



U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

Finance

SENATOR CHUCK GRASSLEY, OF IOWA - CHAIRMAN

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Opening Statement of Sen. Chuck Grassley Wednesday, February 4, 2004

Good morning. I call the committee to order. Today, we will be hearing testimony from the distinguished Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, on the Administration's health and welfare budget priorities for 2005. First and foremost, I'd like to thank you and your staff for all your hard work and dedication last year as we worked on the Medicare Modernization Act (MMA). Because of your leadership and expertise we were able to follow through on a promise to our nation's seniors to modernize the Medicare program by adding coverage for prescription drugs.

However, we are not here to tout our accomplishments. Rather, we are here to discuss the work that remains to be accomplished. One of these important challenges is to address the plight of the 43 million Americans who are without health insurance. Last year we were able to pass Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) as part of the Medicare Modernization Act, and we created the new Health Coverage Tax Credit in the passage of the Trade Act of 2002. Unfortunately, more remains to be done on this very important priority. I am anxious to hear from the Secretary on the President's proposals for helping the uninsured.

Consistent with the emphasis on targeted help to those who need it most, the President has reaffirmed his continued commitment to helping the most vulnerable and needy citizens through the Administration's welfare reform proposals. One important feature of the President's proposal for welfare reform is the promotion of healthy marriages and strong family formation. These proposals are key provisions in the welfare re-authorization bill that passed the Senate Finance Committee last year. Enactment of a meaningful welfare reform re-authorization is a very high priority for me. It is one of the key pieces of unfinished business we need to address in this session of the 108th Congress. I am hopeful that the full Senate will consider the welfare bill very soon. I know that the Secretary has a keen interest in the welfare bill, and I look forward to continuing to work with him on this legislation.

Another important priority that remains is improving the Medicaid program. I believe that one of the most promising Medicaid proposals in the President's budget is the one that gives people with disabilities and older Americans more choices and more control over their benefits. Many of these Medicaid beneficiaries want options, including the ability to live in their own homes and direct their care. The President has created opportunities for choice in his New Freedom Initiative, which includes the "Money Follows the Person" proposal. These are important proposals, and in the coming months I plan to focus on moving forward with these new approaches to creating better options for Medicaid beneficiaries who want to live in the community.

I am also very happy to see that one of the Administration's continuing priorities for Medicaid and SCHIP is ensuring their fiscal integrity. The President's budget proposes to build on past efforts to improve Federal oversight of these programs and to ensure that Federal taxpayer dollars for Medicaid are going to their intended purpose. With my strong commitment to program accountability, I can assure you that this proposal is very much appreciated. Again, Mr. Secretary, thank you for appearing before this committee today. I look forward to working with you and the Administration to accomplish the goals put in front of us today.