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## Senate

### LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. GRASSLEY).

#### PRAYER

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

Let us pray.

Eternal Father, strong to save, whose arms have bound the restless waves, we praise You for Your magnificent love that awakens us each day.

Thank You for lawmakers who strive to please You. Lord, continue to guide their feet and teach them Your wisdom.

In these turbulent times, show Yourself strong on behalf of those who love You. Solve the riddles that confound us. Confuse those who seek to hinder Your providence. And give Your strength to those who would like to throw in the towel. Bring order to a world that often seems to spin out of control. Please comfort all who mourn.

We pray in Your mighty Name. Amen.

#### PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore 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.

#### RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MORENO). Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

#### CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

COMMERCE, JUSTICE, SCIENCE; ENERGY AND WATER DEVELOPMENT; AND INTERIOR AND ENVIRONMENT APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2026—Motion to Proceed—Resumed

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of the motion to proceed to H.R. 6938, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

Motion to proceed to Calendar No. 299, H.R. 6938, a bill making consolidated appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2026, and for other purposes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Iowa.

#### TRIBUTE TO BRENNA TEERLINCK

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. Peerlinck, I am here to honor a young Iowan. I do it during this month of January because January is National Blood Donor Month.

It seems hard to believe, but every 2 seconds someone in the United States needs blood. Yet less than 10 percent of those who can donate blood actually donate blood. Regular blood donations can help a family member, a neighbor, and perhaps in most cases, a stranger.

An Iowan who can inspire us all to donate blood is Brenna Teerlinck. Last fall, Brenna, a St. Ambrose University student in Davenport, IA, was inducted into the National Blood Donation Hall of Fame. She is the youngest person ever to receive this honor.

At age 16, Brenna was inspired to donate blood for her cousin, who was battling a rare immune disorder. She is now a freshman in college. Even though she is in college, Brenna continues to donate blood regularly. Her bravery and dedication ought to inspire us all to donate blood.

Congratulations, Brenna. I yield the floor.

#### RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

#### MINNESOTA

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, recent reports suggest that widespread fraud has taken root in the State of Minnesota. Prosecutors say that industrial-scale fraud has affected at least 14 federally funded programs in the State and that, since 2018, \$9 billion or more may have been stolen from these programs—stolen from taxpayers and from the people in need that these programs are meant to help.

There have been nearly eight indictments related to just one organization that received \$250 million by claiming to have served meals to needy people during the pandemic. In another case, prosecutors say that a program designed to help people at risk of homelessness was subject to widespread fraud, with its costs ballooning to more than \$100 million in just 4 years. In yet another case, prosecutors state that a fraudulent provider stole \$14 million from a program to provide therapy to children with autism, and I could go on.

One has to wonder how this could happen, and I hope we will soon find out.

Last week, every Republican Senator joined Senator CASSIDY's letter to the Governor of Minnesota, demanding answers about the large-scale fraud that appears to have happened on his watch. The Department of Justice has surged resources to Minnesota to assist in prosecuting these crimes, and the Trump administration recently announced it is creating a new position in the Department of Justice focused on investigating instances of fraud across the country because, unfortunately, cases of waste, fraud, and abuse are not confined to one State. The Government Accountability Office estimates that as much as \$500 billion in Federal funds is lost each year to fraud—not an inconsequential sum—and every one of those

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



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dollars is a dollar that isn't going to an American in need.

Republicans have been working to root out waste, fraud, and abuse in Federal programs—the same type of abuses now coming to light in Minnesota. Our landmark legislation, the Working Families Tax Cuts, included a number of reforms to focus Federal dollars on those most in need, guard against abuses of taxpayer funds, and hold States accountable for the Federal funding that they receive.

New measures in the law prevent noncitizens from receiving Federal healthcare and nutrition benefits and refocus those programs to serving American citizens. The law also strengthens work requirements for able-bodied, working-age adults without young children, and it increases accountability.

