

are most at risk right now of losing access to home health services under the current interim payment system.

To decrease total costs in order to remain under their per-beneficiary limits, too many home health agencies have had to significantly reduce the number of visits, which in turn has increased the cost of each visit. We need to deal with the regulatory issues that I have mentioned, including OASIS, surety bonds, sequential billing, and the 15-minute incremental reporting requirement. Our legislation accomplishes these goals.

The Medicare Home Health Equity Act of 1999 will provide a measure of financial and regulatory relief to beleaguered home health agencies in order to ensure that our senior citizens have access to medically necessary home health services.

It has been a pleasure to work with the Senate majority leader, Senator LOTT, as well as Senator ABRAHAM, Senator SANTORUM, Senator BOND, and others who have been real leaders in this effort to come up with a solution to this very pressing problem. My hope is that we will make reforming the payment system for Medicare home health services a top priority this fall.

I yield back the remainder of my time to the Senator from Wyoming.

Mr. THOMAS. I thank the Senator from Maine, not only because of the good job she does all across the board but particularly on this matter of health care, rural health care. As co-chairman of the Rural Health Care Caucus, I am particularly interested in those kinds of things. For example, in Wyoming, home health care is so important and sometimes quite expensive, particularly because of the amount of miles that have to be traveled. But for the patient, and because of the cost, home health care is the right way to go.

I now yield to the Senator from Missouri to talk a little more about the future and our plans with respect to taxes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The distinguished Senator from Missouri is recognized.

Mr. ASHCROFT. Mr. President, I commend the Senator from Maine for her sensitivity to a crisis which is looming in American health care and that she is willing to constructively deal with that crisis. I thank her for her thoughts on this matter and for her cosponsorship of important legislation.

TAX RELIEF

Mr. ASHCROFT. Mr. President, as we look to the future, most of us, in our families, in our businesses, in our civic organizations, in our churches, like to deal with some sort of plan. As a matter of fact, there is a lot of buzz or talk these days about financial planning, making sure we have the capacity to meet the demands of the future when they come to us and when they fall upon us.

It is incumbent on the Congress of the United States to engage in some planning, to take a look at the future and find out exactly where we ought to be going and how we ought to get there, and the things that are important and what we ought to do to protect our interests. It is with that in mind that we, the Members of the Congress, are delivering to the President a financial plan for the next decade. He will have an opportunity to act on that plan this week. That plan has been talked about, the tax relief contained in the plan, but it has not been spoken of very generously in terms of the other major features of this financial plan for America for the next 10 years. I think we can only understand the plan by looking at it as a whole, understanding what we are doing to protect the interests of this country in the years ahead.

The first thing I think people want us to start to do is to be more responsible in the way we in Washington handle their money. One of the areas of irresponsibility in the past has been the Social Security trust fund. When there has been a little bit more in the trust fund—or a lot more in the trust fund—than was needed for that particular year, Members of the House and Senate have been a part of budgeting that money for expenditures not related to Social Security, to support the operational costs of Government.

Americans are duly concerned because they know the reason there is a surplus in the Social Security trust fund is that big bulge of us baby boomers are paying in, but they know when this big bulge of baby boomers starts to consume instead of contribute to the trust fund, we are going to need the surplus. So the first thing we have done in our financial plan for the future is to put an end to that. We are going to stop the practice of spending the trust fund. So the financial plan which will go to the President this week says \$1.9 trillion—trillion being a thousand billions and a billion being a thousand millions; I mean, it is almost impossible to think of it that way—\$1.9 trillion is going to be reserved for Social Security, a major step forward. Americans have a right to expect us to plan to do that and we are doing it. That is a big part of the financial plan for the future.

No. 2, people say over time most families, most organizations want to reduce their debt; they would like to get their debt down to manageable levels. Most of us take 30 years to pay off a home. We have decided to start paying down the national debt. In a part of the plan which I think is very important, we are taking the publicly held debt of the United States of America from \$3.8 trillion down to \$1.9 trillion, a 50-percent decline in the national debt held by the public of the United States of America. What a tremendous decline in debt. As part of a rational plan, the debt to the gross domestic product ratio goes from 43 percent to 14 percent

over that 10-year plan we are sending to the President. First, we protect Social Security. Second, we pay the debt down by 50 percent.

