

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

Illinois. He has helped protect and build Illinois during his tenure at the Department of Transportation. It was such a treat to be able to call the Department of Transportation, to speak to the Secretary of Transportation about an Illinois project and have him know instantly what you were talking about.

The O'Hare Modernization Program is a good example. There is hardly a more important economic engine in the northern part of our State than the O'Hare Airport. The modernization of O'Hare had reached a period of some difficulty and controversy. Ray LaHood stepped in, brought the parties together, and put the Nation's largest airport expansion project back on track.

Secretary LaHood, as I mentioned earlier, brought high-speed rail to Illinois. Last year we rode the first 110-mile-an-hour train between Chicago and St. Louis. He helped build a beautiful new terminal at the Peoria International Airport.

Secretary LaHood's dedication to Illinois will be felt in every corner of Illinois for generations to come. People will be able to travel faster and more safely because of his work. He will bring new businesses to the State by those transportation investments, creating the jobs that we all want to see.

Ray LaHood is a leader with integrity and character. He is also such a good friend. I am going to miss him as my partner in government when he retires from the position of Secretary of Transportation. The Washington Post article I mentioned earlier had a wonderful line. The reporter wrote:

Perhaps the most telling tidbit in LaHood's life is that he resided in Washington for 30 years without once getting a haircut here. A man truly lives where he gets his haircut, and [for Ray LaHood] that is in Peoria, [IL].

As Ray LaHood prepares to leave President Obama's Cabinet and spend more time with his family, I wish the best to him. His wife Kathy—who was often at his side traveling back and forth between Illinois and Washington—will have more time with Ray and their four children: Amy, Sara, Sam, and State Senator Darin LaHood and their wonderful families too. I look forward to working with Secretary LaHood and his very able successor, former Charlotte mayor Anthony Foxx, to maintain and improve America's transportation systems and networks, the backbone of our economy.

GUN VIOLENCE

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I rise to speak about the continuing toll of gun violence on our Nation and on my home State of Illinois.

This past week we lost too many Americans, and too many Illinoisans, to gunfire. Last Monday, 18-year-old April McDaniel was sitting on her porch in Chicago when a masked gunman in a car opened fire, killing April

and wounding four of her friends. Last Tuesday, four members of the Andrus family in Darien, Illinois—including the family's two daughters, ages 16 and 22—were shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide. On Thursday, 19-year-old Robert Allen was killed in a drive-by shooting on the South Side of Chicago. And over the weekend, at least 6 were killed and dozens more were wounded in shootings across the Chicago area.

This senseless violence is devastating personally to the families involved, and to all of us. Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and with their families. The sad reality is that gun violence continues to be an epidemic in America. Over 11,000 Americans are murdered with guns each year. If you count suicides and accidental shootings, the death toll from guns rises to more than 31,000 Americans each year. We have become almost used to this, haven't we? We hear about it every night on the news and we begin to think this is normal. But it isn't normal in any country on Earth for so many people to die from the use of firearms.

You can get a sense of this grim toll by reading the daily "Gun Report" by New York Times columnist Joe Nocera. The report compiles news stories about shootings across the nation. For example, yesterday's Gun Report describes shootings that took place over the weekend. It mentions: a 3-year-old in Columbus, Ohio and a 4-year-old in Wichita, Kansas who were hit on Friday by stray bullets; an 18-year-old girl in Ankeny, Iowa, who was accidentally shot and killed by her father on Friday; a 30-minute shooting spree in Omaha, Nebraska on Saturday that left two dead and two critically injured; a 76-year-old man who shot and killed his 75-year-old wife on Saturday in Cortlandt, New York after an argument; and a man who walked into a Catholic church in Ogden, Utah and shot his father-in-law in the head during Sunday mass. These are just a few of the shootings mentioned in one Gun Report. And each new day brings another long list of shootings in communities across America. It is appalling.

Last Friday marked 6 months since the tragedy in Newtown when a gunman murdered 20 small children and 6 educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School. In the 6 months since that awful day, over 5,000 more Americans have been killed by gunfire.

I commend my colleagues from Connecticut, Senator CHRIS MURPHY and Senator RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, who have come to this floor repeatedly to call for reforms that will spare other families the tragedy that the Newtown families have suffered.

We need to heed those calls. We cannot simply shrug our shoulders and write off this epidemic of gun violence as the cost of living in America.

There is some progress to report when it comes to reducing gun violence. Officials at the local and state

level are taking proactive steps that are showing promising results.

In Chicago, for example, targeted policing strategies and community-based violence-prevention efforts have contributed to a 31 percent reported decrease in homicides compared to last year. The violence of this past week shows that more needs to be done, but this decline in killings is positive news. I commend the local officials, including mayor Rahm Emanuel, who are doing everything they can to reduce gun violence.

The General Assembly in Illinois just passed important legislation that would mandate background checks for private gun sales and require reporting of lost and stolen guns to law enforcement, something we failed to do. It should be a national law.

These are steps that will help keep guns out of the hands of criminals and the mentally ill. They will help reduce crime and save lives.

Other States are stepping up as well, with significant reforms passed in States like Colorado, New York, Maryland and Connecticut.

But State action alone is not sufficient. We need to do our part in Washington. Too often these guns cross State lines. Too often States have weak gun laws next to States with strong gun laws. That is why Congress needs to plug the gaping loopholes in our Federal background check system by passing legislation by Senator JOE MANCHIN, a conservative Democrat from West Virginia, and Senator PATRICK TOOMEY, a conservative Senator from Pennsylvania.

Congress also needs to pass a bill with real teeth to crack down on straw purchasing and gun trafficking, a bill that I worked on with Senators LEAHY, COLLINS, GILLIBRAND, and my colleague from Illinois, MARK KIRK.

Members of Congress need to take a stand on the issue of gun safety and gun violence. There should be no more hiding behind these empty, sham reform proposals written by the gun lobby to accomplish nothing. And no more claims that all we need to do is just enforce the laws on the books because we know the gun lobby has put loopholes in those laws that you can drive a truck through.

I want to mention a few things Congress should do to help reduce gun violence beyond the two items I mentioned. First, I will introduce legislation to encourage more crime gun tracing by State and local law enforcement. Crime gun tracing is a valuable tool for criminal investigations. When a gun is recovered in a crime, a police department can ask the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, known as the ATF, to trace the crime gun back to its first retail sale. This information can help identify criminal suspects and potential gun traffickers. When all the crime guns in an area are traced, law enforcement can start to define and identify trafficking patterns.