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Remarks by President Barack Obama on Children's Health Insurance Program Bill Signing

THE WHITE HOUSE

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Washington, DC

Today, with one of the first bills I sign – reauthorizing the Children's Health Insurance Program – we fulfill one of the highest responsibilities we have: to ensure the health and well-being of our nation's children.

It is a responsibility that has only grown more urgent as our economic crisis has deepened, health care costs have exploded, and millions of working families are unable to afford health insurance. Today in America, eight million children are still uninsured – more than 45 million Americans altogether.

It's hard to overstate the toll this takes on our families: the sleepless nights worrying that someone's going to get hurt, or praying that a sick child gets better on her own. The decisions that no parent should ever have to make – how long to put off that doctor's appointment, whether to fill that prescription, whether to let a child play outside, knowing that all it takes is one accident, one injury, to send your family into financial ruin.

The families joining us today know these realities firsthand. When Gregory Secrest, from Martinsville, Virginia lost his job back in August, his kids lost their health care. When he broke the news to his family, his nine year-old son handed over his piggy bank with \$4 in it, and told him, "Daddy, if you need it, you take it."

This is not who we are. We are not a nation that leaves struggling families to fend for themselves. No child in America should be receiving her primary care in the emergency room in the middle of the night. No child should be falling behind at school because he can't hear the teacher or see the blackboard. I refuse to accept that millions of our kids fail to reach their full potential because we fail to meet their basic needs. In a decent society, there are certain obligations that are not subject to tradeoffs or negotiation – health care for our children is one of those obligations.

That is why we have passed this legislation to continue coverage for seven million children, cover an additional four million children in need, and finally lift the ban on states providing insurance to

legal immigrant children if they choose to do so. Since it was created more than ten years ago, the Children's Health Insurance Program has been a lifeline for millions of kids whose parents work full time, and don't qualify for Medicaid, but through no fault of their own don't have – and can't afford – private insurance. For millions of kids who fall into that gap, CHIP has provided care when they're sick and preventative services to help them stay well. This legislation will allow us to continue and build on these successes.

But this bill is only a first step. The way I see it, providing coverage to 11 million children through CHIP is a down payment on my commitment to cover every single American. And it is just one component of a much broader effort to finally bring our health care system into the twenty-first century. That's where the Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Plan that is now before Congress comes in.

Think about this – if Congress passes this recovery plan, in just one month, we'll have done more to modernize our health care system than we've done in the past decade.

We'll be on our way to computerizing all of America's medical records, which won't just eliminate inefficiencies, save billions of dollars and create tens of thousands of jobs – but will save lives by reducing deadly medical errors. We'll have made the single largest investment in prevention and wellness in history – tackling problems like smoking and obesity, and helping people live longer, healthier lives. And we'll have extended health insurance for the unemployed, so that workers who lose their jobs don't lose their health care too.

Now, in the past few days I've heard criticisms of this plan that echo the very same failed theories that helped lead us into this crisis – the notion that tax cuts alone will solve all our problems; that we can address this enormous crisis with half-steps and piecemeal measures; that we can ignore fundamental challenges like the high cost of health care and still expect our economy and our country to thrive.

I reject these theories, and so did the American people when they went to the polls in November and voted resoundingly for change. So I urge members of Congress to act without delay. No plan is perfect, and we should work to make it stronger. But let's not make the perfect the enemy of the essential. Let's show people all over our country who are looking for leadership in this difficult time that we are equal to the task. Let's give America's families the support they need to weather this crisis.

In the end, that's really all that folks like the Secrests are looking for – the chance to work hard, and to have that hard work translate into a good life for their kids. I'm pleased to report that their story had a happy ending – it turned out that Gregory's two sons were eligible for CHIP, and they are now fully covered, much to his relief. I think Gregory put it best when he said: "Kids look at us and think 'they'll take care of us.' That is our job – to keep them safe and healthy."

That's what I think about when I tuck my own girls into bed each night. That is what I want for every child – and every family – in this nation. That's why it is so important that Congress passes our recovery plan – so we can get to work rebuilding America's health care system.

It won't be easy – and it won't happen all at once. But the bill I sign today is a critical first step. So I want to thank all the state and local officials, advocates and ordinary citizens across America who've fought so hard to pass it. I want to thank all the members of Congress who have worked so tirelessly, for so long, so that we could see this day. And I want you all to know that I am confident that if we come together, and work together, we can finally achieve what generations of Americans have fought for and fulfill the promise of health care in our time.

Thank you.

THE WHITE HOUSE, February 4, 2009.