

along with 21 of my Senate colleagues from diverse political, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds, a bipartisan and bicameral bill to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Senate Judiciary Committee has had a very busy year. Last Fall, while the House was beginning its hearings on the Voting Rights Act, we were just finishing our hearings and final vote on the nomination of John G. Roberts, Jr. to be Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Soon after that, we began preparing for hearings on the nomination of Harriet Miers to replace Justice O'Connor on the Supreme Court. When that nomination was withdrawn, we had to start over with a new nominee, Samuel Alito. We held hearings for Justice Alito in January, and since then, we've had a very full schedule which has included several hearings on the legality of the President's domestic spying program and, of course, countless hours marking up comprehensive immigration legislation.

So, we are just now beginning our work on the Voting Rights Act. But our relatively late start here in the Senate should not be interpreted to suggest that the Voting Rights Act is not a priority compared to the other matters we have had to address. To the contrary, the actions we take with respect to the Voting Rights Act—like the actions we took during the Supreme Court confirmation hearings—will dramatically impact the rights and lives of American citizens for generations to come.

The Voting Rights Act has been hailed as the single most effective piece of civil rights legislation that we have ever passed. The Act does not simply guarantee the right to vote, but it ensures the effective exercise of that fundamental right. In 1965, when President Johnson signed the bill into law, there were only 300 minorities elected to State, local, or federal office. Today, just 4 decades later, there are some 10,000 minorities serving as elected public officials.

Leaders from both parties, including President Bush and Attorney General Gonzales, have said they support reauthorization. Today, leaders from both parties of both houses of Congress have come together to introduce this reauthorization bill.

The magic of the Voting Rights Act is apparent in my own hometown, New York City. New York City is one of the most diverse cities in the country, and the Voting Rights Act has been extremely effective in ensuring that all of our citizens are able to participate equally in the political process. But many of the Act's successes in New York have come only since the last time we renewed its major provisions.

For example, the first African American mayor of New York City wasn't elected until 1989, and the first African American wasn't elected to statewide office until 1994. In 2002, the first Asian American was elected to the New York City Council. And finally, just last

year, a mayoral candidate became the first Latino to win his party's nomination.

These strides are important, but they are too few and too recent to say for certain that the goals of the Voting Rights Act have been met. There is still a lot of work to do, and as a member of the Judiciary Committee, I look forward to reviewing the evidence and testimony that is going to be presented at our hearings in the weeks to come, and to working with my colleagues from both Houses and on both sides of the aisle to ensure that this bill is passed well before the deadline.

#### SMALL PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITIES PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT

Mr. SUNUNU. Mr. President, I rise to speak on legislation I introduced yesterday, the Small Public Housing Authorities Paperwork Reduction Act. This legislation is an important step toward alleviating some of the burden placed on our Nation's smallest public housing authorities. PHAs play an important role in meeting the housing needs of the Nation's low-income individuals, families, seniors, and the disabled. Unfortunately, they face a challenge when balancing the housing needs of those they serve with the, oftentimes, consuming and duplicative reporting requirements placed upon them. The legislation I am introducing today seeks to address just one annual report that will free up a significant amount of time and resources, allowing housing authorities to focus more attention on the individuals they serve.

Specifically, this legislation would exempt PHAs with 500 or fewer public housing units and any number of section 8 vouchers from the requirement of submitting an annual plan to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The 1992 Public Housing Reform Act required PHAs to submit separate 5-year and annual plans to HUD. The redundancy of the annual plan process creates an undue burden for small PHAs by requiring them to provide identical information to HUD every 12 months. For example, an annual plan outlines a PHA's goals, policies, eligibility guidelines, and other information that is unlikely to change from year to year. Under this bill, small PHAs would only be required to submit their 5-year plan—a more appropriate timeline for reevaluating their goals and policies—to better allow them to use scarce human and financial resources to directly serve the needs of their communities. Additionally, this bill would only exempt those PHAs that have demonstrated compliance with HUD regulations. PHAs that have been designated by HUD as troubled would not be exempted from the annual plan.

