

The Republican leader tried to move the same measure again last week, even though the Senate already rejected it. And to no one's surprise, it failed.

How about this one? This year—this year—we have already had eight votes on the health of American women—eight votes. Everyone knows how those votes are going to turn out, but you can't satisfy this voracious appetite the Republicans have to bash women. Yet the Republican leader continues to schedule votes on legislation that can't pass the Senate.

I think C-SPAN will have to have a disclaimer each time that flips up there that says: This is not a rerun. This is the Republican Senate doing it again. We have already done it seven times. Once more won't matter that much.

Today the Republican leader wants to rerun the same show again, this time with another bill—military construction. This appropriations bill is still based on the Republican's faulty budget. The senior Senator from Montana, the ranking member of that subcommittee, said yesterday this bill "is shackled to an unwise and unrealistic budget that locks in destructive sequestration cuts and vastly underfunds programs vital to this nation's security and prosperity."

That is what Senator TESTER said yesterday.

It has no chance of getting 60 votes—none. I know that, and my friend the Republican leader knows that. So why are we wasting time on another vote that is destined to fail? Because they do not want to bring real legislation to the floor. Why aren't we spending our time coming to a real bipartisan solution that helps our veterans and helps the nondefense part of our country, which is so important?

The time to sit down and to begin real budget negotiations was a long time ago, but we will take it now. I am happy to learn the Republican leader said he wants negotiations—he said this a couple days ago—he wants negotiations to begin very soon. Well, isn't that nice. Democrats have been waiting for 4 months. So let's get to it.

Just imagine what we could have accomplished if the Republican leader had taken us up on our offer 4 months ago. The U.S. Government wouldn't have come within hours of a shutdown, hundreds of government agencies would not have had to spend time and effort preparing for a shutdown, diverting them from their main jobs.

If you want to see how close we were to a government shutdown take a look at what took place in the House of Representatives yesterday. We passed over here in the Senate a short-term continuing resolution to fund the government until December 11. It went to the House, and they voted on it yesterday. Three-fifths of House Republicans—151—voted for a shutdown. They voted against the continuing resolution. That says it all.

I have reminded people before, and I will do it again. The government was shut down here a couple of years ago for 17 days. We finally got it open. We passed something over here, and it went to the House. Two-thirds of the House of Representatives—Republicans in the House—voted to keep the government closed.

There are so many programs that are just not being taken care of. I will talk about a couple of them right now. There is something I have worked on since I came here—the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The Presiding Officer is from Nevada. He has represented the northern part of the State for many years in different elective jobs. He understands and knows Lake Tahoe very well. It is a beautiful lake that we share with California. Well, the Land and Water Conservation Fund helps us greatly because we were able to take some money out of that program and purchase land that was going to be used for subdivision that would have allowed more filth to go into Lake Tahoe. We were able to stop that with money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The money hasn't been coming in as we have wanted in the past, so we beefed it up and were able to do a lot of things.

Now, for the first time in 50 years, this program has been allowed to expire. It is gone. This program has been supported by Democrats and Republicans and by rural and urban communities. But on the Republicans' watch, one of the most important programs and one of the best programs for our Nation's parks—and one of the most broadly supported programs in the country—has been allowed to lapse. It is gone.

The program is funded by a portion of fees collected by offshore oil and gas drilling. Every day that it is not authorized, we lose out on collecting \$2.4 million of offshore oil and gas so it can be used for our beautiful natural resources that are in a state of disrepair. This Land and Water Conservation Fund has supported projects in every State, from protecting the rim of the Grand Canyon to securing access to the Appalachian Trail, and from Lake Tahoe to building neighborhood playgrounds in urban areas across the country.

In a last-ditch effort to sway their own leadership, several Republicans came to the floor yesterday and tried to pass a stand-alone extension of the program that would be dead on arrival in the House. The Republican leaders refused to extend the program in the continuing resolution, despite many Democrats and Republicans asking for it to be included.

One other program. The good Senator from Illinois—the senior Senator from Illinois, the assistant Democratic leader, served in the House of Representatives, as I did, with a man named Claude Perkins. He was a wonderful House Member. When we came to the House in 1982, he was a very senior per-

son. He was responsible for something called the Federal Perkins Loan Program. It wasn't reauthorized in the continuing resolution. What does that mean? As a result of that, the Nation's oldest student aid program has expired, leaving up to 150,000 students who are coming into college in the lurch.

