

their wake an opioid crisis that is devastating communities.

Outrageously, as they have aggressively pushed doctors to prescribe these opioids, a tax loophole has enabled Big Pharma to write off the cost of television ads that blanketed the airwaves, encouraging more and more people to seek opioids from their doctors for pain relief, oblivious to the harm that these drugs could do. I have joined with Senator BROWN, as well as Senator SHAHEEN, on legislation to close that loophole and end taxpayer subsidies for drug ads, and I am going to continue to push for transparency from these companies.

In addition to the devastating impact that Big Pharma has had in fueling the substance misuse crisis, the industry has also hurt patients by massively increasing the cost of prescription drugs.

One of the top issues I hear about from people in New Hampshire is that affording lifesaving medications is becoming more and more out of reach, and high drug costs are too often forcing seniors and families to make agonizing decisions.

No one should have to decide between buying their prescriptions and heating their home or putting food on the table, but these are the types of choices Americans are devastatingly having to make, all the while big pharmaceutical companies are reporting profits that are higher than ever. We need to change this system, bring down costs, and hold Big Pharma accountable.

Last week, the Finance Committee moved forward with bipartisan legislation to begin to take on Big Pharma and lower prescription drug prices. This bill would cap out-of-pocket costs for seniors on Medicaid Part D and crack down on pharmaceutical companies that raise drug prices higher than inflation.

It is a really big deal that a bill to take on the pharmaceutical industry in a meaningful way advanced out of committee on a strong bipartisan vote. Pharma did everything they could to try to kill and weaken this bill in committee, and they will keep trying. I am really encouraged that we have gotten this far. That is no small accomplishment. We will continue working with colleagues from both sides of the aisle to get it across the finish line.

At the heart of the issue with Big Pharma is the blind pursuit of profits at the expense of people's health and wellbeing. Representatives from the pharmaceutical industry have told us often how important innovation is and how much innovation costs because they say they want to save lives and innovation is critically important.

In my own family, like so many across our country, medical innovation has been critical not only for saving life but to improve the quality of life. Our son Ben regularly has a compression vest that helps clear his lungs without the incredibly labor intensive respiratory therapy that we used to

have to do. He is able to get nutrition through a feeding tube that runs smoothly, steadily through the night so that he can have the kind of nutrition he needs.

Innovation in pharmaceuticals have also helped Ben improve his quality of life, and the combination of pharmaceutical innovation and medical device innovation means that a baclofen pump inserted in Ben's abdominal cavity helps his muscles to relax.

But if innovation is about saving lives, then, how did we get to a point of crisis that started from the drugs that they produced? How did we get to a point where many patients can't even afford the lifesaving prescription that pharma promotes?

It seems that, at least for some pharmaceutical companies, they only want to save lives when it makes them money or when it gives them an excuse not to restrict their profits.

From the substance misuse crisis to the skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs, this body has failed to hold Big Pharma accountable for far too long. That must change, and I am committed to working with anyone who is serious about finally acting to put patients first.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. ROMNEY). The Senator from Alaska.

TRIBUTE TO CHERYL VENECHUK

MR. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, it is the time of week again when I come to the floor to recognize a very special person in my State—someone who I believe helps to make Alaska the best State in the country. We refer to this person as our Alaskan of the Week. It is one of my favorite times of the week because I get to brag about my State and brag about my fellow Alaskans and constituents. I think the pages enjoy these stories about Alaska and what we are doing up there.

This week, that person is Cheryl Venechuk. She is our Alaskan of the Week. She is a wife, a mom, a grandmother, an active member of her community in Healy, AK, which is in the interior of Alaska, and a woman who is very active not just in her community but in her chosen profession. She is a proud member of Laborers Union Local 942 in Fairbanks. That is part of the construction union, Laborers' International Union, LIUNA.

Many people know it for its great men and women across our country—one of the biggest construction building trades in North America. These are men and women who like to go out and build stuff—roads, pipelines, mines, build things. These are the type of Americans who made our country great.

Let me talk about Cheryl's life—about raising her five children in Healy, about her job, and about all she does for her community, which is a lot. I certainly think she personifies the kind of self-sufficiency, toughness, kindness, and independent spirit that Alaska and Alaskans are known for,

not just in Alaska but really throughout the country and the world. She personifies it.

