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SEIU

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT SEIU

MRS. CLINTON: This must have been some concert in here -- (inaudible). (Laughter.) I'm just probably grateful I wasn't here in the beginning. (Laughter.)

But I am very honored to be here, and honored to be introduced by President Sweeney. There is not anyone whom I have met in the months that I have worked on health care reform who is more knowledgeable, more committed, and more convincing about the needs of change than President Sweeney.

I also want to thank all of you, because in this room are health care workers and health care leaders. And many of you know from the front line why this campaign for health care reform is long overdue. (Applause.) You see it every day. And I remember so well during the Democratic Convention the sign that read "Affordable Health Care For Families." That was a good slogan then and it's a good slogan today. (Applause.)

You have kept health care reform on the national agenda, never wavering. Everywhere I went during the campaign and since, I have seen signs held up by many of you and your colleagues. The health action teams have been there everywhere we have gone. And the reason it's been so significant is because your constant presence speaks volumes about what is at stake.

If the people who are caring for our fellow citizens in hospitals and nursing homes and so many other settings understand so well why we need reform, you can lead the way for so many of our other citizens who understand what is at stake. This is a debate not just about reforming our health care system; it is a debate about setting the direction for our country. We have to change the way we provide health care not just because of an economic issue -- but it is a very big one; not just because it's an individual human issue -- but it is. You see it every day. But because at this point in our history, this country can no longer stand alone among its major competitors of industrialized countries in the world and not provide health security -- (inaudible). (Applause.)

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You know better than most the problems facing you and me and every other American. You know that one out of every four of you in this room risks losing the health insurance you now have, in the next two years. Just stop and think about that. You are in this room among the insured, by and large. And yet you can't be secure that you will have your insurance. Every year, millions of Americans are on the brink of losing their insurance and two million a year do. They may lose it for a month or two or six months or a year before they find a way back on to some insurance rolls. They may -- usually do -- pay a lot more to be able to get back to being insured. And every month, 100,000 Americans don't make it back on those health insurance rolls.

Just think of how you will feel because you have seen this in your work. All of us know personal examples of people who are in between insurance, were laid off, were let go, found the cost too high. And it was just at that moment in time that fate struck. It was then that the child got sick. It was then that the parents faced some terrible tragedy. It was then that they needed insurance, and they didn't have it anymore.

And then, when they tried to go back to get it, maybe they got a new job, maybe they were brought back to work after that layoff, that they found the employer's cost-cutting rules had changed policies on them. Not only had costs gone up, but now preexisting conditions stood in the way of being insured. That child was a problem. That spouse with the illness couldn't even be covered, or, if covered, only at a very high cost.

Think about what millions of insured Americans go through every month. And think about how many more of us are no longer secure, we can no longer take for granted that we are employed and our employer provides insurance, that it will always be there for us when we need it. We also no longer can count on insurance covering us in the event that awful accidents or unpredictable illness without grave financial cost and even the prospect of bankruptcy.

Security is what this health care debate is all about. Can your family find peace of mind? Can you, or your child, or your parents get the quality of care when you need it most? That's what we have to be focusing on every single day. We have enough insecurities in our world today. We see it all around us. Americans who work for a living, who pay the bills, take care of raising their families should not be burdened by the insecurity of now knowing whether they will have health insurance. (Applause.)

Those of you who are on the front line with health care workers have a tremendous amount at stake in health care reform. You

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know that better than I. You see it every day -- your job, your livelihood, the quality of your workplace. But you know more about the problems in our system than most of your fellow Americans. And I ask you to talk about those problems with the people you see. Talk about it at the coffee shop, at the supermarket or at church or at dinner. Make sure that what you see every day in a system that is not a system any longer, in which people fall through the cracks through no fault of their own, make sure that comes alive for everyone you reach.

Talk about the hard choices you see being made. People being discharged from hospitals with prescriptions in their hand that they cannot afford to fill. (Applause.) How, when they try then to self-prescribe for themselves by saying, well, I'm supposed to take four of these, but I can only afford to take one of these, maybe that will help -- how they end up back in the hospital, which costs us all and the insured more money. (Applause.)

Talk about the time you spend filling out forms instead of taking care of people -- (applause.) You know better than any that a paperwork hospital and a paperwork nursing home and a paperwork doctor's office is growing four times faster than a hospital -- (inaudible) -- (applause.)