The Perkins Loan Program offers low-interest, federally subsidized student loans for students with exceptional financial needs and also offers a variety of forgiveness options for those who choose to pursue public service professions. Last year, more than \$1.2 billion in new Perkins loans were made to about 540,000 new and returning college students around the country, including 500 low-income students from Nevada.

It is hard to believe the tea party-dominated House—and obviously the Republican Caucus here is heavily influenced by the tea party—has turned a blind eye to this. It is hard to believe the tea party-dominated House of Representatives passed an extension of Perkins unanimously, but Senate Republicans would not agree to do the same. Yesterday, Senate Republicans even blocked a bid to extend the program.

These are just two of the programs that expired at midnight last night. There are many more. It is a shame because they wouldn't have expired at all if we had sat down and negotiated a few months ago. So I say to my friend the Republican leader: Let's not waste another minute on politically motivated votes that are doomed to fail. Instead, let's focus the Senate's energy and attention on bipartisan negotiations to get our country on the right track.

Mr. President, would the Chair announce the business of the day.

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#### RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

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#### MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business for 1 hour, with Senators permitted to speak therein, with the time equally divided, with the majority controlling the first half and the Democrats controlling the final half.

The Senator from Louisiana.

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#### MILCON-VA APPROPRIATIONS

Mr. CASSIDY. Mr. President, I wish to speak on the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill that is now being considered. I will start by saying that this is 3601 Gerstner Memorial Parkway, Lake Charles, LA. This is the location for the new Lake Charles VA clinic—a clinic that has taken 13 years to get

approved, a clinic that has seen delay after delay, costing veterans access to quality health care, a clinic still waiting to be built.

This is a picture of the current facility in Lake Charles, where veterans have to go for their health care while they have waited for over 13 years to have the new facility built. This RV and this small building are why Congress must advance this MILCON-VA appropriations bill and why the President should sign it into law.

This mobile clinic in Lake Charles—you almost laugh—is the clinic for our veterans. It is one of many such clinics in our country and is unacceptable. This is something one might see in a documentary about developing nations, not the United States of America. This RV, where our veterans are treated for serious medical conditions, is connected to a waiting room that is triple the size of the square footage of the mobile home. That is because the demand for care so greatly exceeds this subpar facility's ability to deliver health care to our veterans.

In the waiting room there is a television set, but it is not plugged in and it doesn't have a remote. That is because VA rules say you must have a TV in the waiting room, but the rules don't stipulate that it must function. It sounds like a joke. We have to have a television, but we don't say it has to be plugged in.

This is the current state of the VA, and this is what Congress is allowing when we fail to pass this needed legislation.

I would like to say this is an isolated problem but there are veterans all over the country receiving health care under similar circumstances. For more than 10 years, our young men and women have returned from war in the Middle East. These young veterans are joining men and women who have served this Nation in uniform, defending our freedom in every corner of the globe. They deserve better than a mobile home. They deserve action, and they deserve it now. If we don't pass this bill, there will be consequences for people—America's heroes—who need help now.

This is the VA portion, but it is also the military VA construction budget. If we fail to act, it will not just be our veterans who are hurt; it will also affect our Active-Duty military and our national security.

We know there is a portion of the budget which goes for actually protecting our military construction, but what sometimes people forget is there is a human face to our military. Gen. Robert Rand recently took control of Global Strike, a position that is charged with maintaining our nuclear triad and first strike capabilities, but there are those in the Air Force who serve under General Rand. He needs the resources to maintain our nuclear ability, but without this legislation we cannot maintain his combat readiness, which includes basic needs such as

housing for our soldiers and educating their children.

I urge my fellow Senators to consider what is included in this legislation: family housing, schools, medical facilities for Active-Duty personnel and their families, and funding for the care of 6.9 million veterans.

Let me add something to this. As a doctor, I am glad we also specifically provide for groundbreaking hepatitis C treatments and for modernizing the VA electronic medical records system.

The Senate Appropriations Committee passed the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill by a bipartisan vote of 12 to 9, with all Republicans and 5 Democrats voting in favor.

This is common sense. Congress has the duty to pass this legislation now, and the President has an obligation to sign it. We must honor our commitment to our military and to our veterans.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ROUNDS). The Senator from Maine.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I rise today to urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to support the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill.

