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“Health Care: A State’s Perspective”

REMARKS BY GOVERNOR MARTIN O'MALLEY
AT THE NATIONAL LABOR COLLEGE

Silver Spring, Maryland
July 24, 2009

Thank you all very, very much. President Sweeney, thank you for that kind introduction and for all of your leadership on behalf of the working people of our State and the working people of our country.

I also want to thank our friends at the Kaiser Foundation.

In Maryland, we’ve partnered with our colleagues in organized labor to accomplish what I believe are very important things for working families in our State. Fred Mason was there every step of the way, along with Ernie Greco and so many of you who are leaders in the labor movement in Maryland.

What are some of the things that we’ve been able to accomplish in a short period of time? We were able to pass the nation’s first living wage law. We were able to pass Fair Share. We were able to pass unemployment protections for part-time employees when they lose their jobs. We were able to pass tough new reforms to crack down on businesses which misclassify their employees as contractors in order to avoid paying them a decent wage or to avoid covering their health care benefits. And that’s just the short list.

We’ve also made significant progress together on health care – this issue which really says something about who we are as a people. It says something about the soul of our country.

It was Hubert Humphrey who said that, quote *“the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life”* -- our fellow citizens, people who are vulnerable because of

chronic diseases or illness, people who are vulnerable economically, vulnerable of losing their homes because they can't pay for the care that they or their family might need.

I think all of us would agree that you can't be a society that respects and honors the dignity of every individual if we're content to allow 47 million of our neighbors to go without decent health care coverage.

You cannot be a society that believes there's no such thing as a spare American, if you're willing to allow a 12 year old boy to pass away because his parents couldn't afford to treat a toothache -- as happened here in our great State a couple years ago. Deamonte Driver had a toothache, the infection went to his brain and he died, because he couldn't get a toothache taken care of.

You cannot have a diverse and upwardly mobile middle-class if your citizens can't afford rising medical bills, can you? Or if families have to choose between buying prescription drugs for their parents or food for their children.

And you cannot reach your potential as a nation if small businesses cannot afford to provide health insurance to their workers and workers can't afford to provide health care for their families.

We're very, very fortunate, I think, to have a President with the courage that Barack Obama is displaying in this current climate. (Applause.)

He understand this, he believes this. He has the courage to engage in the only sort of leadership that's ever going to figure a way out of this problem and that is collaborative leadership. To be able to say, "look, here's the goal, let's all come together, let's leave our swords at the door, let's sit down and instead of talking about breaking one another, let's talk about fixing health care. And I welcome all good ideas."

We finally have an opportunity to pass meaningful national health care reform in our country. It couldn't come a moment too soon. It is not only a moral imperative, but it's also an economic imperative. I mean, how the heck are you going to produce things and manufacture things if the amount of health care that's baked into something makes it so much more expensive in a global marketplace.

So speaking as Governor of a State where 22 percent of our budget is dedicated to health care expenses, where our citizens, their employers and their government spend \$36 billion on health care each year, and where the rate of health care spending is outpacing the growth of our economy, I can personally attest to urgent need for Federal action.

We cannot afford to wait another decade or decades to combat rising costs, poor access and mediocre quality. And you know what? The technology is there in the here and now. It is combining with the public will and realization that is here now and will allow us to be able to move forward.

The President's leadership on this issue is also, I think, important for another reason and it is this: In a world where we face an array of new threats to our security -- whether it's bio-terror or global pandemic, or foreign chemical invasions of cocaine and heroin -- our efforts on public health are really connected and fundamental to our ability to protect the homeland and prepare for emergency situations.

I've been asked to give a couple of words today from a State's perspective on health care and I just want to use our brief time together to share a little bit about some of our experiences in Maryland.

FIGHTING FOR HEALTH CARE; PUTTING FAMILIES FIRST

We have been fighting for health care in Maryland, with the realization that getting over that goal line is going to require a national solution. But that does not absolve us from rolling up our sleeves and finding meaningful ways to extend better coverage to more people. And that's what we've been striving to do.

