



Gov. Sebelius Nomination Hearing
Opening Statement of Sen. Chuck Grassley
Thursday, April 2, 2009

Thank you, Senator Baucus, and thank you, Governor Sebelius, for your willingness to serve your country. If confirmed, you will be leading over 64,000 employees and in charge of an annual budget of about 700 billion dollars. The Department of Health and Human Services and its operating divisions serve many vital functions to promote the health and well-being of all Americans. For example, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services provides health care to about 100 million Americans through the Medicare, Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, sometimes better known as CHIP. Americans also rely on the Food and Drug Administration to ensure the safety of food, drugs and devices that are consumed and used every day. And the National Institutes of Health is the principal driver of basic and applied biomedical research.

In addition to being at the helm of the Department, you will be the policy leader in the Administration when it comes to health issues. As a cabinet member, you will have a significant role in shaping Administration policy. It is good that you will be bringing your extensive public service and your Midwest sensibility and know-how to the job. These will serve you well in the difficult challenges that will lie ahead for you as Health and Human Services Secretary.

You come at a time when we face many significant challenges in the health care arena. First and foremost of these challenges is health care reform. I think we all know by now why we need to take on health care reform now instead of later. Skyrocketing health care costs affect everyone including the federal government, states, business and households. Despite all this spending, about 47 million are uninsured at some point during the year. Being uninsured poses a significant barrier to health care access. And despite all this spending, it is clear that we are not always getting our money's worth when it comes to health care quality.

Governor Sebelius, these are indeed serious challenges. But you also come at a time when there is a strong desire and commitment to work together to reform our health care system. Doing nothing should not be not an option. But as with most significant undertakings, the devil is in the details. If we work together, we can reform our health care system to solve the problems we face with cost, quality and access. And we can do it without some proposals that have been circulating lately. First, health care reform should not be legislated through reconciliation.

Everyone agrees that health reform must be done on a bipartisan basis. Reconciliation is instead a partisan exercise that is not an appropriate vehicle for “real” health care reform.

The next important issue is the public plan option. We can reform our health care system to achieve our goals without having a public plan option that is run by the government. We do not need a public plan option where the government sets the rates it pays doctors and hospitals and decides what treatments it would cover. Instead, we need a system where people who like the coverage they have today can keep it; where stronger rules on the health care market mean that health insurers have to cover people with pre-existing medical conditions and stop charging higher premiums to sick people. A new government-run health insurance plan would result in rationing of our health care to control costs. It would take us down the road toward a government run system.

These are a few examples of the tough issues we need to roll up our sleeves and work out on a bipartisan basis. I would like to discuss with you a number of issues that I have working on in Congress. First is the need for transparency in health care. All the stakeholders need to have adequate information to make choices in order for the health care system to work. This information includes price and quality data for patients and providers. It also includes knowing if the manufacturer of a drug or medical device your doctor prescribes for you also has been funneling him or her a lot of money at the same time. So I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the role of transparency in the health care system.

Combating waste, fraud and abuse has also been a longstanding priority of mine. We have much work to do in this regard. I would like to know if curbing waste, fraud and abuse is a priority for you and what you have done in this regard as Governor.

Another area that Senator Baucus and I and other members of the Committee have worked tirelessly on is health care for rural America. Since you come from a largely rural state, I am sure you share our commitment to ensuring that we have a viable and high quality health care system in rural America. These are but a few of the issues that I hope we will be facing together.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to ask unanimous consent to place two letters into the record. These letters are from a group of nine scientists at the FDA. They are writing for a second time to President Obama today regarding their grave concerns about the FDA. Governor Sebelius, I want to be sure that you are aware of these concerns from whistleblowers inside the agency. I also want to note that I am providing copies for the record that do not identify the whistleblowers by name. They are afraid of retaliation particularly in light of the former acting FDA Commissioner’s recent statements and the President’s recent signing statement that seems to limit whistleblower protections.

Also, as has been reported already, you’ve addressed some tax irregularities before we began our review in the Committee of your tax returns. I take tax matters very seriously and I am eager for you to address those matters today so they may be taken into consideration as your nomination moves forward.

With that, I want to thank you again for your willingness to serve and express again, and that if you are confirmed, I look forward to working with you in the days and months ahead.