Yesterday, Congress sent the President a continuing resolution, a bill to prevent a government shutdown. This was necessary to ensure that vital resources and services the American people depend on do not lapse and in order to avoid harm to jobs and our economy. But as my colleagues fully realize, simply putting government on autopilot through a continuing resolution is not the responsible way to fund government. It locks in last year's priorities, delays the start of vital new programs, and allows unneeded programs to continue to be funded. We must pass the 12 annual appropriations bills.

In July of this year, the Senate Appropriations Committee, on which I am privileged to serve, reported the last of the 12 bills. This was the first time that all 12 of the appropriations bills have been approved by the committee, in plenty of time for the Senate to act, since 2009. It is past time for the Senate to take up and pass these funding bills so that we can go to conference with our House colleagues and send to the President annual funding bills that reflect our current priorities that benefit the American people.

In May of this year—in May—the Senate Appropriations Committee reported the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs funding bill by a strong, bipartisan vote of 21 to 9. As a member of the subcommittee with jurisdiction over this bill, I know this represented bipartisan consensus and hard work. It reflected the leadership of Chairman KIRK and Ranking Member TESTER.

This bill provides vital resources for our veterans and our servicemembers. We are operating under very challenging budget constraints, and I sup-

port the negotiations that are going on now. But it is long past time for the Senate to take up, debate, amend, and pass each of these appropriations bills. We have the opportunity to do that just now, and I do not understand those who argue that we should not proceed with the normal appropriations process.

Those who disagree with provisions in this bill will have the opportunity to offer amendments to change the bill. But to not even allow this vital funding bill for our military and for our veterans to come to the Senate floor is an argument that I do not accept nor understand.

We owe it to our Nation's veterans, 127,000 of whom reside in the great State of Maine. There are more than 21 million nationwide. We owe it to them to move forward with this important bill. These veterans answered the call to duty. They shouldered the hardships and sacrifices of military service. They have done their jobs. It is time for the Senate to do its job. We must fulfill our obligations and affirm a larger commitment made long ago to take care of those who have so proudly served our Nation—the patriots who have worn our Nation's uniform.

To highlight a few examples of why this bill is so important, let me mention that it ensures our veterans have access to critical mental health care services. It aims to reduce veteran homelessness—a very important issue to me that I have worked on with Senator JACK REED as a member of the HUD and transportation appropriations subcommittee—another bill that we need to bring to the Senate floor. This bill provides funding to pay veterans benefits and includes \$270 million for the Office of Rural Health, important to the Presiding Officer as well as to my State. This office has established the program called the ARCH Program, or Access Received Closer to Home. ARCH ensures that rural veterans in the pilot States, who often have a difficult time accessing the regular VA health system, can receive care closer to where they live. This has been a tremendous success in northern Maine, which has one of the pilot programs in Caribou, ME, in conjunction with Cary Memorial Hospital. This has made such a difference to our veterans.

I remember one of our veterans telling me about breaking his hip last winter in the height of a terrible winter storm. Instead of enduring a painful and bumpy ride for more than 4 hours to get to the VA hospital in Augusta, he was able, through the ARCH Program, to receive care at his local hospital, Cary Memorial in Caribou, ME. He also had the benefit of being able to receive care closer to where his family and friends were.

The programs that I just mentioned, like so many that are contained within the Military Construction-VA appropriations bill, are essential to ensuring that veterans who have placed their lives on the line for our continued safety receive the benefits they have

earned. This bill is essential to providing updated military housing and other construction upon which those who are serving today depend.

It is simply irresponsible for us not to proceed with consideration of this and every other appropriations bill. They are ready. They have been reported by committee. Let's do our job. We must do our best to honor those who serve, and who have served, and who have sacrificed so much for our country. Surely—surely—the Senate should do its part. We should do our part by promptly passing this important bill.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I wish to commend the distinguished Senator from Maine. She has articulately explained why we need to move forward, and I want to underscore something that she said.

For 6 years now, the Senate has abdicated its responsibility to appropriate. We have left the prioritization of spending to faceless bureaucrats and faceless buildings in Washington, DC. The needs of our veterans and soldiers and our country have gone unheeded, while we in here have argued about things that are superfluous and actually unimportant.

I came into this Chamber today and listened to the distinguished Senator from Nevada, the minority leader, make the following statement: He can't understand why the leader would bring forward a "can't-pass" piece of legislation and not go to something more important.

