

I am part of a group of six or seven Senators who are trying to lower interest rates for 100 percent of students, not just 40 percent. We are not trying to ram it through with 51 votes, but we are trying to get a consensus and then pass it and send it to the House. Hopefully, they will do it.

When the great civil rights bills passed, they were a consensus, and the country accepted them because they were important pieces of legislation.

When the Republican leader and I were young—I was here and he was almost here—we saw Senator Dirksen and President Johnson work together to get a supermajority to say to the country it is time to move ahead on civil rights. That is the way the Senate is supposed to work. Let's stop the threats, stop the intimidation and recognize the progress we have made and get back to work on immigration.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I wish to conclude by thanking the Senator from Tennessee for a very impressive presentation and for his reminding us all of what makes the Senate great.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Minnesota.

Mr. FRANKEN. Are we in morning business?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. We are.

MEDICARE

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I rise to talk about Medicare solvency. I know that to many people the words "Medicare solvency," which is the ability of the Medicare program to meet its financial obligations, sounds like an invitation to a nice nap.

You and I pay into Medicare every month, and we need to know that the benefits we paid for will be there when we need them, and not just that. I need to know Medicare will be around to cover my daughter and my new grandson when they become eligible. That is what Medicare solvency is about.

A couple of weeks ago we got some good news. According to the annual report released by the Medicare board of trustees, Medicare will stay solvent for 2 years longer than previously estimated.

There are a lot of things that are contributing to Medicare solvency, but one big thing is health reform. In fact, Medicare will be solvent for a total of 9 years longer than before we passed health reform. Let me say that again. The life of Medicare is 9 years longer today than it was before we passed health reform.

HHS Secretary Sebelius said:

The Affordable Care Act has helped put Medicare on more stable ground without eliminating a single benefit.

The point is that health reform is not just about making our health coverage more comprehensive, it is not just making sure when we get sick we can get the care we need, it is also making Medicare more efficient. It is extending the life of Medicare so that Medicare

can keep supporting our parents and will be able to support our kids.

How exactly has health reform helped extend the solvency of Medicare? Well, to start with, it stopped Medicare from overpaying private insurers. As you might know, seniors can choose to get their Medicare benefits directly from the Medicare Program or get them through a private insurance program that gets paid by Medicare, which is called Medicare Advantage. Before we passed health reform, we were overpaying these private insurers by about 14 percent. So we reduced what Medicare pays these private insurance companies. In fact, over the next 10 years we are going to reduce these insurance payments by about 14 percent, which CBO scored in 2010 as saving Medicare \$136 billion over 10 years.

I will note that we were told by some of our colleagues that if we did this, insurance companies were going to leave the market, that we weren't going to have Medicare Advantage anymore. Well, so far, enrollment in Medicare Advantage has gone up by 10 percent, and I am glad about that because Medicare Advantage serves an important purpose for millions of seniors across our country.

We are also adjusting reimbursements to hospitals downward. Why and how does that work for hospitals? When you insure 31 million people who previously didn't have insurance, hospitals are no longer on the line for uncompensated care when those 31 million people go into the emergency room. The hospitals aren't left holding the bag for all of those costs.

And we didn't just extend the life of Medicare by 9 years; while we were at it, we expanded benefits for Medicare beneficiaries. I go to a lot of senior centers and nursing homes in my home State of Minnesota, and I have to tell you, seniors are very happy about their new benefits. They are very happy about the new free preventive care they get—the wellness checkups and the colonoscopies and the mammograms. They know and we know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Do you know what else we are doing with that money? We are closing the prescription drug doughnut hole—the gap in coverage under Medicare where seniors have to pay the full costs of their prescription drugs in that gap. Seniors are very happy about that. For more than one-third of seniors, Social Security provides more than 90 percent of their income, and for one-quarter of elderly beneficiaries, Social Security is the sole source of their retirement income. So when Medicare stops covering the cost of their prescription drugs in the doughnut hole, that is serious, and sometimes these seniors have to decide between food and heat and medicine. Well, because we have been closing this doughnut hole, many don't have to make that impossible choice anymore.

When I was running for the Senate back in 2008, a nurse in Cambridge, MN,

told me about a senior being hospitalized. She was being treated by the doctors and nurses so that she would be well enough to leave the hospital, and when she left the hospital, they would make sure to give her the prescriptions she needed.

