

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be permitted to proceed in morning business until the Senator from West Virginia comes to the floor to give his statement. I ask unanimous consent for only 5 minutes or until such time as the Senator arrives.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

PREVENTING FRAUD AND ABUSE WITHIN THE MEDICARE PROGRAM

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, as the Congress grapples with the problem of maintaining the solvency of the Medicare program and with proposals to expand Medicare coverage, we must not overlook a critical problem that threatens the financial integrity of this vital social program, which provides health care services to 38 million older and disabled Americans. I am talking, Mr. President, about the problem of waste, fraud and abuse in this program.

The Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which I chair, has undertaken an extensive investigation into Medicare fraud.

At our first hearing last summer, we learned from the inspector general of the Department of Health and Human Services that an astounding \$23 billion a year is lost to waste, fraud, abuse and other improper payments.

In more recent hearings, Mr. President, we discovered that career criminals, with absolutely no background in health care, were able to be certified as Medicare providers and enter the system for the sole purpose of ripping it off.

For example, one case that the subcommittee investigated involved a totally fictitious durable medical equipment company that was located in the middle of the runway of the Miami International Airport, if it had in fact existed.

I am not talking here, Mr. President, about legitimate providers or innocent mistakes or honest billing errors. I am talking about outright fraud. We need to do a better job of screening providers and controlling their entry into the Medicare system.

Mr. President, the vast majority of health care professionals are dedicated and caring individuals who deliver vital services to millions of Americans across the country. They are as appalled by this kind of fraud as any of us.

Recently, I met with the members of the Home Care Alliance of Maine con-

cerning the issue of fraud in the health care industry. The Home Care Alliance of Maine has a longstanding commitment to ensuring the highest quality home health care in the State of Maine. It has adopted a policy of zero tolerance on fraud and abuse in the home health industry. Its members recognize that unscrupulous home health providers not only tarnish the reputation of legitimate health care professionals, but that these unscrupulous individuals jeopardize the very availability of Medicare.

I ask unanimous consent the position statement of the Home Care Alliance of Maine be printed in the RECORD so my colleagues and organizations representing home health care agencies across the United States can have the benefit of the very fine work this organization has done.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

MEDICARE FRAUD AND ABUSE POSITION STATEMENT

The Home Care Alliance of Maine membership has a long-standing commitment to provide the highest quality of care to the elderly and infirm of our state. Even one unscrupulous home health provider that fails to maintain the values and ethics that are at the core of home care jeopardizes the viability of ongoing access to appropriate home health services.

We recognize that the responsibility for resolving concerns of fraud and abuse lies with the government, the home health industry, and individual providers. We further believe that different strategies are needed to clearly distinguish deliberately fraudulent practice from unintentional errors that can occur in the interpretation of the complex and often vague rules and regulations in the Medicare home health care benefit.

The Home Care Alliance of Maine firmly believes that fraud and abuse can be eliminated and errors corrected when addressed by comprehensive and concerted efforts among the industry, government, individual providers, and consumers. This partnership is critical to achieve the mutually beneficial goal of assuring integrity in administration of the Medicare home health care benefit.

We further believe that education of consumers and advocacy groups is central to ensuring trust in legitimate providers of home health services. It is only through open and public discussion about the basic structure of changes in the Medicare home health care benefit that consumers and others can confidently distinguish blatant fraud and abuse from innocent errors in interpretation and provision of services. Informed consumers and their advocates can then be reassured by their choice of licensed and certified home health agencies.

The Home Care Alliance of Maine supports:

1. Zero tolerance for fraud and abuse of the Medicare home health care benefit.
2. Total cooperation with prompt and responsible investigation and resolution of any errors in interpretation and application of the Medicare home health care benefit.
3. Medicare coverage and reimbursement standards in language that is understandable and readily accessible to providers and consumers through various means, e.g. federal depository libraries, state regulatory agencies, trade associations, fiscal intermediaries, and the Internet.
4. Enhancement of education and training of home health agencies through joint efforts with regulators.

5. Credentialing and competency testing standards for government contractors and federal regulators responsible for issuing Medicare determinations.

6. Mandatory screening and background checks on all applicants for Medicare certification as a home health agency.

7. Development and provision of a summary of program coverage requirements for consumers and prospective consumers of Medicare home health care benefits.

8. Enhancement and increased accessibility of the consumer reporting hotline for suspected fraud and abuse.

The Home Care Alliance of Maine is committed to working with its membership, state and federal regulatory bodies, and consumer advocacy groups to ensure the integrity of the Medicare home health care benefit in Maine.

Ms. COLLINS. I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this issue.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. COVERDELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF MEMBERS OF ARMED FORCES HELD AS PRISONERS OF WAR DURING VIETNAM CONFLICT

Mr. COVERDELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Senate Resolution 177, submitted earlier today by Senators COVERDELL, CLELAND and others.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A resolution (S. Res. 177) recognizing, and calling on all Americans to recognize, the courage and sacrifice of the members of the Armed Forces held as prisoners of war during the Vietnam conflict and stating that the American people will not forget that more than 2,000 members of the Armed Forces remain unaccounted for from the Vietnam conflict and will continue to press for the fullest possible accounting for all such members whose whereabouts are unknown.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection to the immediate consideration of the resolution?

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the resolution.

Mr. COVERDELL. Mr. President, colleagues, I rise on this 25th anniversary of the return of the first American POWs from Vietnam to recognize the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia and the many years and tireless hours Ann Mills Griffiths, the National League of Families' Executive Director, and JoAnne Shirley, Chairwoman of the League's Board and a fellow Georgian, have spent fighting for the return of American POW's and MIA's.

The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia was incorporated in the District of Columbia on May 28, 1970.