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Health and Human Services (HHS) Speeches

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PLACE: Unity Cardozo Health Center, Washington, D.C.
DATE: January 30, 2002
"President's Plan To Assist The Uninsured"

Thank you, Vincent and Jim for the introduction and for your great work. Unity health care is a sterling example of how communities and government can work together to improve the lives of American families.

Unity has provided 17 years of service to this community, and it has served those families who are most in need. More than three-quarters of unity's patients live below the federal poverty line, and many are homeless. It's a record of service to be proud of, and I am honored to be here with you.

My good friends Betty Duke and Bobby Jindal also are here. Betty is the Acting Administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration, and Bobby is the HHS Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. They are both doing a wonderful job at the Department of Health and Human Services.

We are here today to because there are roughly 39 million Americans who don't have health insurance. That's simply too many in a nation as compassionate and caring as ours, and it's something that President Bush and we at HHS are determined to fix.

We made great strides in extending access to health care to Americans during the first year of the Bush administration. We increased funding for community health centers by \$165 million, in order to build on the expertise and compassion that provide care to so many Americans nationwide.

We also have intensified our partnership with the states by working with governors to give them the flexibility they need to best provide health care under the Medicaid and SCHIP programs.

In the last year, we at the Department of Health and Human Services have approved more than 1,400 state plan amendments and Medicaid and SCHIP Waivers - some that had been languishing before the federal government for more than a decade.

As a result, those waivers have expanded the opportunity for health coverage to 1.8 million Americans and expanded existing benefits to 4.5 million more. We signed the latest last week in California, providing care to an additional 300,000 in that state alone.

That's a record that I'm very proud of, but I recognize that we need to do more. We must do more. In solving the problem of the uninsured, we must not be bound by the old ideological battles of the left and the right, of private sector versus public sector solutions. We must take the best of both worlds and, in the end, the reward goes to those who need it most - American families who lack access to quality health care.

That's Why - In The Fiscal Year 2003 Budget - President Bush And We At The Department Of Health And Human Services Have Dedicated Ourselves To Taking A Dedicated Approach To Increasing Access To Quality Health Care For All Americans.

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We are Proposing A Comprehensive Approach To Improving Access To Health Care. This Package Provides Care To Those Who Cannot Afford It And Gives State Government The Power To Make A Difference.

President Bush Will Propose A Series Of Health Credits That Will Help Families Who Don't Have Public Or Employer-Provided Insurance Secure The Health Care They Need. Under The Proposal, Families With Two Or More Children And Incomes Under \$25,000 Could Receive Up To \$3,000 In Credits To Cover The Cost Of Buying Health Insurance. Individuals Earning Up To \$15,000 A Year Could Receive A \$1,000 Credit.

This Health Credit Also Could Be Used For Purchase Of Private Insurance Through Purchasing Groups And State-Sponsored Insurance Pools - Such As Schip Or State Employee Pools

We Estimate That 6 Million Previously Uninsured Americans Will Get Health Insurance Through These Credits, Earning The Security And Peace Of Mind That Comes With Health Insurance.

Health credits are just part of the President's proposal, and it's fitting that we're gathered here at the upper Cardozo health center. Community health centers are at the heart of the President's proposal to expand access to health care to Americans.

The 2003 budget will request an additional \$114.4 million dollars over this year as part of the President's vow to create 1,200 new community health centers by 2006. The increase in the President's proposal would support 170 new and expanded health centers and provide services to a million additional patients. It's part of the President's long-term plan to double the capacity of our community health center system.

That is a noble goal, one that benefits families from coast to coast. In the last year, I have visited community health centers in New York, California, my home state of Wisconsin, and here in the District. The centers - and especially the committed health care providers at those centers - never fail to impress me with their compassion and close ties to the community.

We are going to make sure that the community health centers have excellent health care workers through with the National Health Service Corps. We are increasing funding for the service corps by \$44 million to attract bright young professionals to the community health centers.

This is a crucial service that brings quality doctors and nurses to some of our poorest neighborhoods. All Americans - and all families - deserve the best-quality care, regardless of income or insurance. The National Health Service Corps brings it to them.

Our proposal doesn't stop there. We will help American families through improved Medical Savings Accounts. These accounts provide an important option for individuals to purchase coverage and give them more control over spending on medical services.

We'll also address the issue of Flexible Spending Accounts. These accounts are typically established by employers as a means of employee health-care savings. However, the money reverts to the employer if not spent. We propose

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that up to five hundred dollars of flexible spending account money be kept by employees at year's end.

Finally, let me talk to you about the subject of waivers. Waivers allow state and local government the flexibility they need to address local problems in a local manner.

When I was governor of Wisconsin, I implemented a waiver for health insurance through our Badgercare program. And I can assure you: it works. Badgercare proved to be more popular than we ever imagined, and tens of thousands of Wisconsinites now have health insurance thanks to this groundbreaking program. It is a program that has been duplicated in other states, and we are committed to continuing to work with state and local government so they can address their problems in ways that are best for them. New Yorkers should decide what's best for New York, as Wisconsinites were able to decide what was best for Wisconsin. In particular, waivers give states the flexibility to strengthen their medicaid and schip programs. Extending the availability of state children's health insurance program, or SCHIP, funds is a way to give parents health insurance. This will make it easier for moms and dads to care for their kids, since they themselves will have access to the care they need to stay healthy. An estimated \$3.2 billion in unspent schip dollars would be returned to the federal treasury over the next two years. That's because if states have not used their full schip allotments within three years, the allotments go back to the treasury.

President Bush has proposed to keep this money available for the SCHIP program, which means that billions of additional dollars will be available to states to provide health insurance through SCHIP.

It will be available for states nationwide and will allow us to continue making significant progress in reaching out to the uninsured, especially low-income working families. That is the President's plan. It is a fair plan, and it is a wise plan. It's a plan I'm proud to be able to present it to you. It's clear we must join together to accomplish our goal to expand access to health care in America. I'm reminded of my favorite Spanish phrase: "juntos podemos" (hun-toes poh-day-mose). "together we can."

Yes, together we can. Together, we will.

Thank you, and I'll be happy to take your questions.