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REMARKS FOR ASSOCIATION OF MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

PROGRAMS

LUNCHEON MEETING

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Thank you so much for this award. It is a pleasure to be here, and to join so many committed friends and advocates of America's children and families. I want to acknowledge the strong leadership of the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs: President Deborah Klein Walker (Massachusetts Assistant Health Commissioner); the AMCHP Executive Council; executive director Catherine Hess and the staff; and all of you, who have worked so tirelessly to improve and strengthen maternal and child health programs in states and communities across the nation.

This Association has been a pioneer on behalf of America's women and children for over 50 years -- extending health care to servicemen's wives and children during World War II; ensuring community services were available for children with mental disabilities in the 1950s; and placing the spotlight on the need to provide comprehensive prenatal and infant care to low income women in our inner city neighborhoods in the 1960s.

And you've been our allies in the 1990s, working with the Clinton Administration to place the health and well being of America's families at the top of the nation's agenda. You've helped strengthen efforts to improve immunization rates; and protect our children from the terrible affects of tobacco. You've worked to pass important legislation like the Kennedy-Kassebaum health insurance reforms. Thank you also for assuring strong national public health leadership -- through your support for our new Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher.

Yet as much progress as we've made to improve health care services for women and children over the years, our nation faces another critical cross roads in our journey to give America's families the quality health care they need and deserve. Today, a report released by the Agency for Health Care Policy Research at HHS, confirms that there are eleven million kids in America who do not have health insurance. As many as four million of them are eligible for Medicaid, but are not enrolled. The report, called "Children's Health, 1996," confirms our deepest fears, and more accurately reflects the extraordinary challenge before us.

As the world's wealthiest nation, these figures are not just a terrible shame. They are unacceptable. And we cannot let them stand.

The President, with bipartisan support in Congress and help from organizations like yours, has taken the first crucial steps to begin turning this situation around. Last August, he signed into law the largest expansion of health care in 30 years. On that day, our nation made a commitment of \$24 billion, aimed at insuring millions of children who don't have health insurance. We also created a federal-state partnership to fulfill this historic promise to America's children and their parents.

The enactment of this program into law is just the beginning of the battle, not the end. Now comes the even greater challenge: to see that this health care coverage actually gets to the children who desperately need it -- either through enrollment in Medicaid or the new Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

We can pass all the laws we want, but if parents don't know their children are eligible, these laws will never fulfill their promise.

We knew that finding these eligible children scattered across the country, and then insuring them, would not be easy. But we also knew the consequences if we failed. So a few weeks ago, we opened a second battle front. The President announced an all out, \$900 million effort to inform every family about health insurance, so they can enroll their uninsured children in Medicaid.

The President has taken a number of steps in this children's health outreach campaign. First, he directed all federal agencies who run our children's programs -- such as WIC and food stamps -- to cooperate in a comprehensive effort to make sure every family gets the information they need to enroll their children. They are to spread the word through agency employees, pamphlets, a toll free number, and simpler application forms.

Second, states are creating or expanding health programs in order to insure more children. I know that many of you have been working at the state and community level to help expand coverage for those in need, and to help circulate "best practices" to communities around the nation. And we also need AMCHP and its members to make sure we not only get fuller coverage for children -- but to make sure that translates into quality care -- and better outcomes.

Third, the private sector can, and must, play a critical role in this effort. And already, many companies and foundations are stepping up to the plate. Bell Atlantic will establish a new 800 number that will direct families to state agencies in charge of Medicaid. Safeway will put that number of their shopping bags. And the National Association of Chain Drug Stores and the National Community Pharmacists Association will help us get the word out to parents picking up prescriptions.

Private foundations continue to be strong partners -- with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Kaiser Family Foundation committing more than \$23 million to finding better ways to expand coverage and implement outreach efforts.

Perhaps the most important allies, however, are the people on the front lines in our communities, who have regular contact with our children. We need to enlist every parent, grandparent, doctor, nurse, teacher, camp counselor, coach, minister, and neighbors to work together to find new ways of reaching our children and their parents. They must hear the message: "What you don't know CAN hurt you" -- and your children. We must get parents informed -- and children enrolled. And we can't do without your help and collaboration.