The new law requires States to check eligibility for certain Medicaid enrollees twice per year and to remove ineligible people from their Medicaid rolls more quickly. It takes aim at duplicative enrollment in Federal healthcare programs, which CMS estimates is costing taxpayers as much as \$14 billion per year; and it ensures deceased individuals don't continue receiving payments, as happened in Colorado a few years ago, costing taxpayers more than \$7 million.

We also took steps to hold States accountable for being good stewards of Federal funding. We are incentivizing States to reduce their error rates when making SNAP payments. Significantly, we took aim at rampant abuse of the provider tax loophole. Use of this loophole, which sees States inflate the price of healthcare services provided through Medicaid in order to garner larger reimbursement from the Federal Government, has been a problem for quite a while now. And thanks to waivers that the Biden administration issued to California and other blue States that allows them to further exploit a similar loophole, taxpayers were on the hook for tens of billions of dollars in new spending. So Republicans took action to rein in this abuse and reduce the bills that States are running up for taxpayers.

Ensuring that Federal taxpayer dollars are being spent responsibly and effectively on the people they are supposed to help ought to be a no-brainer, and it should not—not—be a partisan issue, but apparently it is. While Republicans were working to restore integrity to Federal programs, Democrats were panning our commonsense measures as “cruel” and then voted again and again to repeal them.

We have heard little from Democrats condemning the fraud scandal currently engulfing the State of Minnesota, and Democrats have shown that they are perfectly willing to allow waste, fraud, and abuse to continue in the Affordable Care Act exchanges. That is right. Despite evidence of fraud in the ACA exchanges, Democrats have voted time and again to do nothing

about it and have actually tried to repeal Republican-led reforms.

There is waste, fraud, and abuse in ObamaCare, and it seems that the Biden COVID subsidies were especially susceptible to fraud. A recent report from the Government Accountability Office revealed that the ACA exchanges continue to enroll fake individuals, improperly pay out taxpayer-subsidized health insurance, and fail to ensure payment accuracy. The GAO tested 24 fake accounts on the ACA exchanges, and 23 of them were enrolled with false or no documentation to verify Social Security numbers, citizenship, or reported income.

Then there is the growing number of enrollees in the exchanges who filed zero claims. In 2024, 40 percent of people who got fully subsidized insurance coverage through the exchanges never filed a claim—40 percent. Now, there might be some good reasons for that, but it might also be because insurance companies are incentivized to sign people up, and these individuals may be signed up and not even know they have coverage. But Democrats have shown they are perfectly fine with the status quo. They voted numerous times to extend the enhanced subsidies without a single reform. They even shut down the government to try and extend them. These are just the beginning of the issues with ObamaCare.

Work continues to investigate and prosecute criminals engaged in fraud and to, hopefully, recover the tax dollars that have been stolen. I certainly hope the individuals of Minnesota and other criminals around the country are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. But we can't just hope to prosecute fraud; we need to prevent it. We need to be responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars and place guardrails on Federal programs to protect against nefarious schemes and bad actors. We need to ensure, when we commit taxpayer dollars to a particular program, that the money actually goes to the people that program is designed to help.

Republicans have made progress on restoring integrity to Federal programs this past year, but we have more work to do, and we will continue our efforts to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars and ensure that Federal programs are serving the American people as intended.

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

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

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, when government wastes taxpayer money, taxpayers have a right to know what happened. And when emboldened criminals steal money intended to help sin-

gle moms and children in need, taxpayers have a right to be angry.

Americans—and I am hearing it in Wyoming, and I am sure you are hearing it, Mr. President, in your home State of Ohio—Americans are infuriated with the staggering amount of fraud unfolding today in the State of Minnesota. The past few weeks have shown just how deep the corruption in Minnesota has turned out to be.

Investigators have now uncovered fraud schemes across 14 different Minnesota Medicaid Programs. Most people don't even know there are 14 different Medicaid Programs. There is fraud in all of them in Minnesota.

