

the Middle East and to offer my support for Israel. Israel is an important foundation of stability and democracy in the Middle East. The resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is important not only to the peace and security of the Middle East but also to the rest of the world.

The United States and Israel share common principles and a strong commitment to eradicate terrorism and to secure a better future for the world. Israel has been a steadfast ally of the United States and, I assure you, the United States will stand ready to assist our friends, the Israelis, to promote peace, defeat terrorism, and prevent hostile countries that sponsor terrorism from obtaining nuclear weapons.

With hopes for peace and a two-state solution, Israel evacuated all of its citizens and soldiers from Gaza in 2005, including the uprooting of homes, schools, and places of worship. Unfortunately and regrettably, following these actions, the Palestinians failed to develop fully the Gaza Strip and voted into power Hamas, a terrorist organization supported by Iran and whose true objective is to eradicate the state of Israel.

Following years where terror groups in Gaza launched rockets at Israel, targeting the Israeli civilian population, it became clear that it was time for action. After Hamas failed to renew its self-imposed cease-fire—one it, frankly, never enforced fully—Israel was forced to take appropriate action to protect her citizens. To that end, Israel has responded appropriately.

The United States-Israel alliance remains more critical than ever as Israel defends her people and works to end the threat posed from terrorist groups on its borders. The United States and Israel face an unprecedented array of shared threats—from Iran developing a nuclear program with unclear intentions and a clear track record of deceit, to the expanding military capabilities of terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which are supported by Iran—and security and stability in the Middle East, especially for our ally Israel, has never been more precarious.

I do hope this conflict will soon come to a peaceful conclusion. Nevertheless—and let me be clear—Israel has every right to defend its citizens while taking precautions, to the extent possible, to spare the civilian population in Gaza and reduce collateral damage.

I urge the people of Gaza to reject Hamas and surrender the terrorists' rockets in the most expedient manner to facilitate ending this necessary action by Israel. Israel remains committed to peace talks with the Palestinian Authority, despite Hamas's constant bombardment of Israel and its ineffective control over the Gaza Strip.

In order to improve the prospects for successful and lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, it is necessary for all Palestinians to work toward a solution. This cannot be done

while Hamas is allowed to rain terror into southern Israel. I encourage the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to form a legitimate and authoritative body which can speak for all of Palestine, effectuate change, and exercise control over terrorists who reside in their territory. I commend President Abbas for taking part in the international discussions about the situation in Gaza.

I support the necessary requirements of any cease-fire which Secretary Rice discussed before the United Nations. Hamas must end the rocket, mortar, and other attacks on Israel, and Israel can then cease its military offensive and reopen Gaza's border crossings so that Palestinians can benefit from humanitarian goods and basic supplies. Most importantly, the smuggling of weapons into Gaza through hundreds of illegal tunnels must end. The Arab states in the region, especially Egypt, should be a part of this process, and I encourage the Palestinians to seek their guidance and support, and in return for them to offer guidance and political and financial support.

Madam President, with that, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Finally, I ask unanimous consent to speak for 15 minutes as in morning business.

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

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Madam President, today Senator Daschle has come before the HELP Committee for his confirmation hearing as our Secretary designate of Health and Human Services. I know that all of our colleagues and friends in the Senate found it moving and wonderful to see the distinguished chairman of that committee, Senator KENNEDY, back in his chair leading that hearing. We are all delighted to see him back at work in the Senate, and we are delighted to see Senator Daschle back with us in this exciting new capacity.

We know every American deserves health care that he or she can afford. Senator Daschle knows that to do that we need basic systemic reform that will improve the way health care is delivered in this country. Senator Daschle has already brought forward ideas, such as the creation of a Federal health board, that have contributed enormously to the health care reform debate, and I hope very much he will pursue those ideas further at HHS. His nomination and President-elect Obama's creation of a new White House

Office of Health Care Reform emphasize their serious commitment to solving this bedeviling problem. Senator Daschle will bring distinguished, thoughtful leadership to the crisis in our Nation's health care system.

