And the most important thing is, for people who are having drug costs that are causing them trouble right now or they're struggling with their costs, is to find out about this program. As you said, Mr. President, there's some easy ways to do that. You can call us at 1-800-MEDICARE, any time, day or night. You can go to the web site, www.medicare.gov.

And we've also made help available for the first time ever through some expanded programs in local areas. Joe is going to talk about this in a few minutes. But you can get face-to-face help. If you don't think you can follow through with a phone call, if you really want to talk to somebody face to face about this program, you can do that. Right here in Missouri, we're working with CLAIM. It's a State health insurance assistance plan that provides this personalized help for seniors, often working through volunteers who know this program well. So

those are some simple ways that you can find out about what's in this program for you.

And the people who need help the most get the most help right away with this program. If you're struggling with drug costs today because you don't have good drug coverage, you should find out about it. But especially if you've got a limited income, below about \$1,400 a month for a couple, about \$1,040 a month for a single senior—about 7 million Medicare beneficiaries who are in that category, below those income levels, they can get not only the discounts but some direct financial help on their card—\$600 this year, \$600 next year, and there's some additional discounts coming from the drug manufacturers for them as well. So it amounts to literally thousands of dollars in savings. And you can find out about it right now just by calling us at 1-800-MEDICARE, and we'll put you in touch with a face-to-face person if you want to get help that way.

The President. Good job, thanks. Do we have the program up and running where somebody can actually dial up—put in their ZIP Code, the pharmacies come up, they show the different prices for drugs in their neighborhood?

Dr. McClellan. That's exactly right.

The President. In other words, it's kind of a virtual market. It's kind of an interesting concept, isn't it? One of the things I believe is that markets have got a fantastic way of rewarding consumers with better quality and better price. And you can get on your web page or you can get on the computer, and you can shop—price shop right now in your particular ZIP Code. And that's a way, also, to make sure that better price is available for our seniors.

Dr. McClellan. That's right. And if you don't want to go on the web, we can help you over the phone and send you something, a personalized brochure, that gives you as much or as little detail as you want about the best options for your own per-

sonal needs at the pharmacies that you want to use.

The President. Joe Tilghman is with us. Joe is the Administrator. He works with Mark. Don't worry about all the cameras. [Laughter] He is the Regional Administrator. He has been charged with helping people in this area understand the benefits of the drug discount card. He will then, once he completes that task here this year, he'll then be in charge of the '05 modernization of information, and then in '06 will be in charge with helping Mark implement the brand new law. And it's good. I'm telling you, it's going to make a big difference in our seniors' lives.

Joe, thanks. Welcome.

[Joe Tilghman, Regional Administrator, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Department of Health and Human Services, Kansas City Regional Office, Kansas City, MO, made brief remarks.]

The President. See, what you're hearing is, is that Mark has asked his team to go out and educate people. People need to understand the truth and the facts and what's available. That's what we're trying to get done here. And that's what we're trying to get done all around the country. And you're doing a fine job at it. Thank you.

Mr. Tilghman. Thank you, sir.

The President. Just keep putting the word out. This is a program that helps people. If you've got a mom or a dad out there that may be nervous about hearing the change in Medicare, talk to them. Call the number because this will help. And look, you're probably saying, "Another guy is showing up from Washington, laying out something that's just not true." Well, it's true.

And I'll tell you, who best to testify is Wanda, Wanda Blackmore. She and I, as I told you, we just went to a pharmacy. She—I was going to say, you whipped out your card, but you left your card there before, right? Anyway, they had her card, and

she bought some drugs that is a blood thinner, right?

Wanda Blackmore. Right.

The President. Yes. Okay, talk into the mic. [Laughter]

Ms. Blackmore. Yes, sir. [Laughter] I was afraid you would try to over talk me if—

The President. That's right. [Applause] Are your grandkids here?

Ms. Blackmore. I can't see them.

The President. Yes, your grandkids are here. She's talking to me like she does her grandkids. That's okay. [Laughter] I'm used to strong women. [Laughter]

Ms. Blackmore. I'm old enough to be your grandmother too.

The President. Okay. Let's get to work, will you? [Laughter]

[*Ms. Blackmore, senior citizen, Kansas City, MO, made brief remarks.*]

The President. So here's the thing. Let me see if I can distill it, summarize what she just said. She got her card. The first time she used it was June 7th. On a prescription that usually cost \$10, she paid \$1.14. That's called savings. It looks like—we kind of did some rough math, didn't we, and it looks like you're going to save about \$750 this year. And that's a lot. That's an awful lot for some people in this country, and I'm telling, you this thing is working. And I appreciate you coming to testify.