After a few days, this nurse would call the pharmacy and ask: Has Mrs. Johnson come in and filled those prescriptions?

The pharmacist would say: No, she hasn't.

Why was that? Because she was in the doughnut hole. And guess what. In 10 days or in 2 weeks or whatever, Mrs. Johnson would end up back in the hospital because she couldn't afford her medicine. These readmissions cost our health care system a lot of money. But now, because we are closing the doughnut hole as part of the health care law, these seniors are able to get their medicine. This is improving their health, and it is saving us money.

So we have increased benefits and extended the life of Medicare, and that was done as part of health care reform.

Many of the provisions of the health care reform law will make our health care system more efficient and will lower costs in the long run. I wish to touch briefly on one I authored that is already keeping costs down for families in Minnesota and across our country. The provision of the health care reform law that I authored is based on a Minnesota law in a way. In 1993 Minnesota wrote a law that insurance companies had to report their medical loss ratio, and that is the piece I wrote into the law.

What is the medical loss ratio? Medical loss ratio is the percentage of premiums a health insurer receives that goes to actual health care—to actual health care, not to administrative costs, not to marketing costs, not to profits, not to CEO salaries, but actual health care.

Starting in 1993 Minnesota health insurers had to submit to the commissioner of commerce—the Minnesota Department of Commerce—their medical loss ratio. They had to compute it and submit it. I took that and I put a little wrinkle into it. I wrote something called the 80-20 rule, which says that insurance companies have to spend at least 80 percent of their premiums on actual health care for small group policies and individual policies and 85 percent for large group policies, and if they do not meet that, the health insurer has to rebate the difference. Well, thanks to this provision of the law, last year more than 12 million Americans benefited from \$1.1 billion in rebates from insurers that did not meet the 80-20 rule, including 123,000 consumers in Minnesota.

In a new report, the Kaiser Family Foundation estimates that premiums in the individual market would have been \$1.9 billion higher last year if it weren't for the medical loss ratio rule and they would have been \$856 million higher in 2011. That is more than \$2.75

billion in savings over the last 2 years alone. Those savings are in addition to the rebates consumers received. They estimated that insurers would have raised their rates that much more—\$2.75 billion more—if they hadn't had to meet the 80-20 rule. This is another important way the health reform law is keeping health care costs down. So the rule I wrote into the law has already saved Americans nearly \$4 billion in health care costs.

In fact, after going up at three times the rate of inflation for a decade, over each of the last 2 years health care costs have gone up less than 4 percent for the first time in 50 years. That is according to data released by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Now, I am not saying we are done, not by any stretch of the imagination. We have more work to do. In fact, one big thing we could do would be to allow Medicare to negotiate directly with pharmaceutical manufacturers on the price of their drugs. The VA does this, and they pay nearly 50 percent less for the top 10 drugs than Medicare does. I have a bill to allow Medicare to negotiate directly with pharmaceutical manufacturers, and I hope to work with my colleagues to bring this proposal to the floor.

At the end of the day, my job is about strengthening what works in our country and fixing what doesn't. Medicare works. It works for seniors across the Nation, it works for grandparents from Pipestone to Grand Marais, and I hope to work with my colleagues to protect Medicare benefits for our parents and grandparents, while strengthening the program for our children and grandchildren.

I thank the Chair, and I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. SCHATZ). The assistant majority leader.

TRIBUTE TO RAY LAHOOD

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, when President Obama was first elected back in 2008, I can recall the transition period because his transition office was literally next door to my office in the Federal building in Chicago. I can't think of a more exciting time. Here was my colleague in the Senate who had just been elected President of the United States.

The whole world was beating a path to his door. Security was at the highest level, and I made a point of not interrupting him—which I would have done regularly when he was my Senate colleague—during this historic and important moment as he prepared to lead America with the blessing and the mandate of the American people.

I didn't have a long list of requests—well, I did, but I didn't exercise it—but I spoke to him once or twice about a couple of things I thought might be helpful to the country and to him. I recommended to him one person to appoint to his Cabinet—one person. I

urged him to appoint Ray LaHood as America's Secretary of Transportation. I was confident that Ray LaHood would serve America with the same integrity and energy he had shown while serving as a Member of Congress from our State of Illinois. As Secretary Ray LaHood prepares to leave this important Cabinet post, I am pleased but not a bit surprised to be able to say to the President that I was right. He was an excellent choice—in fact, one of the best ever when it comes to the Department of Transportation.