I want the Senator from Nevada to go out to Walter Reed Hospital or to go to the hospital in Maine or the hospital in Arkansas and tell those soldiers, who sacrificed and risked their lives for us, that their needs for health care are not more important, or to tell Jim Webb, who was a Member of this Senate and passed the GI bill expansion a few years ago, that the educational benefits for dependents, children, wives, and others are not that important. Tell the people of the United States of America that those who protect us, those who have sacrificed, those at risk are not more important.

There is nothing more important than our veterans and our military. There is nothing more important in our constitutional responsibility as Senators than to appropriate the money of the American people. We are abdicating our responsibility. It is professional and political malpractice, and it is time it stopped. I get sick and tired of the political bantering back and forth when there are things come before us that must be done.

As chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, last Thursday night in this Senate we passed unanimously—and it has now passed the House—a total reform of VA construction, and we fixed the Denver hospital problem that has been going on for 6 years in the VA. The Denver hospital has had a 428.3

percent cost overrun. That is unconscionable and that is wrong. But we finally are fixing it.

With this bill—if the distinguished minority leader will let us take up this important bill, rather than something that is not as important—we are going to fix VA construction forever because what this does is to say that the VA no longer is in charge of construction of hospitals and clinics. The Corps of Engineers is. It is about time we had construction management by people who know what they are doing. Doctors are good at fixing people, but they are not very good at bricks and mortar. We need the bricks and mortar people doing it.

Secondly, this bill funds mandatory veterans' benefits through 2017. We had a threat of a government shutdown yesterday. Fortunately, we avoided it, but we have had it in the past, and we could have it again. Veterans health care should never be shut down, and we need to continue to forward-fund medical benefits so our veterans know—whether or not we are foolish and shut down the government—that their health care is going to be met.

As the Presiding Officer knows, in the great State of South Dakota—and Senator COLLINS knows from Maine—the biggest complaint we get is about the lack of timely responsibility in determining disability claims in the VA; right? We have veterans waiting 478 days to get a disability claim on an injury they suffered fighting a war for us—478 days, almost 2 years. That is terribly wrong. This bill fixes that. It provides the money for the personnel necessary to expedite disability claims so veterans get a timely judgment.

Now you tell me this, Senator from Nevada: What is more important, taking care of these guys taking care of us or just debating on the Senate floor a bunch of hot air that means no difference to the American people?

It is time we fished or cut bait. It is time we did what we were elected to. It is time we set the priorities. It is time we honored our commitment to those who honored their commitment to us, the veterans of the United States of America.

So as chairman of the most bipartisan committee in the Senate, the Veterans' Affairs Committee—of which the Presiding Officer is a member—we don't have Democratic spats and Republican spats. We talk about our veterans. Almost everything we pass out is unanimous. We do so because we all agree that—Republican or Democrat, black or white, rich or poor, whatever the case might be—we would not be where we are today nor would we be what we are today if it weren't for those who sacrificed, risked their lives, and, in some cases, died for the people of the United States of America while serving in the military.

So I don't know what the Senator from Nevada thinks is more important. But for me, these guys right here are the most important thing in the world.

And to vote against proceeding to debate this important appropriations bill is professional malpractice and wrong. I hope my colleagues on both sides of the aisle will make a commitment to those who served us and vote to proceed to the VA-MILCON appropriations bill.

I yield back the remainder of my time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arkansas.

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, yesterday Congress passed yet another short-term continuing resolution. While this avoids a shutdown, it is far from ideal. Certainly a shutdown is not good governing. I think all of us can agree on that much. I wish to remind my colleagues, though—particularly those on the other side of the aisle—that continuing resolutions are hardly better. While the American people demand that we get our financial house in order, Washington continues to pass stopgap after stopgap funding bills. Instead of tackling this challenge head-on, these short-term extensions continue current funding levels and prevent us from stopping waste, fraud, and abuse of taxpayer dollars. Just like a shutdown, this, too, is no way to govern. There is another option. We don't have to choose between a continuing resolution and a shutdown. The third choice is the right choice, and that choice is for this Chamber to follow regular order and pass all 12 appropriations bills.

We have done our work at the Appropriations Committee. For the first time in 6 years, every spending bill has cleared committee—all 12—and most of them passed with strong bipartisan support. I commend the Appropriations Chairman COCHRAN and Leader MCCONNELL for their leadership to make that happen.