It is also important to note that PHAs would still be required to conduct an annual meeting in which residents and community members are in-

cluded in the planning and development of a housing authority's objectives and priorities. My legislation makes certain that residents have an opportunity to comment on any changes to the goals, objectives, and policies of the agency. Housing authorities are also required to notify tenants of any proposed changes at least 45 days before the public hearing occurs. The annual public meeting, in combination with State and local public meeting requirements, will continue to ensure that any changes made to a PHA's policies are well vetted, with particular attention paid to resident concerns.

PHA directors in my State and across the country contend that this legislation is a significant step toward reducing the excessive paperwork and reporting requirements that burden their agencies. I agree, that by mitigating some of this burden, we will allow PHAs to focus more time and energy for their mission-driven service to their housing residents. Not all PHAs have the time, staff, or resources available to complete these annual plans. Some PHAs have had to hire outside consultants to complete the plans, a costly expense for these agencies. Given the fiscal constraints PHAs are facing, it is more important now than ever to give housing authorities the flexibility needed to work within these budget constraints. This legislation is one simple way Congress can assist in providing needed relief to PHAs.

My colleague, Congressman RANDY NEUGEBAUER, has introduced similar legislation which passed in the House of Representatives on December 13, 2005, by a vote of 387 to 2. The overwhelming support in the House for such an initiative makes very clear the need for this type of relief. I am hopeful my colleagues in the Senate will also see the value of providing paperwork reduction for those agencies that have demonstrated their ability to comply with current regulations.

Finally, I am pleased to have the support of the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority and local agencies across my State in this effort. New Hampshire's PHAs continue to do an exceptional job of providing for the housing needs of those who need it most. State and local housing agencies perform an invaluable community function by securing housing for families and individuals in need. I remain committed to working further with them throughout this legislative process and to reducing unnecessary federal regulatory burdens for housing.

#### COVER THE UNINSURED WEEK

Mr. KOHL. Mr. President, this week has been designated Cover the Uninsured Week. It is week that we mark every year to spur our Nation to act to address the growing number of Americans who lack health insurance. Sadly, that this has become an annual event shows that we have made little

progress. I hope this year will be different, and that the administration and the congressional leadership will finally make health care a priority.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more than 45 million Americans lack health insurance—that is one out of every six people. Wisconsin fares slightly better with 11 percent of our population without health coverage.

These numbers have increased every year since 1999. All across the country, families and businesses are struggling to afford basic health care, and too many are losing the battle.

Government joined the fray, with some success, in the past. In 1997, Congress created the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which led to the BadgerCare program in Wisconsin. Since SCHIP's inception, the program has provided medical coverage and care to millions of children throughout the Nation who otherwise would have gone without. In addition, States have stepped in to provide a safety net for the poorest of the poor through Medicaid and high-risk insurance pools.

Despite these gains, many working families still need help. According to a report by the nonpartisan Commonwealth Fund, 41 percent of working-age Americans with incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000 a year were uninsured for at least part of 2005. This is a dramatic increase from 2001, when just 28 percent of those with moderate incomes were uninsured.

This is an alarming statistic but not surprising. Skyrocketing health care costs have rendered insurance unaffordable to most families and businesses. In 1996, annual premiums for employers grew by 0.8 percent; by 2003, that growth averaged 13.9 percent. Last year, the average premium jumped 9.2 percent, and some areas of Wisconsin saw increases of as much as 24 percent.

All employers struggle with the costs of health care, but none more than the small employer. Many have stopped offering health insurance altogether, swelling the number of uninsured full-time workers.

Congress could help employers to continue providing health insurance by passing the Small Employers Health Benefits Program Act, which I cosponsored. The legislation, modeled after the health insurance system available to Federal workers, allows small employers to band together to purchase health insurance for their employees and negotiate better prices. It also gives employers a refundable tax credit to help with the costs of providing insurance for low-income employees.

