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Senate

The Senate met at 12 noon and was called to order by the Honorable JONI ERNST, a Senator from the State of Iowa.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Eternal God, the center of our joy, You are our strength. Thank You for Your guidance and protection.

Lord, be a stronghold for our law-makers, providing them with strength for today and hope for tomorrow. May they cast their cares on You, knowing that no one is more concerned about the things that threaten their peace. Show Yourself faithful to the faithful, rewarding integrity with Your bountiful blessings.

Lord, arm our Senators with courage for life's battles, keeping them humble and faithful in their work. Help us all to do the best we can each day and leave the results to You.

We pray in Your strong Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, June 21, 2017.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby

appoint the Honorable JONI ERNST, a Senator from the State of Iowa, to perform the duties of the Chair.

ORRIN G. HATCH,
President pro tempore.

Mrs. ERNST thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

HEALTHCARE LEGISLATION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, in the many years since ObamaCare was imposed on the American people, it has continued to hurt the people we represent over and over and over again with higher costs, fewer choices, pain and heartbreak for the middle class. We have watched ObamaCare unravel before our very eyes with each passing year. Now it teeters on the edge of collapse, and we face a choice: Allow the unsustainable ObamaCare status quo to continue hurting more Americans or take action to finally move forward.

Early on, Democrats made it clear they did not want to work with us toward that goal in a serious or bipartisan way. I regret that. But we have a responsibility to move forward, and we are.

As I have said, our entire conference has been active and engaged in moving beyond the failures of ObamaCare for quite some time now, and we are focused on the following: stabilizing insurance markets, which are collapsing under ObamaCare; improving the affordability of health insurance, which keeps getting more expensive under ObamaCare; freeing Americans from ObamaCare mandates, which force them to buy insurance they don't want; strengthening Medicaid for those who need it the most; and preserving access to care for patients with preexisting conditions. Those are the principles.

We believe we can do better than the ObamaCare status quo, and we fully intend to do so. We have all received the calls, letters, and emails from our constituents who have been hurt by this failed healthcare law. We all know the pain it has caused in our home States.

Take my home State of Kentucky, for example. Under ObamaCare, insurance markets are collapsing in Kentucky, just as we see them collapsing across the country. We want to stabilize them. Kentucky was once held up as an ObamaCare success story, but ObamaCare made a mess of healthcare markets in my home State, just as it has made a mess of markets all across the Nation. Too many families in Kentucky who liked their insurance plans or their doctors soon found they were unable to keep them. When families are kicked off their plan, they must find a new insurer, often at a higher price. When families must change doctors, they often lose a bond of trust they develop with a physician who is familiar with their medical history. When insurers flee the exchanges, it leaves families with fewer options for their healthcare. In fact, Kentuckians in nearly half of our counties now have only one option on the ObamaCare exchanges, and as we all know, one option really isn't an option at all.

A woman from Lexington contacted my office about her difficulty finding a plan on the exchanges. Here is what she had to say: "I live in one of the three largest cities in our state, and I had two options for insurance this year." She wrote that the limited networks on both of those two plans "[eliminated] a huge number of providers in Fayette County," the second largest county in my State. In addition to the limited access to care on these plans, she said, "The lowest deductible option was \$10,000."

The lowest deductible option—\$10,000. For this Kentuckian and for so many others, ObamaCare has failed. We must do better, better for Kentuckians and

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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better for families all across the country. That is why we have to act.

Under ObamaCare, healthcare costs are skyrocketing in Kentucky, just as they are skyrocketing across the country. We want to improve affordability. Too many Kentuckians have learned firsthand that the so-called Affordable Care Act has really been anything but affordable. Premiums and deductibles continue to climb higher as ObamaCare takes a larger bite out of Kentuckians' budgets.

A recent Health and Human Services report shows that ObamaCare premiums in Kentucky have spiked an average of 75 percent since 2013, when the law was fully implemented. This year alone, ObamaCare premiums have shot up by as much as 47 percent.

After years of being frustrated by ObamaCare, a small business owner from Lancaster, KY, said she had "decided it was utter nonsense to buy insurance that covered nothing." She said that it was utter nonsense to buy insurance that covered nothing.

Although she pays a large sum every month, her plan "covers no office visits, no prescription coverage, [and] has a \$6,000 deductible." In her estimate, "[i]t is useless."