The full Senate has the responsibility to consider each of these bills as well. Leader MCCONNELL is committed to this approach. Our caucus is behind it 100 percent. The minority, on the other hand, is actively working against it. Committee passage of these 12 bills was no easy task. Both sides made compromises. These bills were the product of a great deal of give-and-take.

We worked very hard for months to ensure that these bills reflect the spending and policy priorities that are right for our Nation. These bills should not simply be left for dead. The President is encouraging the Senate Democrats to obstruct the appropriations process because he wants more domestic spending for agencies like the EPA and IRS. This is not the direction our country needs to go. I hope my colleagues on the other side of the aisle will reconsider this failed strategy.

The funding bills show the American people that we share their priorities. For instance, the bill before us takes care of our Active Military and our veterans when they return home. Clearly this is an area of bipartisan agreement. Yet talk of a filibuster remains.

Here is what the minority is considering filibustering: increases in funding for veterans services, military housing and family support, hospital and health facilities construction, just to name a few vital things in this bill. The bill increases funding in areas where our veterans need it most—health care, benefit claims processing, and medical research. It also includes funding for projects to ensure military readiness and improve the quality of life for military families. In light of the numerous scandals that have plagued the VA, it includes some strong policy reforms such as protection for whistleblowers.

These are funding and policy priorities for both sides of the aisle. That is why this bill passed out of the Appropriations Committee with strong bipartisan support. That is why it should move forward without resistance on the Senate floor. Yet the minority is threatening a filibuster for reasons that have nothing to do with this bill. This is all about protecting the President's agenda.

President Obama wants spending increases across the board. He has issued a blanket veto threat for any appropriations bill that does not meet his demands. Basically, the President's view is that if such agencies don't get more money, then neither should our veterans or military families. It is my hope my colleagues on the other side of the aisle recognize this is out of line with our Nation's priorities.

The right thing to do is reject the President's call to obstruct so we can continue to work together for the good of the country. Determining how we allocate taxpayer dollars is our responsibility, not the President's. Continuing resolutions have been all too common, while they should be a rare exception. We need to reestablish our priority of regular order and pass the individual funding bills that are needed to keep the government open. We can start that today and by moving the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill forward.

I yield the floor.

**THE PRESIDING OFFICER.** The Senator from West Virginia.

**Mrs. CAPITO.** Mr. President, we heard from many Members talking about the situation with the appropriations bill, and I would like to add my voice to the chorus. For too long uncertainty has hampered our Nation's ability to grow our economy and make necessary investments in our workforce, our infrastructure, and our technology. It was imperative that we avoided an unnecessary and reckless government shutdown this week, but that was a short-term patch. Now more than ever we need to take longer term actions to move our economy and our Nation forward.

As the Senator from Arkansas mentioned, earlier this year the Appropriations Committee, on which I sit, accomplished something that has not been done since 2009. We passed all 12 appropriations bills through the full

committee. We did so in a fiscally responsible way. We did so within the budget caps agreed to by the Congress. Many of us voted for those budget caps. We did so with broad-based bipartisan support; 9 of the 12 bills had broad-based bipartisan support. These bills touch every aspect of government and every facet of our economy. From transportation, medical research, energy investments to justice programs, these funding bills were robustly debated.

Knowing all this, why are the Democrats blocking the Senate from considering one of these single appropriations bills? Earlier this week it was the Defense appropriations. Today it is the MILCON-VA. Why? Why are they blocking these same bills that many of them have previously voted for in committee and touted to their constituents?

Last week I had the privilege of traveling across West Virginia with VA Secretary McDonald. We heard directly from veterans about their challenges and needs. One of the things we discussed was the Greenbrier County community-based outpatient clinic that had been closed. Secretary McDonald made a commitment, with over 200 veterans that we had in the room from that area, that that clinic would re-open quickly, but without the certainty of the funding that we have in these bills, Secretary McDonald cannot make those assertions across the country. We went to the Huntington VA Hospital, where we met with employees and veterans—committed individuals who want to see our veterans treated the way we want them to be treated, but the advances in medical technologies can't move forward without a certainty of what the funding levels are.