In Maryland, we're an America in miniature. Any of you who are familiar with Maryland know that we have a lot of diversity. And yet, for all the diversity which makes our State strong, our beliefs are all the same, really. A shared belief in the dignity of every individual, and a shared belief in our responsibility to advance the common good.

And from those shared beliefs comes our mission statement, which is: "to strengthen and grow the ranks of a diverse and upwardly mobile middle-class." That's the top line. Everything we do to improve public safety, everything we do to improve public health, everything we do to improve security, everything we do to expand opportunity, is all about strengthening and growing the ranks of an upwardly mobile middle-class.

Health care is connected to each one of those priorities. It's deeply interwoven within the greatest challenges that our country faces in the 21st Century: leadership in security, leadership in sustainability, and leadership in skills -- that is the talents, the education of our people.

The notion that every child deserves a healthy start is something that I think most of us, as Americans, embrace. Perhaps all of us as human beings embrace that.

It's a notion which has inspired our State to set the big goal of becoming the first in the nation to eradicate childhood hunger. It's a notion which has driven us, as well, to fight to provide health care coverage to tens of thousands of additional children since we took office two and-a-half years ago.

One of our top children's health priorities was inspired by that tragedy involving Deamonte Driver. And so now we actually do have a dental benefit for economically disadvantaged kids so that they can actually get the attention they need, so that sort of tragedy doesn't happen again.

Additionally, we've increased incentives to dentists to get them to provide services to more vulnerable kids. We developed a training program at the University of Maryland Dental School. We're investing in new public dental clinics and so on.

At the other end of the spectrum we've also made it a priority to protect our vulnerable seniors by closing the Medicare donut hole. Donut holes are good things if you're losing weight, they're not good things if you have to pay on your own for your prescription drugs.

To assist Marylanders of all ages, we're one of a handful of States that has chosen to offer an incentive program for small businesses that want to join the ranks of the insured. Thus far, we're assisting nearly 200 small businesses and we believe we can leverage this initiative to serve as many as 10,000 Marylanders, whose employers will otherwise be a part of the increasingly growing ranks of businesses that just can't meet their bottom line and cover the rising cost of health care and health care inflation.

And, with a government that works, we've been able to expand health care coverage even in difficult times to nearly 45,000 Marylanders, who previously did not have health insurance.

LOWERING COSTS, INCREASING EFFICIENCY & IMPROVING QUALITY

Our over-arching goal in the State is to keep costs down and efficiency up, while still constantly improving the quality of care -- something that I know all of you have been talking about and will continue to talk about for the remainder of this day.

Another strategy that we've found promising is "pay for performance," which is based on the simple idea that we can encourage innovation, improve the quality of health care in our State and reduce costs if we incentivize hospitals and providers to show improvement.

It's an approach that we're implementing in a State which is actually a manageable size -- looking at California, I didn't appreciate fully just how manageable we actually are. (Laughter.)

HEALTH IT

But we are a State of manageable size and we also are a State that has more PHDs per capita than any other state in the union. Part of that, we think, of course is attributable to places like Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland. But the others are big brain mathematicians who work at NSA or used to work at NSA and now work for contractors.

So high technology, IT, is one of our core strengths, one of our "economic and talent strengths" as a State.

We are working to leverage this strength by moving forward with health information technology, "Health IT" -- digitizing medical records and utilizing technology which allows information to flow safely from one system to another. We believe, as I think all of you believe, that it will be possible to reduce errors, it will be possible to improve quality of care and it will be possible to save our State millions of dollars while we're at it.

Health IT is an area where President Obama has demonstrated significant leadership, making it part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. I know that we have many people here who have followed the goings-on of our Federal government for a long time. Have you ever seen another President in the history of the United States get something through as quickly as President Obama did with the Recovery and Reinvestment Act? And as comprehensive as it was? (Applause.)

I saw a Governor of another major state, it was actually Governor Schwarzenegger, saying what he'd had to bail out the Federal government. Pardon me, but that's horse hockey. If President Obama had not gotten through the Recovery and Reinvestment Act when he did four months ago, California would already be at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

Every state in America would be struggling. There would be far more unemployment than there is right now if President Obama had not acted.