I recently met a family who had been suffering from lack of health care coverage -- and who would benefit from these new measures. Linda Havemann [have - uh - man] is a full time homemaker in Williamsburg, Virginia. Her husband, Tom, has a good job working as a mechanic, but he can't afford health insurance for their sons Raymond, 6, Michael, 3, and Andrew, 18 months. The two youngest have suffered with ear infections since birth -- but they've never had regular doctor's visits because they don't have insurance. Linda and Tom were particularly worried that Andrew wasn't speaking like other kids his age.

Just recently, a Salvation Army social worker informed them that Michael and Andrew were eligible for Medicaid. When the Havemann's finally took the boys to the doctor, they found that Andrew had already lost 20 percent of his hearing. A few weeks later, after surgery to insert tubes in his ears, Andrew said his first words: Mama, Dadda, bubble, and shoe.

That's the good news. The bad news is that Raymond is too old to qualify for Virginia's Medicaid program. And that's where the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) can help the millions of working parents like the Havemann's get the health care coverage they and their children so desperately need. Today's report tells us that 90% of the children not insured live in homes like the Havemann's -- with one working adult.

These efforts to ensure our youngest and most vulnerable kids get the health care coverage they need -- as critical as that is -- must be seen as part of the larger network of services and programs aimed at ensuring all of our nation's children get a healthy start in life. Children need to be healthy physically, emotionally, and intellectually. And one of the ways we can make sure they get those building blocks for the future is by providing safe, quality, affordable child care to America's working families. And here again, we're not giving parents the opportunities or the choices they need to succeed in the most important job they will ever have: raising their children.

That's why the President has proposed the single largest child care investment in the history of our nation. He claims he was responding to my ceaseless requests for action over the past 20 years -- but I know he believes as deeply as I do that this is part of America's unfinished business, and that it's time to give parents child care they can afford, trust, and rely on.

As many of you know, we held the first ever White House Conference on Child Care last year, to jump start efforts to improve child care in America. The urgency to act has been heightened by new scientific information we have gained about the emotional and intellectual development of young children.

Science has confirmed what all mothers and grandparents and care givers have always known instinctively -- that how we interact with a child -- particularly in those first three years -- affects how well he or she learns and develops over a lifetime. And with 45 percent of our children under the age of one in regular day care, the issue of quality has tremendous bearing not only on individual lives, but on the future of this country.

And here, I want to recognize your important work over the years to strengthen the link between health care services and child care providers. Thanks to your contributions to initiatives like Healthy Child Care America, partnerships between child care providers and health care services have been established in almost every state.

This Administration's Child Care initiative seeks to build on these efforts, by stepping up enforcement of state health and safety standards, and providing scholarships for child care workers -- so they are better trained to give children the stimulating and loving atmosphere they need to grow and thrive. We're also promoting early childhood learning opportunities, to get children ready to read and learn.

But let's remember that these proposals to improve child care are just that -- proposals. We need your help to make them a reality for America's families and children.

And I urge you to help us another front as well: to cut down on the terrible scourge of teen smoking. Last fall, the President called on the Congress to pass comprehensive bipartisan legislation to reduce teen smoking by raising the price of cigarettes by up to \$1.50 a pack over the next decade; imposing strong penalties on tobacco companies that keep advertising to children; and giving the FDA full authority to reduce our children's access to tobacco products. We can stop almost 3 million children from taking that first puff. We can prevent almost one million premature deaths. But to do this, we must pass comprehensive tobacco legislation.

Giving our children the best possible start in life -- by building healthy bodies and active minds -- is our greatest challenge -- and when met, our greatest reward. But succeeding will demand the energy, resources, creativity and commitment of every one of us. Whether it's working at the state level to deliver quality maternal and child health programs; promoting literacy efforts in our communities where doctors "prescribe" books for parents to read to their children; printing an 800 number on shopping bags to alert parents they could be eligible for health insurance; improving safety standards for child care centers; we all have a role to play in promoting the health and well being of our children.

This month, we celebrate Women's History month -- giving us an opportunity to look back on the historic strides that this country has made on behalf of women and children -- but also to gird ourselves for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. As this gathering knows so well, and as I've seen so vividly on my travels around this country and the world, whenever we invest in women -- we see progress for families, for communities, and for the nation.

Thank you for your invaluable contributions to that investment over the years. And thank you for what you will do in the weeks and months ahead, working on the front lines in our states and communities to fulfill America's promise to our children and families.