Let me tell you a little bit about Cheryl's life. She was originally from the Midwest—Michigan. When she was about 23 years old, a friend of hers, Tom Bodett—who was a high school friend and eventually became the voice of Motel 6's motto, "We'll leave the lights on for you"—told her that Alaska was a good place to make a living and raise a family. So Cheryl and her husband Tim, with a child on the way, moved to a beautiful part of Southeast Alaska, a community called Petersburg, which is a beautiful fishing community in the southeast part of our State.

They settled there. They made friends. They began to raise a family. She worked at the local cannery, at the daycare, at the grocery store. She loved Petersburg. We all love Petersburg. I encourage people watching or watching on TV, when you visit Alaska, make sure to make that part of your stops.

Eventually, three kids later, Cheryl and her husband Tim moved north for Tim's work as a surveyor for Usibelli Coal Mine in Healy, AK. That is about 100 miles southwest of Fairbanks in the interior.

Usibelli is another great story in Alaska. Several generations of Usibelli family members have been producing coal for Alaska and the world, and they are still doing it—a great company, great families.

What did Cheryl find in Healy? Certainly another welcoming community, but a lot smaller, with a lot fewer amenities than she found in Petersburg.

So as she does, Cheryl rolled up her sleeves, and along with other young mothers in the area, she got to work to create a community that her children—eventually five children—and all the other children and families could enjoy in interior Alaska.

"We made stuff happen," Cheryl said. They started a daycare. They started Boy Scout and Brownie troops. They made sure hungry children got a hot lunch. They went around town picking up cans and started a recycling effort before recycling was even the rage. They helped build an ice rink for the kids to play hockey on. They even went so far as to haul the water for the rink in a truck and then spread it out to form ice. She mentored countless kids and always had time for her five kids.

This is what one of her children said about her: You have a hockey team that needs a hot meal? Call Cheryl. You need food for a wedding? Call Cheryl. Your kid is in trouble? Call Cheryl. You need something built? Call Cheryl.

Every community has a Cheryl—the backbone, the go-to person—who is usually unsung. We all know someone like that, and they make our communities so strong and caring, and in

many ways these kind of people are exactly what my “Alaskan of the Week” series of speeches is all about. So it is very appropriate we are talking about her right now.

When Cheryl was in her mid-forties, with her kids settled and in college, like a modern-day homesteader, she yearned for the next challenge. One day, she saw a group of workers doing road construction—hard, but very important work—and she thought, I can do that. Soon, she became a proud member of Alaska Laborers Local 942. That was almost 20 years ago. Her hard work, along with fellow laborers, is seen all across the State of Alaska, wind farms, trails, roads, bridges, and pipelines.

Many people talk about the great natural wonders in Alaska, and we have so many, but the manmade wonders are also remarkable—bridges, roads slicing into giant mountains, oil rigs, mines—and she and her fellow laborers have done so much to build up that part of the State.

She is a strong advocate for anybody who decides to work in the building trades, and she is particularly focused on women in the construction and building trades and recruiting them for these good jobs. She said: These are good jobs. They are good-paying jobs, and they build confidence. It is a great way to make money and to learn how to use your hands and of course to give back to your community.

To that end, she and her daughter Halle created, at their own expense, an Alaska “Women in the Trades” promotional calendar. The calendar features women of all ages who are employed as heavy equipment operators, welders, truckdrivers, tree trimmers, and on and on and on. With her own money, she put this calendar together.

She drops these calendars off at laundromats, schools, cafes, union halls, churches, and always keeps a few on hand to give to women who might need a new way of thinking about a career, who might need hope. She also gives them to people she just runs into—people like me. I was out in Fairbanks, AK, a couple weeks ago in the O'Reilly Auto Parts parking lot, and bumped into Cheryl and her daughter Halle, and I got one of these.

This calendar, Alaska Women in the Trades, is a great calendar with a couple of inspirational quotes:

Nothing is impossible. The word itself says, “I'm possible.”

Get it? Pretty clever.

How about another one:

Do something today that your future self will thank you for.

Think about that, pages. It is good advice, even for Senators.

This is the kind of work she does, on her own dime, giving this kind of inspiration to her fellow Alaskans.

