

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT HEALTH CARE BRIEFING

Great Falls, Montana

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. I am so pleased to be here. I had other opportunities to come to Montana and visit. My husband and daughter and I had a wonderful night a few years ago in your Governor's residence, with then-Governor Schwendon*. And I am just so pleased to be back. And I've told anyone who will listen, I will take just about any excuse to return. So I hope you will give me that opportunity.

I am very grateful also for the invitation that I received from Senator Baucus to come to Montana. And yesterday Senator Baucus and Senator Burns and I were, at the invitation of Congressman Williams, in Billings. And I had an opportunity there to meet with citizens of Montana to talk about health care and came away impressed at the commitment and thoughtfulness that people are bringing to this very difficult issue.

And I'm particularly looking forward to hearing from those who will be making formal presentations and those who will be asking questions here this morning, because what I have found in my travels around the country is exactly what you have already heard from both of your senators and your congressmen, from your governor and your state senator and the chairman of Health Montana -- there is a great, deep yearning on the part of Americans to come together to reach a consensus to try to solve this particular set of problems that affects every individual, every household, every business, and every level of government. The whole dilemma that we are confronted with now with respect to health care is one that affects every single American.

I did not know until Congressman Williams told us this morning that people in Montana actually pay more for health insurance than people in any other country anywhere in the world. That is a fact that I wrote down and I will take with me. It is emblematic of the extraordinary problem that we are facing. The dimensions of that problem are one you in this state (gap in tape)

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(gap in tape) -- figures approximately \$940 billion. That is all of us -- individuals, households, businesses, all levels of government. That \$940 billion is a lousy investment, because we don't even cover every American. When we compare ourselves with other countries that have tackled these problems ahead of us, they not only cover all of their citizens, but they do it at less of a cost. What we want is to come up with an American solution that leaves room for a Montana solution so that all Americans will feel they are part of solving this health care crisis. (Applause.)

We also want to bring to reinstate individual responsibility into the system. We want people to be more responsible for themselves, for their families, for their own health care. (Applause.)

The President is looking at a system that will be a national framework with certain national guarantees that all Americans will be able to rely on, but with the kind of state flexibility that states like Montana need to have.

And I want to say a special word about rural health care. In Billings yesterday when we were listening to some of the people there talking about the difficult they face with the distances and the other problems of access here in this state, I said that we needed to coin a new phrase, that rural is something I'm familiar with in Arkansas, but we're talking hyper-rural or megarural here in Montana. (Laughter.) So we probably need to come up with yet another way of discussing the problems that you particularly confront.

But one thing I can guarantee you is that my husband believes very strongly in making sure that rural America is adequately cared for, that its needs are taken into account. That's what he has grown up with in believing; the kind of problem that he has lived with, he understands and he feels. And we are going to do all that we can to put in to place a system that rural America will not only be able to take advantage of, but be participants in helping to shape.

Because no matter what the proposals that the President sends to Congress are, we know we have no magic bullet. There is not an easy answer to this problem, which has grown up over decades. We will need the continuing consultation and help from citizens all over America through their local governments, through their state governments, to be able to make sure that what we see as a vision of quality, affordable health care for every American becomes a reality.

So I view this as the first of many conversations I would like to take part in on behalf of my husband and others who are

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working to make sure that we achieve these goals. Because once we come with a plan we will all have a lot of hard work ahead of us to make sure that plan works.

And I'm really counting on a new spirit of cooperation and commitment in our country. I want again to feel that I'm living in the country that I took for granted and was raised in. I know that for some people, that sounds nostalgic and maybe unrealistic. But I remember very well, even though I grew up in a suburb and not a rural community, that everybody looked out for each other, that neighbors really cared about each other, doctors made house calls -- those kinds of things that seem like part of distance past. But you know, there was a connection among us then that I would like to see reinstilled in America.

Health care touches us at our most basic human experience level. There's nothing like the birth of a baby, or the death of a loved one. There's nothing like walking those long hospital corridors or going out and seeing the joy on a person's face when you tell them that everything is going to be all right.

That's how we really, at the very most basic level, understand what it means to be a human being; understand what it is about life that connects us from generation to generation; makes us reliant in a most fundamental way upon each other. We've gotten away from that. We've watched bureaucracies and paperwork and red tape and distance between people replace that human caring that needs to be at the root of any health care system. And we can't wave a magic wand and reverse time.

But we can try -- as you work here on Health Montana and as we work on trying to take this system and make it human again -- to remember what is really important in our lives and those moments when we are so dependant upon each other. That's what I hope: that in a few years we will not only have a streamlined system; will not only have a better distribution of health care professionals, and have more primary and preventative health care physicians, and nurse practitioners, and physician assistants; will not only have better access, but we'll feel better about ourselves. Not just because we're healthier, but because we're part of a community of caring again. And health care can be the start of that if we do it right.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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