The President's vision calls for the creation of a national health information database. In Maryland, we're building what we hope will be the cornerstone of that, it might even be the nation's first comprehensive sustainable health information exchange, linking together all physicians, hospitals, medical laboratories and pharmacies in our State. (Applause.)

And it's a consortium led by some pretty significant players, including Johns Hopkins and the University of Maryland, Erickson and others.

We're basing our efforts on the simple notion that IT can help us connect our resources to the problems. It can help us connect our shared efforts to the individuals that are the most in need of it. We've seen already how that can work when it comes to public safety. We're doing that every day in every way in Maryland.

Isn't it remarkable how quickly drug dealers embrace new technologies and how slow police departments and governments are to connect?

We're basing our efforts on an initiative we created to fight crime called "Dashboard." Dashboard integrates data from our prison system, parole and probation, firearms registries, our fingerprints systems, mug shots, DNA, motor vehicle records, and other databases which provide law enforcement and government officials with information that can be essential to saving lives and preventing crime. In some cases we are having to take data stored on 3x5 index cards and bring it into the digital age. The key here is that we're able to safely and securely share important information in real-time.

As General Alexander of the NSA says, "*if we only knew what we knew.*" If we only knew what we knew. How many more lives might be saved if we only knew what we knew?

That same principle is really at the core of what this drive -- that I know all of you are supportive of -- on Health IT is all about. And we hope that Maryland will be a State that leads the way.

HEALTH CARE & HOMELAND SECURITY

Our recent efforts to monitor H1N1 were a reminder of how something as basic as sharing information can be vital to the public's health and safety.

And fundamental to all of this is converting all of those paper records to electronic records. Sharing information is fundamental not only to our efforts to contain costs and improve care, but we believe in Maryland that it also has an inherent value to our efforts to protect

the homeland and to prepare our State for emergency situations,... to better gauge surge capacity, to understand what's needed and to understand in a timely fashion.

We now have a statewide bio-surveillance system. We had a number of holes in it before H1N1 came around, but now we have a statewide bio-surveillance system. Forty-six acute care hospitals now all participate in ESSENCE, so that we can instantly monitor symptoms as they show up and hopefully get a one or two day jump on it, on spikes. By sharing emergency room information we have the ability to respond quickly to epidemics as they move throughout our State. And should, God forbid, we ever face a bio-terror attack, that's a very, very important asset for that as well.

CONCLUSION

I want to just conclude by encouraging all of you not to give up on this debate and not to become pessimistic just because you look at the news and some days it seems that this progress is veering off into politics, rather than to the goal at hand. Folks, if this were easy it would have been done 50 years ago. Just because it's not easy doesn't mean that it doesn't need to get done. And just because it's difficult doesn't mean that it won't get done. It's amazing what happens if we stick to the goal, if we keep pounding on those beliefs that unite us.

I think people are smart and I think they're fair. And I think in the long-term they also figure out what's going on, they figure out whether their representatives are focused on breaking one another's politics or on fixing health care.

There's not a single family in America that doesn't want better quality and more affordable health care.

We're coming off of eight years of a President who was very adept at belittling government and undermining any public confidence in our ability as a people to still get big things done through our government.

But we're turning the corner on that. It's not an easy time, it's a difficult time, but I believe that God loves the United States of America and I think we have the right leadership in the White House to pull us through this. And he certainly doesn't look like a man that's going to give up.

And none of us should give up either. Don't be cowed and don't be backed down by the fear mongers and those that pander to the lowest common denominator. We have a higher denominator that we aspire to.

The ancient Greeks said that *"healing is not only a matter of time, but is sometimes a matter of opportunity."*

That opportunity is now.

As Americans, we are fortunate to be led by President Obama, who is willing to seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to get something meaningful done on health care.

To have the men and women of organized labor all across this country being in the vanguard of this movement -- this is something important, not just for us in the here and now, it's important for our kids, it's important for the future. And we're very, very fortunate to have the dedicated work of Kaiser and the AFL-CIO and so many of you to share this commitment that all of us have to the families and to the health of the families of the United States.

Thank you all very, very much. (Applause.)