Ms. Blackmore. Yes, sir.

The President. There you go. She drove in with the limo—we're a little familiar with each other because she was in the limousine from the airport to here. [Laughter]

Ms. Blackmore. I got him lined out. [Laughter]

The President. That's right. All right, you're not the only person on the stage here. [Laughter]

Ms. Blackmore. I will be, if you keep talking like that. [Laughter]

The President. That's right.

Ms. Blackmore. I'll throw him out.

The President. All right, here we go. [Laughter] Yes, ma'am. [Laughter]

Ms. Blackmore. Thank you, sir.

The President. Gladys Cole.

Gladys Cole. Mr. President, I can tell you that your drug card is working.

The President. Okay, why can you say that?

Ms. Cole. Well, because I went and got my medicine that I had to give \$120 for, and when I got through, I gave \$20-something for that same medicine. So there's no doubt in my mind that it is working and working quite well.

The President. All right, how did you find out about the card? See, people are wondering out there how these two ladies found out about the card, and they may not have heard about it.

Ms. Cole. Well, my pharmacist knew that I had no prescription card, and so he knew what a price I'd been paying for my medicine. So when the leaflets come in for us to fill out, he asked me, would I take them home and fill it out. And he said, "I'll fax them in if you'll just fill them out." So I thought, "Oh, well, maybe 5 or 10 dollars," but 5 and 10 dollars looked awful good to me. So I said, "All right." And when he got my medicine card and I took it in and he told me what the savings was, I about dropped my false teeth. [Laughter]

The President. We're talking about teeth up here. [Laughter] Now that you've recovered your false teeth—[laughter].

Ms. Cole. So I'm sold on it, and anytime I can tell you people out there that are of our age, try it out. See if it fits for you. And then if it don't, well, fine. But you need to at least try it and see.

The President. There you go. I appreciate you, Gladys. Thanks very much for sharing that.

It's estimated that over the next 7 months, she's going to save \$700 for the year. That's good. Yes, that's a lot of money. These ladies qualify for the \$600 subsidy. At a certain income level, people can qualify for additional help, not only

get the card. If you don't qualify, you use the card anyway, because you're going to get your discounts. But you get \$600 additional a year help.

Ms. Blackmore. This is the only time I've been glad to be poor. [Laughter]

The President. Who's writing your material for you? [Laughter]

Ms. Blackmore. I'm not going to tell.

The President. We didn't have enough room on the stage—well, we have plenty of room. Anyway—[laughter]—Roberta Sims and Betty Sten is with us too. Where are you? There you go. Thanks for coming, ladies. I appreciate you all being here. She got her—Roberta got her card, and she used it at Liberty Wal-Mart on June the 5th. She purchased over \$300 in prescriptions and paid 22.62. That's a fact. It better be a fact. [Laughter] Betty got her card recently too and is going to save a lot of money, \$500.

In other words, this is important. The reason we're here is to share information. We're trying to fight through the clutter, the noise, so that people can understand that there is a great opportunity to take advantage of a good piece of legislation. That's what we're here to talk about.

We want our seniors to be able to have the benefits of modern medicine in a way that is best affordable. That's what we're here to talk about, and if you don't believe me, just listen to the two ladies here on the stage. They go to their pharmacies; they put down their money; and they've seen

the difference between what they had been charged and what they're paying now. And it's a real savings, and it's important savings. And I want to thank them for coming to share their stories. You have made the day much more credible—[laughter]—much more lively too.

Let me conclude by telling you this: I—you know, our country has been challenged. We're challenged to make sure that we're defended from an enemy that can't stand what we believe in. We're challenged because the economy has been through quite a bit. It's now getting better, I might add. We've been challenged in a lot of ways. Our hearts are challenged every day when we realize amidst our plenty there are people who hurt.

The thing I want to share with you and remind you about, that this great country can overcome any challenge we face. This is a great country because of the values we believe in. It's a great country because of the citizens who inhabit her. And there's nothing—there's not one thing we can't do together to make sure the world is more free, the country is secure, and America is the best possible place it can be for all our citizens to call home.

Thanks for greeting us today. I'm so honored you came. May God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:32 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Stephen P. Hawkins of Liberty, MO.

Statement on Signing Legislation Supporting the Participation of Taiwan in the World Health Organization

June 14, 2004

Today, I have signed into law S. 2092, an Act concerning participation of Taiwan in the World Health Organization. The United States fully supports the participation of Taiwan in the work of the World

Health Organization, including observer status. The United States has expressed publicly its firm support for Taiwan's observer status and will continue to do so.