The rising costs of ObamaCare add a burden that many in my State simply cannot bear. I have received heart-breaking letters from Kentuckians, such as one family faced with this dilemma: Pay for health insurance or put food on the table. As ObamaCare collapses, these families are stuck dealing with the consequences. Increasing costs have become the status quo under ObamaCare, and it is completely unsustainable—unsustainable for Kentuckians and unsustainable for families across the country. That is why we have to act.

Under ObamaCare, Kentuckians are being forced to buy insurance plans they don't want, just as Americans are being similarly forced to do so all across our country. We want to free them from those mandates. The American people have made clear that they don't like the mandate, which compels individuals to purchase unaffordable ObamaCare plans or pay a penalty. When you combine those who pay the fine and those who received a waiver, it adds up to millions of Americans who decided they didn't want or simply could not afford ObamaCare.

Listen to the story of a single mom from Berea, KY, who recently wrote my office. She is a full-time student trying to make ends meet. When she began searching for a plan on the ObamaCare exchanges, she saw a startling picture: high premiums and a staggering deductible. She wrote:

At this rate, I would honestly be better not to take health insurance at all and hope for the best.

Americans like myself need something better.

Some families, instead of bracing for another double-digit increase next year, are considering not buying health

insurance at all. Because of the ObamaCare mandate, they are forced to buy insurance they just can't afford.

The elimination of the mandate will restore to Americans the freedom to choose the healthcare plans that are right for them, instead of being forced to purchase something that may not meet their needs. The American people, just like this Kentucky mom, deserve a better healthcare system than ObamaCare.

The Senate Republican conference is focused on addressing the issues I mentioned as we work toward strengthening Medicaid and preserving access to care for patients with preexisting conditions.

The Kentuckians' stories I have read this morning are just a sample of the pain felt by so many across my State, just as Americans from States across the country continue to share similar concerns with their Senators. ObamaCare's years-long legacy of soaring prices, shrinking choices, and total failure will continue to get worse unless we act.

The ObamaCare status quo is simply unsustainable. It is hurting Americans, and it will continue to do so unless we act. The American people are demanding relief, and we intend to deliver it to them. That is why Senate Republicans are continuing to work toward smarter healthcare solutions that will finally allow us to move beyond this failed law.

I want to repeat what I said yesterday. A discussion draft will be made public tomorrow. Every Member of the Senate will have it, and it will be posted online for everyone to review.

For the past 7 years, ObamaCare has continued to hurt the people we represent. For the past 7 years, Republicans have offered ideas for a better way forward. Soon we will finally have the chance to turn the page on this failing law.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that all time postcloture on the Mandelker nomination be considered expired at 4:15 p.m. today; further, that if cloture is invoked on the Billingslea nomination, it be as if cloture had been invoked at 6:30 p.m. tonight.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

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

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Democratic leader is recognized.

HEALTHCARE LEGISLATION

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, we are only a little more than a week away from having to vote on a secret Republican healthcare bill, according to the timelines given by the majority leader to the press—just 1 week away from voting on legislation that will reorder one-sixth of our economy and impact every single American in this country, and not a soul in America has seen it.

I have never seen a more radical or reckless legislative process in my time in politics—write the bill in secret; discuss it in secret; send it to the CBO in secret; then rush it to the floor with no committee hearings, no amendments, and just 10 hours of debate for the minority.

That is not how America ever got big things done. That is not how we do big things like healthcare in the Senate. That is hardly how we do small things, and my Republican friends know it.

Republican Senator BILL CASSIDY, of Louisiana, said: "I've always said I would have preferred a more open process."

Republican Senator MURKOWSKI, from Alaska, said: "If I'm not going to see a bill before we have a vote on it, that's just not a good way to handle something that is as significant and important as health care."

I couldn't have said it better myself.

Republican Senator MORAN said: "My hope is that we treat the bill seriously, that we have hearings, that we have witnesses. I want regular order to work."

In addition, Republican Senators RUBIO, CORKER, GARDNER, MCCAIN, COLLINS, PAUL, DAINES, FISCHER, JOHNSON, and LEE have all complained about the lack of transparency in the process.

Why did they flatly refuse to say to the majority leader: Let's have a hearing. Let's accept amendments in committee. Let's have regular order and real debate on this bill. It is too important.

If they do not want to say it to the majority leader directly, I hope they express their frustration with this process with their votes on the motion to proceed, which looks like we will have next week.

We Democrats had all of the things they had asked for. They did not vote for our bill, those who were here, but at least they had input. They could offer amendments on the floor or in the committees, if they were in the relevant committees. They could debate.

Not today. Not next week.

Now, why is it that my Republican friends have resorted to such secrecy?

There is only one reason: They are ashamed of their bill. They must think