Joe Thompson, U.S. attorney in Minnesota, has spent his career prosecuting fraud, and based on his extensive investigation, he believes criminals have now stolen at least \$9 billion—billion with a “b”—from those Minnesota Medicaid Programs. That is half of the total amount of money Minnesota spends for Medicaid Programs in the State. Today, the fraud is so prevalent that Thompson says the State has “developed a fraud tourism”—tourism—“industry.” Can you imagine that—“a fraud tourism industry.”

Here is how these schemes work. Criminals, fraudsters, set up fake businesses for nonprofit organizations. The criminals then claim to provide services—services such as housing, food, and healthcare assistance. Then they bill Medicaid. They bill them for services never provided. They use the names of children and enroll them into the programs. Sometimes the children don't exist. Sometimes the children exist, and they are signed up by parents who are getting paid fraudulently to let them use their children's names.

In 2021, taxpayers paid \$4.6 million for something called Minnesota's Integrated Community Support Medicaid Program. It is a mouthful. In 2021, \$4.6 million. Then the fraudsters hit. Three years later, due to criminal fraud, spending for that program ballooned to more than \$170 million. From \$4 million to \$170 million—that is 37 times as much in just 3 years. Money completely stolen as the Governor and others in Minnesota, the Democrat elected officials, looked the other way.

Taxpayers similarly paid \$21 million in 2021 for something called Minnesota's Housing Stabilization Services. In the first 6 months of last year, due to criminal fraud, Democrats looking the other way, taxpayers paid nearly three times that amount.

A Medicaid Program claiming to help Minnesota children with autism cost \$6 million in 2018. By 2023, due to criminal fraud, it went from \$6 million to \$192 million.

Daycare fraud is just one of these brazen schemes where the Democrats in Minnesota look the other way. Last month, an independent journalist visited 10 State-funded daycare sites in the Twin Cities, Minneapolis-Saint Paul. He found no children at the

daycare centers—middle of the day, not a single child was there.

One year ago, a local reporter visited several of those same sites. The reporter found no children at the daycare centers. They are supposed to be daycare centers, and getting paid to take care of children.

Here is one of those sites. This is a sign from one of the sites. It is called—you can't make this stuff up—Quality “Learing” Center. It is supposed to be a learning center. They can't even spell “learning” right. But that doesn't stop the Democrats in Minnesota who keep shoveling money right to these programs, stealing money from the taxpayers—from the Democrats, going to Democrats who are running these things.

It is appalling. The people of the United States are appalled and are furious. This ought to be a red flag for fraud. Why aren't the Democrats who run the place doing anything about it?

There were 95 violations for this “learing” center alone between 2019 and 2023. Violations occurred. No records on the children. But Minnesota's—run by the Democrats—taxpayer money continued to flow. It is disgraceful.

These aren't just one-off abuses. We now know that the fraud schemes used in the State's childcare programs have been used to defraud other social programs as well.

Even the New York Times has pointed to this. They say the fraud in Minnesota, run by the Democrats, is “staggering in its scale and brazenness.”

I don't see any Democrats coming to the floor here today to point out the fraud, talk about what is happening there, how the money has been stolen from people that need it, the services that are needed by people. That means they are not getting it.

The Department of Justice has charged 98 defendants in Minnesota Medicaid fraud-related cases. So far, 64 of these have been convicted.

Last month, one defendant was found guilty of stealing \$14 million from Medicaid. Yes, she did. She stole \$14 million from Medicaid. You don't hear a word from the Minnesota Democrats coming to the floor here to talk about it. Nope.

She also stole nearly half a million dollars from child nutrition programs.

The Democrats come to the floor and say: Oh, we need more money for child nutrition and more money for child healthcare. Why aren't they looking at where the money is being taken from the mouths of the children?

For fraudsters, how much money was taken? Let's put this into perspective. The stolen money was supposed to be used to provide 200,000 meals for hungry children who did not get fed. Democrats must think that is fine. The defendant instead sent the hundreds of thousands of dollars overseas, and she bought real estate in Kenya, in Africa. Apparently, that is how business goes in Minnesota with the Democrats who are running that State.