These men and women, our brave veterans, deserve our unified support and should not be subjected to the gridlock that has been so common in these past few years. The Military Construction and Veterans Affairs bill funds construction and care for facilities and services that assist our military veterans. It improves facilities for men and women who are willing to sacrifice for our freedoms. I will say, many of our VA facilities are challenged with approximately 20 percent of women veterans who are coming out. They don't have facilities to adequately treat our women veterans. This bill also includes funding for construction of State extended-care facilities, which helps construct, expand, and remodel nursing home facilities to care for our elderly veterans. We know many of our veterans are aging in larger and larger numbers.

Determining our Nation's spending priorities, especially when it comes to our veterans, is one of Congress's most important responsibilities. Our process can work and our government can function. We demonstrated that at the committee level. We need to demonstrate that as well today on the floor

of the Senate, but make no mistake about this, this is not just about process; it is also about progress. Funding bills are not just numbers on paper; they are people. They are our veterans. They are our friends and neighbors, our fathers and mothers, our sons and daughters. They represent the priorities of our Nation.

There are other things in the appropriations bills that are equally important. We passed out historic investments in NIH and community health centers. We passed out critical infrastructure improvements from expanding broadband access to trying to help with the drug epidemic. You cannot measure the impact of programs like the National Guard Counterdrug Program, which is helping to combat the spread of illegal drugs in our State, or the work of the Appalachian Regional Commission which helps to improve the lives of so many. Endless continuing resolutions are not the most effective ways to meet these needs and can be proved wasteful in both time and dollars. Our bills provide critical funding, but they also provide direction on significant policy matters that are facing this Nation.

When we operate from one short-term funding patch to the other, we as Members of Congress are forfeiting our responsibility to hold the executive branch accountable. Advancing appropriations bills through regular order is a vital check on wasteful spending and overreach in our government agencies.

We need to work together. We can start that today, and I hope we will later this afternoon. These are broad goals, and the goals are shown in those bills. As the Senate begins consideration of funding for Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, we should remember this: Governing is about setting priorities and bringing fiscal responsibility to the Federal Government, while ensuring that we provide for the necessary investments and services. Supporting our veterans is not only necessary, it is about the men and women who put their lives on the line for us so we can enjoy the freedoms we have here today. West Virginia is a very patriotic State, with one of the highest percentages of military veterans. I want to see that they are cared for properly. I am going to make that vote today. I hope my colleagues—the ones who are on the Appropriations Committee who have already voted in favor of this bill—will convince their colleagues on the other side that gridlock and obstructionism is not the way to go in the Senate. It is time to work across the aisle to pass this bill and support our veterans. Doing so will strengthen our Nation.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

**THE PRESIDING OFFICER.** The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. CAPITO). Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### SENTENCING REFORM

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, there are many stories written in the last months about the dysfunction of Congress, why can't they get along, why can't they produce something, why can't they address the issues and challenges of our time. It is easy to get into that mindset and believe that something has happened on Capitol Hill that cannot be repaired. For those who are about to give up hope, I hope they are reflecting on what I left just a few moments ago. It was a press conference held up in the radio and TV Senate gallery.

Attending this press conference were Senator CHUCK GRASSLEY, who is the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee; Senator JOHN CORNYN, the Republican whip; Senator MIKE LEE of Utah; and Senator TIM SCOTT. On the Democratic side: Senator PATRICK LEAHY, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee; Senator COREY BOOKER of New Jersey, a relatively new Member of the Senate; Senator SHELDON WHITEHOUSE; and Senator CHUCK SCHUMER.

We were there to announce what we think is a historic achievement, a historic agreement. We have been working now for years, literally for years, on both sides of the aisle to make significant and meaningful criminal sentencing reform and reform to the corrections system of the United States of America. On that stage, from MIKE LEE to PAT LEAHY and DICK DURBIN, was the entire political spectrum of the Senate. Within that spectrum, there are a lot of differences of opinion. There were times a year ago that I did not think that meeting and that announcement would take place.

But today we came together, on a bipartisan basis, to announce that we had reached an agreement, a historic agreement, on the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015. We knew we had a problem in America, a problem of incarceration. A nation with 5 percent of the world's population has 25 percent of the world's prison population. What is going on in America? Why are so many people in prison, and has it made us any safer? We asked those hard questions and came up with what we think is a good response.