Helping employers afford health care premiums is only part of the answer; we also must tackle the problem of escalating health care costs driven largely by the rising cost of prescription drugs. Americans pay the highest prices in the world for medicines sold in other countries for a fraction of the cost. I support reforms such as allowing Americans to purchase less expen-

sive prescription drugs from Canada and other countries with strong protections to ensure the safety of those medicines. I have also cosponsored legislation to speed to market generic drugs, which cost much less than their brand-name counterparts. And I believe we must allow Medicare to negotiate directly with drug companies for lower prices for seniors participating in the new Medicare drug benefit.

America is the leader of the world in health care innovation. We have the highest per-capita spending on health care of any developed nation, but we rank at the bottom when it comes to health insurance coverage.

That is inexcusable. For too long we have said the right things, but failed to take concrete action. Let's make the next year different. Next year, we should spend this week celebrating real progress rather than lamenting another year of inaction. Another year of empty rhetoric and pointing fingers will get us no closer to the goal of ensuring all Americans reliable, affordable health coverage. I stand ready to work with those on both sides of the aisle who are interested in making a real difference in the coming year.

#### ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

##### RECOGNIZING TAFT HIGH SCHOOL

• Mrs. FEINSTEIN. Mr. President, I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the students of the Taft High School Academic Decathlon Team on becoming this year's 2006 National Champions.

Each year, the U.S. Academic Decathlon tests our Nation's best and brightest in a host of subjects including calculus, writing, impromptu speaking, music, and art history. The competition is consistently among the most rigorous in the country.

Amassing an outstanding 51,659 points out of a possible 60,000, Taft High School earned one of the most sweeping and significant victories in recent decathlon history. As one decathlon official noted, "I've never seen anything like this."

These students could not have achieved this memorable accomplishment without the tremendous support and encouragement from their dedicated teachers and parents.

I commend the team coach Dr. Arthur Berchin and Taft High School faculty and administrators for their invaluable guidance, and I applaud the participants' parents for their unwavering dedication and commitment to helping these students reach their full potential.

I would also like to recognize team members Zachary Ellington, Michael Farrell, Farhan Khan, David Lopez, David Novgorodsky, Julia Rebrova, Atish Sawant, Dean Schaffer, and Monica Schettler for their tremendous poise and determination. I encourage them to continue the hard work and

perseverance that have brought them this victory. They are wonderful examples of true scholarship, and have made Taft High School, the county of Los Angeles, and the State of California very proud.

What is more extraordinary is that each Taft High School team member placed first, second, or third in all ten of their individual events, totaling 43 medals and capturing 7 of the top 9 awards for individual performance.

Equally important, the Taft High School Academic Decathlon Team is one strengthened by diversity, including students from Russia and Bangladesh. Good schools, like good societies and good families, celebrate and cherish diversity.

Many of these students have decided to take their scholastic successes to the next level, and will attend a myriad of prestigious colleges and universities in the fall. All participants have already taken undergraduate-level courses, and their passionate pursuit of academic excellence is indeed noteworthy.

Once again, I would like to honor the entire Taft High School Academic Decathlon Team on a well-deserved victory. Each of these students holds wonderful promise and I applaud them for their many achievements. Their futures are bright and their performance will continue to serve as an inspiration to us all. •

##### HAL DAVID CELEBRATES HIS 85TH BIRTHDAY

• Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, May 25th marks the 85th birthday of an extraordinary American artist—Hal David. Hal is one of America's most prolific and beloved lyricists, and I congratulate him as he celebrates this birthday and a lifetime of memorable songs.

Hal David's music has been entertaining millions for generations. His collaborations with Burt Bacharach on songs performed by Dionne Warwick are legendary. He has won the hearts of music lovers of all ages, and has earned 20 gold records, several Grammys, and an Academy Award.

Over the years he has also earned the immense respect of his colleagues nationally and internationally. He was elected to the Songwriter's Hall of Fame and awarded their prestigious Johnny Mercer Award. He received the Grammy Trustee Award from the Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, and the Ivor Novello Award from the British Performing Rights Society.

He has written film scores including "The April Fools" and "A House is Not a Home." His brilliant works for the theater include "Promises, Promises," which received a Grammy Award and a Tony Award nomination.

Hal has been an inspiring advocate for young songwriters as well. He is a member of the board of directors of ASCAP and formerly served as its