Health care reform is the signal challenge facing our families, our economy, and our Government. I wish to take a few minutes today to speak about this great challenge and the urgent need for action.

We all know the system is broken. The evidence lies all around us—in my State of Rhode Island and across the country. When a lost job is frightening not just because it means lost income but because it means lost health care, our health care system is broken. When sudden illness strikes and insurance will not cover the costs, our health care system is broken. When families wait to see a doctor until it is too late because they have no health insurance to pay for the visit, our health care system is broken.

We see the evidence of the broken system and the staggering costs of health care in this country. The United States spends 16 percent of our GDP on health care. That is about twice what our major industrialized competitor nations spend. The annual cost of the system exceeds \$2 trillion, and it is expected soon to double. Family health emergencies have been the most common cause of personal bankruptcy, and businesses, large and small, struggle under the weight of ever-increasing health insurance costs. There is more health care than steel in Ford's cars and more health care than coffee beans in Starbucks coffee.

Yet for all that money, what do we get? We still leave 46 million Americans uninsured; 46 million wrenching stories of health care foregone, of personal misfortune, even lives lost. That doesn't even include the experiences of our Nation's underinsured or small business owners struggling to provide health insurance or the many Americans who receive poor quality health care.

President-elect Obama is committed to reforming this broken system, and he has taken swift action to engage the American people in a national conversation about what is wrong and what we can do to fix it. Last month, he and Secretary-designate Daschle asked people to hold meetings in their communities to discuss health care reform and to share their ideas.

In the end, there is no better way to understand the deep failures of our health care system and the very real pain, frustration, anxiety, and anger it causes than to talk to the people who have experienced it firsthand. Over the past few years—at community dinners that I have around our State, in my office, as I travel around—many Rhode Islanders have reached out to me to share their stories and to urge that we work urgently to repair this broken system. I wish to take a moment to share a few of those stories.

A mother in Narragansett, RI, shared a story about her 20-year-old son who suffers from severe bipolar disorder and relies on therapy and expensive medications to remain a valued and productive member of his community. He is too old to be covered under her family health insurance plan, and his pre-existing condition makes buying insurance on the individual market impossible—prohibitively expensive. So what did they do? This mother and her family came up with a surprising solution. They enrolled her son at the Community College of Rhode Island so he could participate in the student health insurance plan. He takes the absolute minimum course load in order to continue to work, but he remains a student because it is less expensive to pay for college tuition than it is to pay for individual health insurance. Any parent with a child in college knows what a burden this Rhode Island family is bearing to ensure that their son gets the basic treatment he needs to stay healthy.

I also heard from the proud owner of a small bookkeeping and tax preparation business in Warwick, RI. She has worked tirelessly to raise five sons, go back to college, and finally she has become her own boss. Yet despite all her effort and all her success, she wrote me to plead for reform. She wrote this:

I spend over 50 percent of my income just to have health insurance for my husband and myself. The premiums are over \$1,000 per month, even with very high deductibles. My employees need health insurance also, but I am unable to provide them with any benefits because of the poor economic conditions.

Her employees are like family to her, as with so many small businesses, and it breaks her heart that they are uninsured. Yet she says she simply will not be able to keep her doors open if she tried to contribute toward their benefits.

In the midst of this economic downturn, and particularly in Rhode Island where the unemployment rate is one of the highest in the Nation, this story shows all too clearly how closely linked are the tasks of reforming our health care system and strengthening our economy.

Our health care system manages to fail even those who believe themselves to be covered. A woman who lives in Woonsocket and who has health insurance and was always careful to pay her bills on time, assumed she would be covered in the event of an emergency. Why not? She was current. She paid her premiums. She had insurance. But not too long ago, she suddenly had to have her appendix removed. Despite having health insurance, she left that hospital with a \$10,000 bill. She is currently working for a temp service and she has no idea how she can pay off this debt. She had recently bought her own home, a longtime dream and an accomplishment in which she took great pride. Now, because of the fine print of that health insurance policy, she risks losing the home she worked so long to

afford. As this Rhode Islander learned in the hardest way possible, health insurance often ends up ensuring very little.