This organized, systemic theft has gone on for years under Democrat leadership, and it really exploded under Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

The Democrats have permitted schemes stacked upon schemes to drain money meant for those in need. Republicans are not going to allow this massive theft of taxpayer dollars to be ignored. Democrats want us to just look the other way. We are talking about a comprehensive approach to root out the fraud in Minnesota and across the country.

Now, our Working Families Tax Cuts law fights fraud. We strengthened eligibility requirements for Medicaid. We ensured that illegal immigrants don't receive taxpayer-funded healthcare. We put in place work requirements for Medicaid and for food stamps. These policies will protect taxpayers and will increase accountability.

Additionally, Republicans are conducting aggressive congressional oversight. On Friday, the entire Senate Republican conference demanded Governor Walz explain his actions. We asked nine specific, detailed questions—questions such as why Minnesota failed to adopt key fraud prevention measures. Why aren't they trying to prevent the fraud? Why do they keep looking the other way?

These are measures that the Department of Health and Human Services recommended to Minnesota back in May. Nope. Governor Walz wants nothing to do with it. He knew about this widespread fraud. He refused to do anything about it.

Senate Republicans are ready to give the Trump administration the manpower it needs to tackle this fraud in Minnesota and wherever else it appears and occurs.

The Trump administration has asked the Senate to confirm a new Assistant Attorney General position—a position that will be focused on the fraud—and the Senate will get that person in place and on the job quickly.

The Trump administration has taken other bold and decisive actions to stop fraud. To further strengthen enforcement efforts, the Department of Justice has doubled the number of attorneys handling these fraud cases. The Treasury Department is cracking down on businesses in Minnesota for alleged money laundering because that is what is happening. The Department of Health and Human Services under President Trump froze Federal funding for fraud-prone programs in Minnesota.

If Senate Democrats care about stopping fraud, why are they preparing to vote today to loosen eligibility and income verifications for ObamaCare subsidies? They ought to want to be tightening these things up. But that is what the Congressional Review Act resolution from Senator MARK WARNER of Virginia does, and we are going to vote on it today. Eliminating these vital protections invites more fraud. It means subsidies go to individuals who don't qualify for them.

Congress shouldn't make it easier to defraud the American taxpayers. This is the wrong direction to take after the biggest fraud scandal in Minnesota history. Protecting taxpayer dollars should not be a partisan issue. The fraud scandal in Minnesota should be a wake-up call for every American taxpayer.

Our Federal Government spends nearly \$1.5 trillion each and every year to try to help feed and house and treat and care for vulnerable families and children. Those programs are there for a reason, but Democrats seem to think they are there to be a piggy bank for people who want to steal from the government.

Medicaid, food stamps, and other social programs have been called a lifeline. Years of waste, fraud, abuse, and corruption have pushed those who truly need the help away from the lifeline and to the back of the line. That is what Democrats have been enabling and continue to enable.

Republicans aren't going to stop until the depth of this fraud is uncovered and prosecuted, and Republicans are committed to preventing it from happening again.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic whip.

#### DISRUPT EXPLICIT FORGED IMAGES AND NON-CONSENSUAL EDITS ACT OF 2025

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, it has been my good fortune and honor to serve in this Chamber for many years and to represent my home State of Illinois. I can reflect for a moment about the changes in the Senate Chamber in the time that I have been here. I am afraid it would take me too long to express my thoughts on that at the expense of the regular business of this Chamber. But we have reached a point where there are few and far between moments where we come together and agree on something the American people think is important.

A year ago, I was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee—for 4 years. We considered many judicial nominees and many pieces of legislation in that committee. We were evenly divided or closely divided during the entire period of time. I think we achieved quite a few things despite those divisions.

We approved more judicial nominees for Federal judgeships in that 4-year period of time than any 4-year period in the history of the U.S. Senate. It took 80 percent of the votes to be bipartisan for that to happen. So I tried as chairman to always find something we just might agree on, Democrats and Republicans would agree. The issue which I am going to address very briefly this morning is one of those issues.

There was a time when the Senate Judiciary Committee was so equally and evenly divided that people thought we would accomplish nothing, but