We took a category of crime, drug use, that does not involve violence or a gun or gang activity and said: We are going to give to the judge in that case, that category of cases, more flexibility when it comes to sentencing. The minimum mandatory requirements can be changed by the judge based on the defendant before him, the crime they committed, and what that judge believes to be the best for our society.

It is such a change. For the longest time, years and decades, our goal was to incarcerate as many as possible, and

we did, some of them for extraordinarily unfair and unjust periods of time. The worst vote—the worst vote I ever cast as a Member of Congress was in the House. It goes back more than 20 years ago. A basketball player at the University of Maryland named Len Bias died from a drug overdose. We were called on to stiffen the penalties for crack cocaine in America and we did, dramatically: 100 to 1 for crack cocaine versus sentencing for powdered cocaine—100 to 1. The net result of that in several decades of sentencing was to send away primarily African Americans for incredibly long sentences. Eugenia Jennings of Alton, IL, a teenage mother and a crack addict was selling crack cocaine, a handful of it, to buy clothes and food for her children. It was her third offense.

When she was convicted, the mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines gave Judge PATRICK MURPHY no choice but to hand down a sentence of 23 years in prison. Judge Murphy said at the time: This country, this government, has done nothing for you, Ms. Jennings, through your tortured life, and now at this moment in life we are going to kick you hard.

The judge knew it was the wrong sentence. Fortunately, Eugenia Jennings' sentence was commuted after a dozen years. She was released from prison to be with her children, only for a short time. She passed away from cancer. But that is just one statistic, one story, and it can be repeated thousands of times.

This bill tries to avoid that type of injustice. We were not going to be a safer State, a safer nation if she served 23 years instead of 12. It made no sense. So we address it with this bill. With this bill, we go after a new approach in sentencing on this narrow category of crimes, which we believe can result in many serving shorter sentences.

Secondly, for those who are still in prison subject to that 100-to-1 ratio on sentencing, we give 6,500 inmates in the Federal prison system a chance to petition for reconsideration of their sentence on an individual basis, so they can be judged by judges, prosecutors, and people in the community as to whether their sentence should be changed.

So this, in a way, is a sweeping bill when it comes to the population of our prisons. I believe—many agree—it would be far better to take the \$25,000, \$30,000, \$35,000 a year it costs to house an inmate and put it instead into community policing, making our neighborhoods safer, giving our prosecutors the resources they need to not only come down with the right sentences but variations in sentencing like drug courts, veterans courts, and things that are working around America which will make us safer at a lower cost. We will have more money available to the Department of Justice and across the board to go after the seriously threatening criminals we still have in America whom we can never ever ignore.

Senator CORNYN and Senator WHITEHOUSE took a look at those in prison to determine ways they could earn an earlier release or better terms of release. They did extraordinary work. Senator Corey Booker of New Jersey stepped in on an issue that all of us who serve with him know he feels so passionately about, the African-American incarceration rate and particularly the impact it has on young people in that part of our population. He made some valuable contributions to this bill.

It is our hope we can bring this bill to the Senate Judiciary Committee soon. Senator GRASSLEY gave his word that would happen, and then bring it to the floor and send it to the House.

For those who say, "What is going to happen over there, with all of the changes taking place?" I would make one observation: Our spectrum of political support for the bill we had at the press conference represents the spectrum in the House as well. All of us came together. All of them can come together too. They may not agree with every word in this bill. Having served in the House, I am sure they won't. But if they will make the same good-faith effort at finding reasonable compromise, then we can reach a historic achievement, a historic outcome in this process.

I wish to commend one member of my staff in particular who has devoted more hours than I could ever count to make this a reality. His name is Joe Zogby. He is my lead counsel on the Senate Judiciary Committee. Time and time again, Joe Zogby has performed so professionally and with such determination, from my point of view and I am sure from other Senators' points of view. We wouldn't be here today if we didn't have staffers like Joe who have given so much of their time and their heartfelt dedication to finding a solution to an American problem.

So before we walk away from the Congress and say there is no hope, take a look at this bill and this effort. This is how the Senate is supposed to work. This is how the House is supposed to work. It is how Congress is supposed to work. It is how America expects us to work.

The President is anxious for us to come up with this work product. Let's not disappoint him and the millions of Americans who count on us to solve the problems facing America.

Madam President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

#### 9/11 HEALTH PROGRAM

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, I rise today to mark a sad occasion. Yesterday, parts of the Zadroga 9/11 Health