

they accelerate those initiatives and provide the care that is necessary so that wherever possible we eliminate the wait times and the lack of continuum of care.

In a recent survey by the inspector general, they found that 20 percent of veterans—one in five—who were referred to a private mental health provider never received an appointment. That is one in every five veterans who have come in and admitted they have a problem. They may be at risk for taking their own life. They may be depressed. That is unsatisfactory.

One of the focuses we made in our hearing was bringing about better coordination by the VA in terms of accessing community resources in mental health to see to it that we raised the number of providers offering mental health services to our veterans. As I said earlier in my remarks, suicide is preventable. It is not preventable, however, if there is no access to therapy, no access to consultation, and no access for our veterans when they need it the most.

Let me brag a little bit about the VA and some of what they have done in recent years that was helped and give you some amazing statistics.

In 2007 the Veterans Crisis Line was conceived where veterans in trouble could call in and receive counseling. More than 814,000 calls have been received by the Veterans Crisis Line since it opened, and 28,000 interventions have saved the lives of veterans. There are 28,000 veterans who are alive today because of the crisis line.

In 2009 the VA added an anonymous online chat service where a veteran could have a nonthreatening way of communicating and seeking therapy anonymously. There have been 94,000 calls since its inception.

Most impressive to me is that in 2011 the Veterans Crisis Line added texting as a way to expand its accessibility to veterans.

If you are a veteran in crisis, we need to make sure, as Senators and members of the Veterans' Committee, that you have the access you need to therapy and counseling when you need it. We all know that the tragedy of suicide is terrible for a family and a horrible loss of a life that was sacrificed on behalf of the United States of America. We owe it to ourselves to see that the Veterans' Administration continues to improve access to mental health services, continues to reduce their wait times and long lines, and continues to cooperate and reach out to the community to bring in private providers on a referral basis so that veterans in need of care receive a referral and an appointment quickly.

My last point is that it is important that the VA follow that veteran to see to it they keep that appointment. In the cases of the suicides in the Atlanta VA, the failure to keep an appointment or the failure to have a continuum of care in the following of that veteran substantially created and contributed to the loss of life.

While we have had tragedies at the Atlanta VA, things are improving. While we have had tragedies and suicides across the country, we are finally focusing on veteran suicide.

Lastly, we need to focus on the fact that there are many contributing factors to suicide. Many people will think it is someone returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom. In some cases, that is true, but more often than not veterans over 50 are the victims of suicide. In fact, of the ones in Atlanta, they were Vietnam-era veterans.

It is important we understand that it is every veteran who is at risk, that it is every veteran who needs access to treatment. We need to understand that we owe our veterans a big debt. It is most important to see to it that they don't lose their lives out of despair and depression, that their lives are saved because our VA cares enough to see to it that they have the continuum of care and the access to help they so vitally need.

To the VA Administration, thanks for the improvements you are making. To every Member of the Senate, let's continue to support the Veterans' Administration with the funding necessary to deal with the more than 1 million new veterans returning home from the wars in the Middle East over the last decade.

I yield back the remainder of my time, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

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

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

FISCAL DISCIPLINE

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, earlier this week the Congressional Budget Office released its latest long-term outlook. Of course, the CBO, as it is known around here, is the authoritative guide to all things involving the finances and the fiscal picture for the Federal Government. That long-term outlook offered us a sobering reminder the Federal Government cannot defy the laws of fiscal gravity forever. In other words, as every American knows—every working family knows—your output can't exceed your input forever. In other words, you can't spend more money than you have coming in. Unless you are the Federal Government, of course. But sooner or later we will have to reverse the trend of debt accumulation before it destroys our economy, because our current path is simply unsustainable.

The crazy thing about it is that everybody in Washington, particularly the Congress, knows that. Yet it seems as though they are in a state of denial about what could very well happen to our country and to our future if we

don't act. As I said, it is a very sobering message, and it is also very different from the message President Obama has been delivering lately. He likes to talk about America's short-term budget deficit falling. To remind everybody, there is the debt and there is the deficit. The deficit we measure on an annual basis. Debt is the cumulative shortfall between what comes in the front door and what goes out the back door. That debt is now about \$17 trillion.

