

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