Make no mistake, Ray LaHood is a proud Republican. I remember meeting him first when he was a staffer for Bob Michel, who was the Republican leader in the U.S. House of Representatives. Ray was a behind-the-scenes worker for the Republican minority leader in the House, and I knew he was from Peoria but little else about him. When Bob Michel announced his retirement, Ray LaHood said he was going to run for that position in Congress.

What surprised me was that some of my closest Democratic friends in central Illinois said they were going to financially support and do everything they could to elect Ray LaHood. And I thought, this is really amazing. These partisan friends of mine think Ray LaHood, a Republican, is a good person for this job.

So I started paying closer attention to this new Congressman. As it turned out, we became close friends. We worked together. We had adjoining congressional districts. Eventually, when I was elected to the Senate, we worked all through central Illinois on common projects, and I was happy to do it. Ray was not working with a great appetite for publicity; he wanted to get the job done, and he didn't mind giving credit to Democrats or Republicans if we could achieve our goals, the local goals we shared.

When he became Secretary of Transportation I saw that same spirit of cooperation and bipartisanship. Any time I spoke to President Obama or Vice President BIDEN about Ray LaHood, their Secretary of Transportation, they always said the same thing: He is the best and we are sure glad he is part of our team.

The President could not find anyone better to carry out the transportation agenda for America in his first term. I believe history is going to record Ray LaHood as one of the very best in that position. He put millions of Americans back to work with the \$48 billion transportation funding that was part of President Obama's Recovery Act. He oversaw the creation of the Nation's first high-speed rail program, a program that Illinois has participated in with great commitment and excitement. He also helped to create the TIGER Program, a \$2.7 billion investment in America's future that has built some of our Nation's most significant transportation projects. And he helped save lives by focusing personally on our national aviation system.

He also had another safety campaign. He conducted what he called a rampage against distracted driving, people who were texting or talking on cell phones and trying to drive at the same time. He traveled more widely and more frequently than many professional pilots did. As a Washington Post reporter wrote a while back:

There are just two kinds of states: States where [Ray LaHood has] been to spread his gospel of safety and to inspect transportation systems and those States that he plans to visit soon.

The people of Illinois are grateful to Ray LaHood not only for his 4 historic years as Transportation Secretary, but also for his many decades of service as staffer to Bob Michel and then a member in his own right in our Illinois delegation.

Ray was born and raised in Peoria, IL. He stayed true to his Midwestern values throughout his career. He started his public service as a teacher in a classroom. He cut his political teeth working for another top Republican Congressman, Tom Railsback. As I mentioned, then he went on to work for Bob Michel. In 1994 he was elected to Bob Michel's congressional district, the 18th District. The district stretches from Peoria, south to the State capital, my hometown of Springfield.

There is a history of some pretty outstanding Congressmen from that district. I mentioned Bob Michel, and I can include Everett McKinley Dirksen as well. If you go far enough back in history you will find there was a young Congressman from a part of that district by the name of Abraham Lincoln.

Ray is a great student of history. He inspired a great effort to create the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, and I was honored to join him as a co-chair with Harold Holzer of New York. We observed President Lincoln's 200th birthday in 2009 with suitable recognition and celebration across America.

Ray's work helped students everywhere learn a little bit more about President Lincoln and his role in America's history. Like his famous predecessors, Ray LaHood has raised the standard for civility and cooperation in the Congress. In the darkest hours of the House of Representatives when people were at each other's throats, it was Ray LaHood who reached across the aisle to a Democratic Congressman and said: Why don't we get together on a bipartisan basis, with our families, for a weekend. It seems so obvious and easy. Nobody had ever thought about it before Ray.

Back in Illinois Ray used to convene bipartisan meetings with local officials, State representatives, and his dedication to his district and his service in the House earned him the reputation as one of the best. When President Obama nominated Ray for Transportation Secretary, all of us in Illinois knew the President had chosen the right person.

Ray's legacy in DC will be substantial, but it will be even greater back in