For these young people down here, that means they each owe about \$52,000 because my generation and other adults have not been responsible, and we have shoved off onto the next generation the responsibilities we ought to be meeting ourselves. So here is the reality. Any short-term deficit reduction will be meaningless unless we adopt longer term reforms. That means where the Federal Government spends most of its money, which is in mandatory spending—the spending that keeps Social Security and Medicare, among other programs, going. We need to also bend the spending curve down so that we are spending less money as well.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates, when we factor in the likely impact of rising debt levels, the publicly held debt is on course to reach 108 percent of our gross domestic product in 2038. The gross domestic product is basically another way of saying the size of our entire economy. So 108 percent of the size of our entire economy is their projection, and that is before we include money the Federal Government effectively owes itself.

I realize 2038 sounds like a long time from now. I remember as a kid I thought the year 2000 was going to be a long way away, but we now see that only in our rearview mirror. But by 2038, under current law, our net interest payments, as a share of our economy, will be 2½ times greater than the 40-year average.

Let me boil that down a little bit. When we borrow money—because we are spending money we don't actually have—that adds to our annual deficit. But it also, over time, adds to our national debt. We have to get somebody to buy that debt so we can continue to spend money we don't have, so that we can continue to spend borrowed money. We have to pay interest to our creditors. In other words, they are going to expect a rate of return, as anybody would, when they loan somebody money. When China loans us money, it is not cost free. When they buy a huge portion of our national debt, it is not cost free.

Over time we will see interest rates—which are really at historic lows now because of the aggressive action of the Federal Reserve keeping those interest rates low—go back up to historic norms, and then we are going to see that a larger and larger share of what the Federal Government spends is merely to pay China and our other creditors who buy our debt, unless we

take aggressive measures to begin to bring our debt load down.

The President and the Democrats frequently demand more spending on things such as research and development—that is a good thing—or infrastructure—that is a good thing—yet they refuse to embrace the serious reforms necessary that enable us to do so. Here again, when the interest payments on the debt invariably go up, they will crowd out spending on other priorities, such as research and development, such as infrastructure, such as education, and others that should be among our national priorities.

The Congressional Budget Office projects that by 2038 total spending on everything other than major health care programs, Social Security, and net interest payments would decline to 7 percent of gross domestic product, and that is down from 11 percent, which is the average over the last 40 years. That is the crowding-out effect I was mentioning a moment ago. When we spend more and more money on these other programs, it crowds out spending on other things necessary to keep our economy growing and to keep people employed.

If we don't start reforming our biggest mandatory spending programs—again, that is Social Security and Medicare—in a responsible way, it will become much harder for the Federal Government to perform its most basic obligations and it will leave these young people and others—such as my daughters, who are in their early thirties—holding the bag, not only with the debt I mentioned a moment ago, but also with broken programs that are unsustainable, that will not be there for them when they turn 65 or when they get older.

It is a law of nature that you cannot keep spending money you don't have, and you can't keep racking up debt forever without any consequences. The only question is whether the reforms I am talking about will be gradual—will be phased in over time—or whether they will be sudden and abrupt and disruptive. If we start now in a responsible way, these reforms can be gradual.

Thank goodness, when Social Security was passed people didn't live to be 80 years old, on average, and they weren't as productive as they are today. That is a good thing. Modern medicine and nutrition have made it possible for us to live longer, on average, and to be much more productive. But we need to make sure we take into account, through Medicare and Social Security, the fact that people are living longer and are more productive. We need to make certain our programs are modernized to keep up with those facts and make sure they are available in the future, particularly among our most vulnerable citizens. If we wait until America is on the verge of a debt crisis, the reforms will have to be abrupt. In other words, when the bottom drops out, a lot of people are going to

be hurt, and it will be far more difficult to protect the most vulnerable among us from the harshest sort of cuts.