No. 3, as the chairman of the Budget Committee, Senator DOMENICI, has indicated, we put aside about \$505 billion for contingencies over the next 10 years, things we might want to spend money on over and above what we are spending now. So not only do we have a reservation of \$1.9 trillion for Social Security, not only do we cut the publicly held debt of this country in half, but we also reserve a half trillion dollars for expenditures we are not now making.

It is only in the context of these three items—the saving of the Social Security surplus for Social Security; reducing the national debt, the publicly held debt of America, by 50 percent; putting aside a half trillion dollars for contingencies—that we understand what the tax relief is all about. The tax relief is what is left over. Americans earn the money. We trust Americans to earn this money; we should trust them to spend it. The question is whether we are going to fund families or bureaucracies.

We got the President to agree with us on saving Social Security to the extent of putting \$1.9 trillion aside, and I commend him for getting there. He wasn't there in his State of the Union Message. I commend the President for being willing to pay down the national debt. But the President, after that, wants to spend so much more of what is left over on more Government programs.

Frankly, we ought to be giving a tax relief package, 1 percent, to every bracket. We ought to be doing away with the marriage penalty tax. We ought to allow parents and grandparents to invest money so their kids can have money for education, and the growth of that money can have a tax preferred status. We ought to allow people to buy health care in a more tax beneficial way, especially the self-employed who do not get it on their jobs.

It is with that in mind I think this package is delivered to the President to say this is a comprehensive financial plan for the future. The tax relief only amounts to 23.8 percent of the total surplus as we have defined surpluses historically because we have been so responsible as to set that Social Security surplus aside. It is not part of what we will spend. And we start to knock down the national debt, take down the publicly held debt of the country 50 percent in the next 10 years and set aside a half trillion dollars for contingencies, and then work on abolishing the marriage penalty and tax, saving for education and expanded IRAs, and knocking every tax rate down by 1 percent—a 1-percent decline for folks at the top brackets and a 1-percent decline for folks at the bottom brackets.

It seems to me that is the kind of plan upon which a nation can march

forward. I call upon the President of the United States to reevaluate his position. He has expressed real doubts, serious reservations about this. Seeing it in the context of a financial plan for the future of the United States is to see it as a roadmap to opportunity and success and prosperity.

I close with this. Because we had the two biggest tax increases in history in this decade, Americans have paid in far more money than we are going to need. It is like going to the grocery store and you hand the man a \$10 bill for a \$2.45 gallon of milk. You expect change. You expect to get something back when you pay more than is needed for what you have ordered. You would not think much of the grocer who said: I'm going to give you two more gallons of milk and a pound of bacon, whether you need it or not. That is what has happened. The President said we have the Government covered, the costs are covered, but they have overpaid. Now we are going to give them a whole bunch more Government, whether they have ordered it or not.

I think we need a little change. Americans deserve some tax relief, and I am pleased to have had this opportunity to present this financial plan which the President should sign.

I yield the floor.

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I think we have used the time that has been allocated. I ask unanimous consent for an additional 10 minutes. Since I am the only one present, the chances are probably pretty good.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

A BUDGET AGREEMENT

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. President, I am very pleased my associates could come over this morning and talk about some of the programs that are before us, to talk about some of the directions we will be taking. I think there is another area, in addition to what has been talked about, that is right before us. We are dealing now with spending. We are now in the process of finishing the appropriations process. Congress must adopt 13 different appropriations bills for future spending of the Government and we are in the process of doing that.

We also have some budget limitations that we have placed on ourselves, some caps that we have to honor. We are dealing also with emergency spending. We have talked some now about the surpluses that have been available. The surpluses that are available this year, however, are generally Social Security dollars. But there are \$14 billion in the regular budget and those will, of course, be available. Most of those have already been set aside as emergency spending.

What we have before us is an opportunity to continue to work and complete this matter of funding the budget for this year. At the same time, we must pass it on to the White House. We must find some agreement, either that

or have some continuing resolutions that will put us into the future or, in fact, we are faced with the possibility of the President vetoing the legislation and of having the Government shut down, as happened in the past. I hope this will not be the case.