Make a little experiment sometimes. Collect up blank copies of all the forms you have to fill out. Okay? Take them and show them to your friends and neighbors. Hold them up and say, if you look at all these forms -- (inaudible) -- 1,500 different insurers and the government, they all ask for about the same kind of information, but you have to fill them all out individually because they won't take somebody else's form. Talk about the hours and waste and inefficiency that causes to you. I'd rather have those of you who are front-line health care workers making sure that I and my family and yours get better instead of dotting every I and crossing every T. (Applause.)

And one of the promises of health care reform is we're going to eliminate the ridiculous paperwork and administrative -- (inaudible) -- (applause.) Talk to your friends and neighbors about what you see every day in terms of price gouging, cost shifting, unconscionable profiteering. Explain how you see the system is being -- (inaudible) -- and ripped off because it has no real discipline -- (inaudible) -- (applause.)

Part of the reason we are in this spiraling cost explosion which makes it impossible for us to feel secure that we will be insured even if we currently are, because too many -- (inaudible) -- people have made too much money off of eliminating opportunities for caring for people instead of expanding them. We

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need -- (applause) -- to get back to a system that values added -- (inaudible) -- the quality of care that is available to every American. And we need to have a budget for our health care system just like we budget everything else, so that people will know their primary responsibility is to take care of people, not to enhance the profits of all -- (inaudible) -- (applause.)

You are also, though, consumers of health care. And we want to make you better informed consumers. We want you to be able to choose your health plan, not to be required to choose only the health plan offered by your employer but to make real choices. We want to give you good information so that you can make good consumer choices among health plans.

Most people have health insurance that they don't understand as well as the car they drive. (Applause.) (Inaudible) -- car than you do for your health insurance. And I wouldn't want to embarrass myself or any of you, but I bet we couldn't really explain everything about our health insurance policy to each other if we tried. We don't get the information in understandable forms. We cannot comparison shop. We can't make good decisions that may be right for my family but wouldn't fit your family. So we need a system that promotes consumer awareness, information and choice.

The system that will be proposed will do all of that. Because among the absolute bedrock principles that we want to abide by is consumer choice as much as possible within the health care system. You know, the surest way to get an institution or an individual to change in business is to walk away when you are -- (inaudible.) Right now, we can't do that in most instances. In a new plan, every year you'll be able to comparison shop and join the plan that you think is best for you. And that will send a very good message to those plans you do not choose to join that they had better change to get your business. An educated consumer in a health care field is one of the surest ways of controlling costs and maintaining quality. And we intend to have Americans be educated consumers and make good decisions for their own health -- (applause.)

We want security for every American. We want to control the costs in the system so that we can reallocate the money that is there so it could be used for taking care of people. We want to ensure quality and give you good information so that you can be judges of the quality of your health care. We want to give you choice among health care plans so that you can decide what is best for your family based on the comprehensive benefits package that will be available to every American. And then you can decide if you want fee for service like you have now, if you want an HMO like you have now. Do want a particular kind of service that may be available in

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one plan but not in another? You will be able to make those kinds of choices.

Now, is this going to be easy? No. The status quo exists because there are people who benefit from it. There are interests who see the same statistics and hear the same stories that we do; who meet people who are afraid they're going to lose their insurance or who through no fault of their own already have, but they -- (inaudible) -- just the price of doing business.

We have to be willing to commit ourselves to these fundamental values about what the American health care system should be founded on. We have to be willing to take on every special interest group. We have to be willing to stand up and say we are going to put the American people and their health first. (Applause.) We have to be willing -- (inaudible) -- what will be a very hard-fought battle over changing this -- (inaudible.)

And you know as well as I do that there will be many arguments marshalled against reform. The strongest will be that if we change it could get worse. It's sort of hard to imagine the cost going up \$100 billion a year, with millions of people at risk of losing their insurance and a 1.2 million every year losing it, with it costing more and more and delivering less and less; it's hard to imagine how these proponents of the status quo will be successful with that argument. But don't ever underestimate their capacity to confuse the issue, to scare people, to use tactics that will be very difficult to -- (inaudible.)

But we have a lot of arguments on our side. You know you can be the leader in getting this argument across, because we know that if we do nothing, we will not stand still, we will go backwards. We know if we do nothing, there will be people who will continue to profit from our existing system -- (inaudible) -- will go without care, have to postpone care, be bankrupt by obtaining care.

So I ask each of you to continue what you have begun. Stand up for the kind of health care system that makes sense, that will save money, will eliminate fraud and abuse, will focus on quality, will provide a choice, and will in the long run make this country and everyone in it more secure and healthier. If the debate is fought out on those terms, then by this time next year, I will be getting ready for the celebration -- (inaudible) -- President meeting and signing this. (Applause).

Thank you.

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