What I am suggesting makes sense. Wouldn't we prefer to be in control of a gradual reform of our mandatory spending programs that are phased in over years, in ways most Americans will not actually feel because it can be done gradually? To me, it makes sense to do that as opposed to watching the bottom drop out or just simply kicking the can down the road. You know, they say: If you kick the can down the road long enough, pretty soon you are going to run out of road.

Let me again quote from the Congressional Budget Office. They said:

At some point, investors will begin to doubt the government's willingness or ability to pay U.S. debt obligations, making it more difficult or more expensive for the government to borrow money. Moreover, even before that point is reached, the high and rising amount of debt that CBO projects under the extended baseline would have significant negative consequences for both the economy and the Federal budget.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent for 2 additional minutes.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. CORNYN. Those negative consequences would include less private investment; more Federal spending on interest, which I have talked about briefly; less flexibility to address unexpected events, which you know always seems to occur—such as 9/11 or a natural disaster—and more risk of a full-blown debt crisis.

To the extent President Obama and our friends across the aisle acknowledge our long-term debt problem, their main solution seems to be always the same: Let's raise taxes some more. In fact, they are now trying to use tax reform, which we thought should be revenue neutral, as a vehicle for another \$1 trillion tax increase. We are told that is a condition of even talking about reforming our Tax Code, to make it flatter, simpler, and more growth oriented. That is after the President and his allies have already raised taxes by \$1.7 trillion. So there is never enough to feed the beast of the Federal Government here in Washington. It is insatiable.

Meanwhile, to the extent the President acknowledges the need for Medicare reform, his proposals always involve more price controls, primarily on the providers. Yet price controls have not solved Medicare's fundamental cost problems, and they won't solve it in the future. They say: We can save money on Medicare. We will just whack the payments we make to doctors and hospitals. I can tell you from talking to the hospitals and doctors in Texas—who would like to see Medicare patients but they can no longer afford to do so—that it is limiting access to health care by just dealing with Medicare on this basis of price controls and whacking payments to providers.

Amid the weakest economic recovery and the longest periods of high unem-

ployment since the Great Depression, the last thing we need is another massive tax increase that would discourage work, savings, and investment. We all know we cannot simply tax our way back into fiscal stability, and we cannot spend our way back into economic prosperity. If the President would merely accept those two realities, we might finally get the kind of long-term reforms and the real long-term spending cuts that might finally produce the economic recovery America is desperately waiting for and desperately needs.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Pennsylvania.

ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Mr. TOOMEY. Mr. President, I rise this morning to address the energy efficiency bill we have been attempting to take up in this Chamber, and in particular an amendment I would like to offer to this bill.

I want to strongly urge my colleagues to please get on this bill. I really wish we would do some business here in the Senate. I think we are on our way to our second consecutive week where we have not had a single vote on a single legislative matter—at least not that I can remember—and we have important legislative issues to deal with. I happen to think this is one of them. There are many others. This is just not acceptable, that we go on and on without addressing the challenges we need to address for the sake of the people we represent—the American people.

I want to talk about one small particular but important aspect. I have an amendment I have filed—and I thank my cosponsors, Senators COBURN, FLAKE, RISCH, and AYOTTE for joining me in this effort—which is an effort to repeal the renewable fuel standard. I want to talk about why it is so important we do this.

First of all, the renewable fuel standard is an old law that is on the books. It is a Federal Government mandate that we burn a certain amount, a certain volume of ethanol in our gasoline.

We have gotten to the point where this year this mandate will require that over 40 percent of all the corn we grow in America be turned into ethanol and burned in the gasoline tanks of our automobiles. We are literally burning our food. That is what we are doing on a very large scale.

The way this law works is it requires increases every year in the amount of ethanol we are forced to burn through our gasoline tanks. This policy is harmful to our environment, it is unambiguously raising food prices, it makes it more expensive to fill up at the gas pump, and it is threatening good-paying jobs in Pennsylvania and other States. It is time for this to go.

What my amendment would do is completely repeal this renewable fuel standard, which is overdue. I know