

Opening Statement

Alex Michael Azar II
Nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services
Finance Committee
United States Senate
Washington, DC
January 9, 2018

I'm pleased to be joined today by my wife, Jennifer, my daughter, Claire, my son, Alex, and my father, Dr. Alex Azar. Unfortunately my mother, Lynda, could not be here today, and most tragically my step-mother Wilma passed away just last July from cancer. Thank you all. Having an opportunity such as this does not happen without family support and guidance.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wyden, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you as the President's nominee to be the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Secretary Thompson and Secretary Leavitt, thank you so much for those kind words and for your friendship and mentorship over the years.

I thank President Trump for the confidence he has bestowed on me.

Ninety-seven years ago, my grandfather—an impoverished teenager who spoke no English—stepped out of steerage on the S.S. Argentina, completing his long journey from Amioun, Lebanon, to America. As he entered the receiving hall at Ellis Island, he met an individual in a military uniform. That person possessed the power to admit him or to send him back to poverty and uncertainty. That person was a member of the United States Public Health Service. It is a testament to all that I love about this country that just 97 years after my grandfather went through his six-second physical on Ellis Island with no discernable prospects other than the political, economic, and religious freedom America offers, his grandson might be

in charge of that very Public Health Service, as well as all of the other world-renowned components of the Department of Health and Human Services.

The mission of HHS is to enhance and protect the health and the well-being of all Americans, through programs that touch every single American in some way, every single day. Through its outstanding leaders and career staff, HHS is primed to meet that challenge. The task is humbling. Marshalling and leading the incredible resources of the Department require innovating, never being satisfied with the status quo, and anticipating and preparing for the future. I gained these skills in the dark days after 9/11, as we faced the health and human consequences of those attacks, through the subsequent anthrax attacks and preparedness for potential further biological, chemical, radiological, or nuclear attacks, in the implementation of our completely novel Part D prescription drug benefit for seniors, by helping to build global, national, state, and local pandemic flu preparedness, in our response to threats such as SARS and monkeypox, in our efforts to continue to reform welfare programs to make them as modern, responsive, and empowering as possible for the individuals and families we serve, through innovation in the private sector to bring life-improving therapies to our people and the people of the world, and in harnessing the power of big data and predictive analytics to make us more efficient and more capable of serving our fellow Americans.

With a department the size and scope of HHS, it can be difficult to prioritize. Nonetheless, should I be confirmed, I do envision focusing my personal efforts in four critical areas. First, drug prices are too high. The President has made this clear. So have I. Through my experience helping to implement Part D and with my extensive knowledge of how insurance, manufacturers, pharmacy, and government programs work together, I believe I bring skills and

experiences to the table that can help us address these issues, while still encouraging discovery so Americans have access to high quality care.

Second, we must make healthcare more affordable, more available, and more tailored to what individuals want and need in their care. We all share a common concern for our fellow Americans who are struggling to achieve access to quality healthcare, even if we do not necessarily always agree on how best to go about addressing that challenge. Under the status quo, premiums have been skyrocketing year after year, and choices have been dwindling. We must address these challenges for those who have insurance coverage and for those who have been pushed out or left out of the insurance market by the Affordable Care Act.

Third, we must harness the power of Medicare to shift the focus in our healthcare system from paying for procedures and sickness to paying for health and outcomes. We can better channel the power of health information technology, and leverage what is best in our programs and in the private, competitive marketplace to ensure the individual patient is at the center of decision making and his or her needs are being met with greater transparency and accountability.

Finally, we must heed President Trump's call-to-action and tackle the scourge of the opioid epidemic that is destroying so many individuals, families, and communities. We need aggressive prevention, education, regulatory, and enforcement efforts to stop over-prescribing and overuse of these legal and illegal drugs. And we need compassionate treatment for those suffering from dependence and addiction.

These are serious challenges that require a serious-minded sense of purpose, and, if confirmed, I will work with the superb team at HHS to deliver serious results.

I thank President Trump for this important opportunity to serve the American people, and I thank you for your consideration of my nomination.