It is on behalf of these Rhode Islanders and so many others that I urge my colleagues to come together to support health care reform that will lower costs and improve the quality of care for all Americans. We must improve the way we deliver health care by promoting quality, implementing health information technology, and investing in preventing disease. We must, and will, protect existing coverage when it is good, we must improve it when it is not, and we must guarantee health care for the 46 million Americans, 9 million of whom are children who have no health insurance at all.

We see ourselves now in darkening and tumultuous economic times. Yet looking beyond the immediate economic perils we face, there is a \$35 trillion unfunded liability for Medicare that is bearing down on us. It is bearing down on us because our population is aging, because people get sicker as they age, and that makes them more expensive. Unless we figure out a way in this Chamber to stop time, unless we figure out a way in this Chamber to reverse the aging process, unless we figure out a way in this Chamber to make elders have healthier lives and bodies than younger people, this is inevitable. It is coming at us, and we have to prepare. In order to prepare, we have to reform the health care delivery system. We are committed, as Democrats, to making sure every American has health insurance coverage, but it is not enough just to bring everyone into the boat. If you had a boat in the ocean and people swimming around it and to save them you needed to bring them into the boat, you would do that. But if the boat itself was sinking, if the boat itself was on fire, just bringing everybody into the boat is not an adequate discharge of your duties. It is also important that you repair the boat, that you get it steaming forward, that you make sure it is safe for the people whom you bring into it.

That means reforming our health information technology infrastructure so every American can count on an electronic health record, so when you go to see your doctor, you don't have to fill out that clipboard one time after another, when at the same time you can sign on to Amazon and not only do they know who you are, they know what you have bought and they have suggestions for you based on your buying habits. There is no excuse for our health care system being back in the 1950s as the rest of the economy moves forward into the 21st century. It requires improving the quality of health care and it requires investing in prevention.

We dramatically underinvest in prevention and quality. There are market failures that cause those things to happen. They are repairable. In addition to the cost savings, it is estimated that

100,000 Americans die every year—100,000 Americans die every year—because of avoidable medical errors. It is simply not tolerable to allow that to continue, particularly when it is a win-win situation, where improved quality of care means lower costs.

Finally, the third leg of the reform, in addition to helping infrastructure technology and quality and prevention reform, is that we have to reform how we pay for health care to align the price signal that we send by those payments with what we want from health care. Until we do that, we will be constantly struggling uphill against our own financial message.

This is all doable. This is all so doable, but it will take time. These are complex matters. We will have to make adjustments. The adjustments will take time. It is a dynamic environment which will have to make course corrections along the way. That means we need to start now. We do not have the luxury of time on our side. If we do not get started on a thorough-going health care delivery system reform now, then the alternative will be times that are even darker and more tumultuous than we find ourselves in right now.

I see the very distinguished chairman of the Budget Committee on the floor, a man who is an eloquent voice on the dark and tumultuous times and the risks we face from the current fiscal situation, so I will gladly yield at this point, and I thank the Presiding Officer.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Dakota is recognized.

CBO REPORT

Mr. CONRAD. Madam President, first of all, I wish to thank Senator WHITEHOUSE for his contributions to this Chamber. He has been an outstanding Member. He serves on the Budget Committee with me. He has developed a special expertise on health care which is so badly needed.

I wish to comment very briefly on the CBO report we received today in the Budget Committee hearing on the fiscal outlook. It is truly jaw-dropping. There is a \$1.2 trillion deficit for this year, before any economic recovery package is passed. Add to the debt even higher: \$1.6 trillion will be added to the debt of the country, and, again, that is before any cost of an economic recovery plan.

If one factors in an economic recovery plan, we could be looking at an increase in the debt of \$2 trillion this year alone. To put that in context, we have a gross debt of the United States of \$10.6 trillion roughly today.

So I think it is imperative that while we put together an economic recovery plan, which we must, we also are cognizant of the very serious long-term fiscal condition we face as a nation.

There is a front-page story in the New York Times today indicating that the Chinese, the biggest financiers of our debt, have a reduced appetite for