I noticed in the paper the other day the President has indicated he would like nothing better than a bipartisan compromise. Hopefully, that is what will happen. Yet he has suggested "if only the Republicans could be a little more reasonable." I am not sure that is necessarily a part of it. Probably his White House aides are happy about this partisan combat because, as we know, the last time the Government was shut down, the Congress shouldered all the responsibility. I do not believe that ought to be the case, and hopefully it will not be this year. We are looking forward to working in those areas.

In terms of Social Security, there are some changes that need to be made. We are talking about saving Social Security. We ought to do that. We are committed to doing that. The method of doing it currently, of course, is to put the Social Security surplus in to replace the publicly held debt. The fact is, it then becomes debt that has to be covered by the taxpayers when the time comes to use it.

We also are looking at a change in the Social Security Act which responds to what is happening with Social Security. The demographics are changing. When Social Security started, there were 34 people working for every 1 beneficiary. People paid about \$30 a year into the program. Now there are three people working for every beneficiary, and it is moving toward two. They are paying 12.5 percent of up to nearly \$80,000 into this fund.

The fact is, over a period of time, probably in 20 years, there will not be enough money to continue as we have, so we have to make some changes. The choices are very simple ones basically:

We can increase taxes. Nobody really wants to do that. The Social Security tax is the largest tax paid by almost all taxpayers in the lower-income brackets.

We can reduce benefits. People are not much interested in that.

The third alternative, of course, is to increase the revenue that comes from the moneys that are in the trust fund. We are very anxious to do that. It also gives an opportunity to take that money when it comes in and put it somewhere other than into additional national debt loans and put it into individual accounts that people would have as their own, to be invested in the private sector for a much higher yield.

These are some of the things with which we grapple. Certainly, we are going to be working with the administration to see if we can do something in that respect. I do not think there is willingness on this side to trade off tax relief for increased spending. I hope not, and I do not believe we will do that.

On the other hand, we can find, I am sure, agreement in the appropriations areas, and we can move forward with that.

Mr. President, our time has expired. I see there is a Senator on the other side of the isle, so I yield back my time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. KYL). Under the previous order, the time until 2 p.m. shall be controlled by the Senator from Illinois, Mr. DURBIN, or his designee.

The Senator from Minnesota.

Mr. WELLSTONE. I thank the Chair.

Mr. President, I say to my colleague from Wyoming, I did not hear all of his remarks, but I always appreciate what he has to say, agree or disagree.

ECONOMIC CONVULSION IN AGRICULTURE

Mr. WELLSTONE. Mr. President, I will not speak for a long time about the economic convulsion in agriculture. I think my colleague sees some of this in Wyoming as well. I said last week I was going to come to the floor and talk about what is happening to family farmers in Minnesota and around the country. I want to speak about this briefly today and announce a bill that I will be introducing. I also want to say to my colleagues, as I see us moving forward over the next couple of days this week, that I do intend to be back on the floor with amendments that relate to how we can get a decent price for family farmers and how we can get some competition and how we can put some free enterprise back into the food industry.

I am also prepared—and I am sure other Senators would feel the same way if they came from an agricultural State—I am also prepared, starting this week and every week, to spend a considerable amount of time before the Senate talking, not so much in statistical terms but more in personal terms, about what is happening.

I give, by the way, a lot of credit to Willie Nelson and Neil Young and John Mellencamp for putting together Farm Aid. I had a chance to be there yesterday morning with my wife Sheila. It was an important gathering. I thank them for bringing some attention to the crisis in agriculture and what is happening to family farmers.

They are not Johnny-come-latelys. They have been at this for some time. There was a rally this morning, a "Save the Family Farm" coalition rally, and then the Farmers Union was meeting with Secretary Glickman. I know there are hundreds of Farmers Union members who are going to be meeting with Republican and Democratic Senators.

What everybody is saying right now is, we have this convulsion in agriculture. When I was a college teacher in the mid-1980s in Northfield, MN, in Rice County, I did a lot of organizing with farmers. I had some friends who took their lives. I am not being melodramatic, unfortunately. I was at more