

Children's Health Outreach
The White House
February 23, 1999

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PRESERVATION**

THE WHITE HOUSE
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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT AND THE FIRST LADY
AT CHILDREN'S HEALTH OUTREACH EVENT

The East Room

2:40 P.M. EST

MRS. CLINTON: Good afternoon. Thank you, please be seated. We are delighted to welcome you to the White House, to be part of this very exciting announcement and program.

We have a number -- well, actually, everyone here is a distinguished guest, and we have a number of members of Congress, representatives of many businesses and not-for-profit organizations. We're pleased to have representatives of the states, both governors, governors' spouses and staff from the National Governors Association.

This has been an extraordinary effort that has brought together literally every part of America. And I'm honored to join the President and all of you as together we take another important step forward in our efforts to make quality health care a reality for all of America's children.

The progress we've already made would not have been possible without many of you here in this room. I want to thank the Secretary of HHS, Secretary Donna Shalala, for her tireless leadership. I want to thank the two governors who are here with us on the stage, Governor Leavitt and Governor Carper, for making health care a bipartisan effort. And I'm particularly pleased to see a number of congressional leaders -- some are en route and I believe the President will recognize everyone who is eventually here; but I know that Senator Hatch is here and Representative Sheila Jackson Lee is here and others, I'm told, are coming.

I'm also delighted that this effort has brought together advocates and business leaders in one common goal: to try to make sure that all of our children have the health care that they need.

I would like especially to acknowledge the health care advocates, the community leaders, the education groups, the business leaders, the not-for-profits, and especially the work of our religious groups, like Catholic Charities, who are doing such valuable work on behalf of children's health issues today.

Nothing better explains why we are here than the story of a woman I just met. Mary Smith is here with her two sons, Samuel Jr. and Thomas. And the Smith family really represent millions and millions of American families. Mary and her husband have both been working, but their employers either didn't provide health care coverage, or offered them private coverage they could not afford. So for three long and wearisome years their children had no health insurance. And every single day -- particularly in the afternoons, when she knew her sons were out playing sports -- Mary felt, in her words, that she was walking on eggshells, hoping and praying that nothing would happen to her boys.

Now, every parent can imagine how Mary and her husband felt. When our children are sick or hurt, the last thing we should have to worry about is whether we will have the financial resources to take care of their pain, to heal their wounds, lower their fevers, put them back on their feet.

Yet, as shocking as it may sound, almost 11 million children in America have no health insurance. Thanks to you, and with the support of the President, who made it a priority, and a bipartisan majority in Congress, that situation began to change on August 5, 1997, when the President signed into law the largest expansion in health care in over 30 years. That day, our nation committed \$24 billion to insure millions of uninsured children, and their parents, through a federal-state partnership. Today, more of America's families, including Mary's, are breathing easier because their children are covered under the Children's Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP.

Creating CHIP was the critical first step in ensuring that our children receive the health care they need, from check-ups to immunizations to complicated surgery. But we recognized that fulfilling the promise of this legislation would not be done when the President signed it -- in fact, that would just be the beginning of the hard work to make sure it could be implemented.

At least half of all uninsured children are eligible for federal-state health insurance programs, but too often their parents don't know or don't believe they qualify. As successful, for example, as Medicaid has been, an estimated 4 million eligible children are still not enrolled. Millions of others, like Mary's sons, have working parents and didn't know where to turn for health insurance. Sometimes people lose their coverage when a parent loses a job; sometimes the long, complicated forms just really seem too much for any family to face.

So over the past year we've carried on a sustained outreach effort in communities nationwide to help educate families about CHIP. And I'm very grateful for the work that all of you have done. I'd like to describe a particularly successful effort.

Last November, Chicago's public schools launched an aggressive, school-based outreach campaign aimed at the estimated 170,000 students who were eligible but not enrolled in the Illinois KidCare program. First they sent out enrollment information to every family who had

children in the city's public schools. Then, on the day that Chicago requires parents to come to school -- which I think is a very good idea -- to pick up their child's report card, 3,000 volunteers were on hand to help eligible parents fill out the forms to get their children enrolled.

Everyone was involved, from teachers to social workers to counselors; from private corporations to advocacy groups. And they also had advertisements that were public service, on the media and the TV and the radio, translated into five different languages, including Cantonese and Arabic. And the result of this concerted campaign? About 14,000 children in Chicago applied for KidCare during that time period. And I know Paul Vallas, who is the CEO of Chicago's public schools, is here with us, and I want to congratulate him for creating such a model program.

This Chicago program shows what we can do when we work together, and when we really reach out to families and children, to make good on the promise that the President signed into law in August of 1997. There isn't any more important mission than ensuring that every parent has the peace of mind that Mary now has, to know her children are insured, and has the resources to back up that peace of mind.

I want to ask Mary and her sons to stand, so that we can acknowledge you. And I know teenage boys hate this so -- (laughter) -- we'll do it really quickly, Samuel and Thomas, but I want to acknowledge the family. (Applause.)