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THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
AT HEALTHRIGHT EVENT

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. I am always grateful that Healthright holds events like this. I'm also grateful they don't do it every day. I could not emotionally take it every day, because what they do is to break through the sometimes self-protection that exists among those of us who care about this issue and who see the faces of the people we have heard from today and the thousands of others through this past year, and know what an incredible obligation we face to provide health care to every American.

I particularly want to thank Candy and Lisa, Edwin and Gladys and Ruby and Douglas for sharing their stories. It is not easy, as you've already heard, standing up and talking to people about your medical condition, and I am grateful that each one of these speakers today was willing to do that, because they were able to stand for millions of other Americans. Each one of their stories is not their own personal story alone; it is the story of many, many other Americans who are not here physically, but are here in spirit, because they face the same challenges because of our health care system.

I was thinking as I heard these testimonies from working, middle class Americans that in the last three years, nearly three million more Americans have lost their insurance. When my husband started running for president, the best estimate we had was that there were about thirty-seven million uninsured Americans, 85 percent of whom worked and were in working families. Now the best estimate is that we're closer to forty million, and the numbers are continuing to rise. That is approximately one percent of our population that has become uninsured in the last three years.

If we had an epidemic that had affected three million Americans in the last three years, we would certainly be mobilized to act. If we had an extraordinary national

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disaster that had occurred, like we've unfortunately suffered in the last years with earthquakes and floods and hurricanes, that affected three million people, we would be mobilized.

Well, sometimes unseen by those of us who live in a place like Washington and are well-insured, millions of Americans are living through their own personal disaster. We've heard some of those stories. Because although we have the finest health care system in the world, we have not yet figured out how to make it available and affordable for every single American.

There's been a lot of talk in the last few weeks about why we need to reach the president's principle goal, which is that every American will be guaranteed health insurance, and I'd like to just review briefly the reasons why that is the goal. Because as has been said, no other reform in our health care system will work if we do not achieve guaranteed universal coverage.

Arthur Fleming, who has led Healthright's efforts, wrote an article, along with former Secretary and Attorney General Elliott Richardson, which outlined clearly what was at stake and why universal coverage must remain the goal. First, because it is those in the middle, the great majority of Americans, the people who have been referred to as "the backbone," the people who work in the nursing homes, the people who keep our businesses going, the people do four part-time jobs, these are the people who will be the ones left out and disadvantaged without universal coverage.

If you are rich enough, you will have health insurance; if you are poor enough, you will have health insurance. And it is people in the middle, the vast majority, who are either now losing it and are among the now forty million uninsured, or who are one job, one divorce, one accident, one illness away from losing their health insurance.

Secondly, people with insurance will continue to pay for people without insurance. This is a point that cannot be made too often, because too many people with insurance give a great sigh of relief and say, "Well, thank goodness, they're not talking about me." Well, we are talking about the insured, because for every increase in the uninsured, those who are insured pay. We pay because

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eventually people get health care. We heard how, if you do finally make the decision, if you are in the position that Edwin and Gladys are, and you don't have insurance for your children, and you wait and wait, eventually you do end up at the emergency room. Those who are insured pay for the care that's given.

Third, responsible businesses will continue to pay the price, because the businesses that currently insure will be charged more and more to make up for those who are uninsured and to pay for the care that the uninsured receive. It is a vicious cycle we are caught in. The more you have uninsured continuing to receive care, the more the cost is shifted to those who pay the bills, who pay more and therefore decide to drop coverage for people because they can no longer afford to provide it, thereby putting more people into the uninsured pool, which puts more and more of a financial burden on the businesses and individuals who pay the bills.

Billions will continue to be wasted on last-minute emergency-related acute care. We don't know what the outcome would have been for Ruby's husband. We will never know. But we do know that there are millions and millions of people like Ruby's husband who don't get the care they need until the last possible moment, which thereby costs all of us more money than it would have if they had gotten preventive and timely care in the meantime.

We cannot get costs under control without universal coverage. That is particularly important in regard to the federal budget, because those of you are in Congress and those who cover Congress know that although we finally have a responsible budget, we finally have the deficit going down -- it will go down for the third time in a row, and that has not happened since Harry Truman was president -- we finally are cutting discretionary spending, we are finally moving the federal workforce back to the level it was before 1980, we are doing what we need to do to control the federal budget. But we cannot keep the budget under control unless you control health care costs.

So what will happen if we don't have comprehensive health care reform with universal coverage that controls costs? There will be pressure to cut back on Medicaid and Medicare. You can hear some in the Congress already saying,

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some who don't seem to understand the relationship between cutting back on expenditures in Medicare to try to control the federal budget is like holding onto a balloon that pops out somewhere else.

You can look at any state and any business, and you can see what the result will be if we try to control only Medicare and Medicaid by cutting reimbursement levels there, thinking we are getting entitlements under control. What will happen is, as costs begin to be decreased in terms of what hospitals and doctors get from Medicare and Medicaid, costs will be shifted onto private payers, businesses and individuals.

I spoke to a group of North Carolina business people, and I explained that Medicare now only pays 90 percent of the costs of health care in North Carolina, on average, so, therefore, the businesses in North Carolina, particularly the small businesses, pay a 30 to 40 percent surcharge to try to get to something resembling costs. So the more you cut Medicare and Medicaid from the top, the more the costs get shifted onto the backs of businesses and individuals, the more they decide they cannot pay for it, the more people then get dropped and end up being uninsured, therefore eligible for Medicaid, and the cost cycle continues to spiral out of control.

Every American risks losing their health insurance. There is not one of us in this room who can with any certainty say we will have the same health care coverage this time next year to cover the same benefits at the same costs.

We also are seeing the result of breaking the link between responsible behavior and work and health care when we hear stories that I hear all the time, particularly what we heard from both Deborah and Gladys, about people who have to stay on welfare because if they leave welfare to go into a job without benefits, they cannot provide health care for their children.

So we will continue to pay more to cover less; we will continue to see thousands of Americans stay on welfare, not because they want to, but because that's where they get their health care benefits. All of these problems will get worse in the absence of universal coverage. This is not a static status quo; this is a deteriorating status quo.

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So on nearly every argument one can make -- economics, social justice, political effectiveness, moral, ethical -- the right decision is to do what all of our speakers have asked, and that is for the Congress to give to Americans the same guarantee of health coverage that they have for themselves. That is what we who are in government owe the people who pay our salaries, pay for our health benefits, and basically want all of those who are in government, in the Executive and the Legislative Branch, to hear them and understand that we owe working middle class Americans the same health security that they give to all of us.

Thank you very much.

(End of speech.)

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