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The Hill-AstraZeneca Breakfast Policy Briefing

Max S. Baucus

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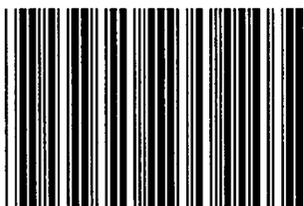
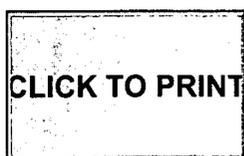
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BAUCUS

The Hill-AstraZeneca Breakfast Policy Briefing
Statement of Senator Max Baucus
May 7, 2009

Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about a cause that has become a calling — health care reform. Comprehensive health reform is my top priority in the Finance Committee. And that's because when I look at the numbers, they add up to one thing — a crisis.

Health care costs are skyrocketing. They are squeezing American families. They are leaving American businesses unable to compete in the global marketplace. Health care costs are forcing state and local governments to cut jobs and critical community programs. And they are driving up the Federal debt.

The numbers speak for themselves.

Between 2000 and 2008, health care premiums rose five times faster than wages. That's a crisis.

In just 7 years, most Americans will spend nearly half their income on health insurance. That's a crisis.

Uncompensated care forces the average family with insurance to pay more than \$1,000 a year in increased premiums. That's a crisis.

One and a half million families lose their homes each year to foreclosure because of unaffordable medical costs. That's a crisis.

While our major trading partners pay only 96 cents an hour for health care benefits, American manufacturers pay an average of \$2.38 an hour. That's a crisis.

The numbers say it all.

And that's why support for reforming the system is so strong. Business owners and executives, doctors and nurses, economists and policy makers all agree: The time to act is now.

In the Finance Committee, Senator Grassley and I have been working diligently on a plan to address our ailing health care system.

We are holding a series of roundtable discussions. These are discussions among health care policy experts, industry experts, and Finance Committee Senators on the best health care solutions.

This week, we held our second roundtable on expanding health care coverage to all Americans.

The experts all agreed that we have to make sure that all Americans have meaningful, affordable health care coverage. And, there was a good deal of agreement on how we might achieve that goal.

The experts agreed that the individual market is not working. They agreed that it need to be reformed. And they agreed that we need to provide assistance to make coverage affordable. I was heartened by the amount of agreement among the experts.

We are also holding meetings of Finance Committee Senators to walk through the options. These options will translate ideas from our roundtable discussions into policies that we can enact into law.

These meetings of Finance Committee Senators have been good opportunities for me to hear from other Senators. They've voiced their views on the issues that matter to them. And it has been a good opportunity for the Senators — Democrats and Republicans alike — to bring their ideas to the table.

We are all in this together. And we have to work together to find a solution. Working together, we will get a better bill. And working together, we will get a more sustainable law. So far, the mantra of working together has been a success.

And so far, our schedule is on track. These discussions are preparing us to be ready to mark up a bill in June. And they are preparing us to be ready to consider health care reform on the Senate floor before the August Recess. I intend to keep us on track to deliver a bill to President Obama to sign into law this year.

In my 30-plus years as a Senator, never has there been a moment like this. We have an opportunity now to change the course of our nation. We have an opportunity to leave a legacy for generations.

It won't be easy. This is the hardest challenge that I have ever faced in my career. To get this done, everyone is going to have to compromise a little. Everyone is going to have to keep an open mind. Folks cannot rush to take things off the table.

I'm encouraging people to keep their focus on the three things:

- lowering costs in the long run,**
- improving quality**
- and making sure that every American has quality affordable health care.**

Today, costs are so high because our system encourages more care, not better care. If we reform how we pay for health care, we can improve quality and reduce costs.

Today, there are not many safeguards in the health care system to ensure that Americans always receive the highest-quality care. Health care reform will invest in more research on top-quality care. It will make sure that the right information reaches doctors and other health care providers.

Today, millions of people go without health care, because they cannot get the coverage that they need. Reforming the insurance market will make sure that all Americans can purchase a decent health insurance policy, even if they have a pre-existing condition.

We are working to improve the health care system in areas that need work. But there are areas of our system that are working, too. People who like the coverage that they have right now will be able to keep it. And the goal is that costs will go down for those folks, too.

Health reform won't be easy. It's a huge undertaking. But it is a challenge that we cannot afford to ignore.

The numbers are clear: We're facing a crisis. We don't have time to waste.

Working together, we can respond. Working together, we can enact health care reform. And working together, we can deliver quality, affordable health care to all Americans.