My team and I have gotten many emails from Cheryl's five children over the past few days, all of them talking about what a great mother she is, how giving, caring, hard-working she is,

how she is a hero to all of them, and how she is an inspiring example. Let me quote from one of the emails.

Her daughter Emmaline Hill, who, by the way, signed up for the U.S. Marine Corps when she was 18, then went on to graduate from Notre Dame, got her commission in the Marine Corps, and now is stationed in Japan as a major in the U.S. Marines—here is what she said about her mom:

My mom believes in people, especially those who have a hard time believing in themselves or don't think they are worthy of it. She is a rugged champion for the underdog and a tireless advocate for employing Alaskans and building our communities through volunteerism and action.

That is a beautiful testament to her mom from her daughter who is a major in the Marine Corps in Japan.

We are going to be going into our August work session. I am going to be back home in Alaska the whole time. We are going to be coming up on Labor Day, a very important holiday. I think it is important, when we are thinking about Labor Day, to think about people like Cheryl, her fellow laborers, and particularly the women who are doing this kind of hard work. You don't always think about that in terms of the construction and building trades, but they do great work.

So, Cheryl, thank you for all you have done. Thank you for your hard work, your inspiration, your dedication and faith, your indomitable spirit, and your example to your kids, to your fellow Alaskans, and now to Americans, as we congratulate you for being our Alaskan of the Week.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon:

#### NOMINATION OF ELIZABETH DARLING

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, in the coming hours, the Senate could take up the nomination of Elizabeth Darling to serve as Commissioner for Children, Youth, and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services. If she is confirmed to that role, she would be a key official overseeing the foster care system.

I previously had a hold on Ms. Darling's nomination, and I am going to begin my remarks by saying my hold was never about her personally or about concerns with her qualifications. In fact, I believe she is qualified for the position. I placed a hold on her nomination because of serious problems at the Department of Health and Human Services affecting child welfare policies that would fall in her area of jurisdiction if she is confirmed. I think this involves a matter the distinguished Presiding Officer of the Senate might be particularly interested in at this point.

I authored, with the former Finance Committee Chair, Senator Orrin Hatch, landmark families legislation called the Family First Prevention Services Act.

Family First, that Chairman Hatch and I authored, is a once-in-a-generation bipartisan update of child welfare

laws in America, inspired to a great extent by Marian Wright Edelman, the head of the Children's Defense Fund. The implementation of that law, in my view, is moving too slowly.

Last week, the Department of Health and Human Services followed through on a request from me and a group of colleagues from both parties and both Chambers to open up the availability of prevention programs for States that Chairman Hatch and I felt so strongly about under Family First. This was an important first step, and, if Ms. Darling is confirmed, I expect to see the Department take more.

What I would like to address for a few minutes, though, is a deeply discriminatory policy change that has been made by the Trump administration in the child welfare system. Until the Trump administration intervened, Health and Human Services regulations explicitly banned religious discrimination in federally funded Social Services programs, discrimination that should be barred by our core constitutional protections. Unfortunately, under this administration, that safeguard is no more.

This year, the Trump administration has set a precedent that foster care agencies that receive Federal dollars can turn away qualified prospective foster parents simply because they are Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Mormon, or any other faith, or simply because they are nonbelievers.

What this is all about, in short, is a green light for taxpayer-funded discrimination on the basis of religion. It stems from a case involving Miracle Hill Ministries, a foster agency in South Carolina. Miracle Hill is a faith-based social service organization—the largest provider of foster care services in South Carolina. It serves around 15 percent of the State's foster care population. I have no reason to doubt that Miracle Hill has a lot of wonderful staff and volunteers who wish to do a great deal of good work.

Last year, the Governor of South Carolina asked the Department of Health and Human Services for a waiver that would allow Miracle Hill to continue receiving taxpayer dollars despite its practice of turning away qualified foster parents based solely on their religious beliefs. In effect, it was a request for a loophole to evade the Federal policy banning religious discrimination. The Department of Health and Human Services OK'd it.

At a time—the Presiding Officer of the Senate and I have talked about this—when there are too many vulnerable kids and too few safe foster homes in America, the Trump administration actually gave the largest foster care organization in South Carolina permission to turn away prospective foster parents because of their faith.

This is not an academic matter. Let me give an example of the consequences. In 2018, Beth Lesser—a woman who unintentionally brought this issue to light—went to Miracle