Big Timber MAF (Medical Assistance Facility) Dedication

Max S. Baucus
Senator * or Department*: **BAUCUS**

Instructions:
Prepare one form for insertion at the beginning of each record series.
Prepare and insert additional forms at points that you want to index.
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Record Type*: **Speeches & Remarks**

MONTH/YEAR of Records*: **June-1996**
(Example: JANUARY-2003)

(1) Subject*: **Health**
(select subject from controlled vocabulary, if your office has one)

(2) Subject* **Big Timber MAF Dedication**

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(Example: 01/12/1966)

* "required information"
Remarks of Senator Max Baucus  
Big Timber MAF Dedication  
June 15, 1996

Thank you, Sonny, for that wonderful introduction and all of your help in making today happen. And I thank everyone here today for the work you did to see that the Pioneer Medical Center become a Medical Assistance Facility.

This means more stability for the Pioneer Medical Center. And as a result, more security and guaranteed health care for Big Timber and for all of the folks around here who rely on Pioneer for their health care needs.

QUALITY OF LIFE IN SMALL TOWN MONTANA

We Montanans have a lot of blessings.

We live in the most beautiful state in America -- from the Great Plains and Pompey's Pillar up the road apiece, to the Crazy Mountains and Yellowstone National Park.

We have the world's best hunting and fishing.

A good life on the land for family farmers and ranchers.

The kind of community spirit that puts on the Big Timber Rodeo and the Black Powder shoot every year.

And maybe most important, the neighborliness and small-town decency that a lot of the big cities have lost.

All that gives us a high quality of life. But in turn, we have some unique challenges. And they are nowhere more evident than in health care.

People in rural communities face long trips to the hospital and sometimes have trouble getting prescriptions filled. In Montana, a transportation program like Essential Air Service is also a health issue.

Farmers, ranchers and folks in small business pay more for insurance than people who work for big companies in the cities. I'll never forget the letter I got from Gary Beley, a Big Timber rancher whom everybody here probably knows, a couple of years back. He just laid out the statistics of it:

"My wife and I are 59 years of age and ranch for a living. We have a ... $1500 deductible policy on which we have filed one accident claim in over a ten year period. They rate us in good health. From 1991 to 1993, our premium has gone
from $3970 to $7352 per year. This is an 85% increase over a 2 year period. The increases over the last two years have been about 20% per every six months."

And rural hospitals have their own set of troubles. They have a smaller patient base, older patients, and depend more heavily on Medicare and Medicaid than big urban hospitals. So particularly in an era when the Congress is talking about very large cuts in these services, folks in Big Timber and many other Montana towns have to live with the fear of losing access to health care completely.

MAF DEDICATION

But as we dedicate the Pioneer Medical Center as a Medical Assistance Facility today, we prove that we can meet these challenges.

We will guarantee access to health care for the community. Protect some good-paying health industry jobs and maybe create some more. And make our contribution to creating a more efficient health care system that saves money without raising premiums or cutting benefits.

This is going on all over Montana. We now have nine MAFs, and the tenth is on its way up in White Sulphur Springs. The Montana Hospital Association tells me this is going to continue. In the coming years many more Montana hospitals will change their status to become Medical Assistance Facilities.

That means access to health services for Montanans. And in a way, it means something for our entire national health care debate.

CREATION OF THE MAF

We had the idea for this project about five years ago. I got the Health and Human Services Department to authorize it as an experiment in a few towns -- places like Culbertson, Ekalaka, Terry and Circle -- which simply did not have the patient base or the money to support a hospital.

It cut some regulations we found unnecessary in a small rural town; and raised Medicare reimbursements so we could preserve physician service. The agency people were worried about what it could cost -- but what we've found is that, in fact, the MAF saves money by ensuring basic and preventive care.

It has been so successful, in fact, that health experts and administrators from all over the country have come to Montana to
learn about our experience. We've even got a bill that I introduced in Congress to make the MAF a permanent rather than experimental program, and open it up to all fifty states.

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE FACILITY

When it ultimately passes, any hospital in rural America that meets the criteria can move toward MAF status. People in hospital administration and local government will no longer need to go through a lot of waivers and bureaucracy and paperwork to do what makes sense for their community.

Instead, we'll have a bit more control over our future. Small rural hospitals will get out from under rigid and expensive regulations, and Medicare reimbursements too low to let them stay open.

TOP-LEVEL ATTENTION TO RURAL HEALTH ISSUES

Finally, we create a new, permanent position of Assistant Secretary for Rural Health at the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington. Montana -- all of rural America -- needs more advocates within the federal government. More people who understand our unique problems and will push for solutions.

So when this bill passes, the Department of Health and Human Services, with its hundreds of thousands of employees, will have a top-level official whose job is to remember places like Sweetgrass County. This will make sure we have somebody in the room when these federal agencies make decisions on Medicare, Medicaid and other services that are particularly important in rural America.

ACTION IN CONGRESS

Of course this isn't the whole solution. We should go on to make some more of the right kind of changes -- make self-employed health insurance premium fully tax deductible, for example, to give ranchers like the Beleys a little relief. Give physicians some more incentives to stay in rural communities rather than the big city.

But the MAF is a crucial part of the equation. It shows that we in Montana have found a way to improve access to health care; and at the same time to make health care more efficient and less costly.

That is more important than ever, at a time when Congress is taking the opposite approach. The Gingrich plan is a good
example. Its basic assumption is that, in order to save money, we need to raise Medicare premiums on older folks and reduce the amount of services it provides. I just don't think it's necessary.

And whatever happens in Congress this year, I will fight to make sure that Montana's MAF program not only continues here at the Pioneer Medical Center, but in White Sulphur Springs and the other communities that need this kind of program.

CONCLUSION

But we can talk about that another day. For now, I just want to congratulate everyone here.

Sonny Todd on the Task Force.

Board Members Elaine Allestad, John Boe, Paula Curtain, Carolyn Osen and Jim Yuzeitis.

Lauri Cooney and Joe Hanson.

Dr. Ronald Healy and Mike Patterson.

And everyone here today, because the whole community has worked long and hard to make this happen.

Let's keep up the good work, and get on with the show.