



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

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Baucus Urges Swift Passage of Katrina Health Package

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) Today, U.S. Senator Max Baucus, ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, delivered the following speech on the Senate floor urging passage of S. 1716, the Emergency Health Care Relief Act.

Baucus drafted the legislation with Chairman Grassley of the Senate Finance Committee. A tax relief measure co-authored by Baucus and Grassley was signed into law by President Bush last Friday. A letter sent to Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt from Senators Baucus and Grassley supporting S. 1716 is attached. The statement follows:

Floor Statement of U.S. Senator Max Baucus Urging Passage of Hurricane Katrina Health Relief

Mr. President, I come to the floor once again to insist that the Senate act on the emergency health care needs of Katrina survivors. The Senate must pass the Katrina health package that Chairman Grassley and I put together. To help the victims of Katrina, we must pass this bill today.

Mr. President, this legislation has broad support. This morning, the Finance Committee heard testimony from the Governors of the states that suffered most from this massive disaster. Governor Blanco of Louisiana supports our bill. Governor Barbour of Mississippi supports our bill. Governor Riley of Alabama supports our bill. To help these Governors, and to help these states, we must pass this bill today.

Also at the Finance Committee, Senator Lincoln told of a woman with diabetes whom our bill would help. This woman escaped the flooding by riding on a refrigerator. She needs medical help. But she was told that because she did not have children, she did not fit into one of the categories that would qualify her for Medicaid. To help her, we must pass this bill today.

On Monday, I told the Senate about Tina Eagerton, who fled Louisiana when 7 months pregnant, but could not find a Florida doctor who would accept her Louisiana Medicaid card. To help Tina Eagerton, we must pass this bill today.

I have told the Senate about Rosalind Breaux, who has colon cancer, and was scheduled for her third round of chemotherapy on August 31, a day after flooding began, while her husband has lost his job and there are questions about his insurance. To help Rosalind Breaux, we must pass this bill today.

The administration sent a letter last night. I have it right here. The administration claims that it can provide “relief without the need for congressional action” through its new Medicaid waiver policy.

But the administration’s waivers would fall short of what our legislation provides. Let me cite three ways that the administration’s policy would fall short.

First, the administration’s waivers limit eligibility for Medicaid coverage to only those groups of people who have traditionally been eligible for Medicaid. Adults without children, no matter how poor they are or how much they need health care, would not be covered under the administration’s policy.

The woman with diabetes would not be covered. In this time of crisis, that just makes no sense. Limiting access to benefits in this way would mean leaving tens of thousands of Katrina’s victims without aid.

After Katrina, Louisiana dispatched Medicaid eligibility workers to more than 200 shelters to enroll evacuees in Medicaid. Of the 4,000 potentially eligible families screened in these shelters, more than 1 in 5 were screened out as ineligible. They did not meet Louisiana’s traditional eligibility rules.

And 1 of every 3 people who have applied for Medicaid in Louisiana following Katrina have been denied coverage. Most did not meet the traditional eligibility rules.

Adult Katrina survivors need access to health care. A recent survey of Katrina evacuees in Houston shelters found that most of the adult evacuees without children were uninsured. Among those, more than 40 percent reported having a chronic condition. And a third reported having trouble getting the prescription drugs that they need.

Differentiating among individuals during this time of need is just not right. Hurricane Katrina did not differentiate. Katrina hit all the residents of the Gulf Coast, hard. We should not differentiate in our efforts to help those in need.

The second key difference between the administration’s policy and what our bill does is the funds provided to defray the cost of uncompensated care that thousands of health care providers across our nation are giving to Katrina survivors. The administration has said it will provide an uncompensated care fund. But the administration has not given any further information about how much would be provided. The administration has not given information about how it would be spent.

By contrast, our bill includes an uncompensated care fund of up to \$800 million. That fund could be spent on compensating those health care providers who have seen a dramatic increase or drop in their patient load as a result of Katrina. The administration promises. But under our bill there would be no doubt.

Third, our bill would provide 100 percent federal funding for all evacuees covered under Medicaid, wherever they are, and for the affected states. By contrast, the administration’s waiver policy promises to “make states whole.” But I have serious questions about how they could deliver on that promise, without legislation. It is unclear that the administration could, under its current statutory authority, provide these additional funds to states. I have no doubt that it intends to. I just do not believe that it has the legal authority to do so.

At the same time, the administration has asked the three most affected states to sign memoranda of understanding making them financially responsible for paying the cost of evacuees’ care in other states. Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama need our help, not more bills to pay.

Mr. President, it is an outrage that a small number of willful Senators continue to stall this bill. Hurricane Katrina's health costs continue to spill in waves across the Gulf Coast region. Victims continue to suffer without proper medical care.

Our bill would restore immediate access to basic health care. Our bill would relieve the financial burden health-care providers have shouldered.

Mr. President, we must act. And thus, at the appropriate time, I intend to join with my Colleagues in asking consent for the Senate to pass our bill.

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