

years. That bill is caught up in controversy and is going nowhere. The President has said he would have to veto it. The provision in there relative to Medicare and Medicaid would be lost in that process.

It has been reported in the newspapers, and I think it is probably accurate, that the leadership has pulled away from that tax bill now and believes it cannot pass. But we would make a serious mistake if we backed off from our commitment to deal with Medicare and Medicaid before we adjourn this Congress. I think there is a will and there is a way.

I have spoken with the representative from the White House, Mr. Lew, who heads up the Office of Management and Budget, and my colleague and friend, the Speaker of the House DENNIS HASTER, who understands the importance of this issue to the State of Illinois. I have talked to my colleagues on this floor. We clearly can achieve this. In achieving it, we can send back a message not only to rural hospitals, which frankly are facing the ruin of declining revenues at a time when they are trying to keep their doors open, but also hospitals in the inner cities and hospitals across America, teaching hospitals, and others that rely on these reimbursements.

I urge my colleagues, as we consider the next Congress, let's not forget the remaining agenda of this Congress. It is not enough to pack our bags, wish everyone a happy holiday, and head home. There are important items still to be resolved. We were elected and took an oath of office to resolve this. No excuse will do at this point. Let us pass those pending appropriations bills, make the compromises necessary to do so, and not forget our responsibility under Medicare and Medicaid across the United States to seniors, the disabled, and the disadvantaged, who rely on those programs for quality health care.

I think it can be done. I hope my colleagues join me in making certain we make that effort as we close this session of the Congress.

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is closed.

BANKRUPTCY REFORM ACT OF 2000—CONFERENCE REPORT

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will now

resume consideration of the conference report to accompany H.R. 2415, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

Conference report to accompany the bill (H.R. 2415) to enhance security of United States missions and personnel overseas, to authorize appropriations for the Department of State for fiscal year 2000, and for other purposes.

Mr. WELLSTONE. Mr. President, it is my understanding that we are now in debate on the bankruptcy bill; is that correct?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

Mr. WELLSTONE. I thank the Chair.

Mr. President, I yield myself, from Senator LEAHY's time, 30 minutes.

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

Mr. WELLSTONE. I am sorry, I have my own time.

Mr. President, The proponents of this bill argue that people file because they want to get out of their obligations, because they're untrustworthy, because they're dishonest, because there is no stigma in filing for bankruptcy.

But any look at the data tells you otherwise. We know that in the vast majority of cases it is a drastic step taken by families in desperate financial circumstances and overburdened by debt. The main income earner may have lost his or her job. There may be sudden illness or a terrible accident requiring medical care.

Specifically we know that nearly half of all debtors report that high medical costs forced them into bankruptcy—this is an especially serious problem for the elderly. But when you think about it, a medical crisis can be a double financial whammy for any family. First there are the high costs associated with treatment of serious health problem. Costs that may not be fully covered by insurance, and certainly the over 30 million Americans without health insurance are especially vulnerable. But a serious accident or illness may disable—at least for a time—the primary wage earner in the household. Even if it isn't the person who draws the income, a parent may have to take significant time to care for a sick or disabled child. Or a son or daughter may need to care for an elderly parent. This means a loss in income. It means more debt and the inability to pay that debt.

Are people overwhelmed with medical debt or sidelined by illness deadbeats? This bill assumes they are. For example, it would force them into credit counseling before they could file—as if a serious illness or disability is something that can be counseled away.

Women single filers are now the largest group in bankruptcy, and are one third of all filers. They are also the fastest growing. Since 1981, the number of women filing alone increased by more than 700 percent. A woman single

parent has a 500 percent greater likelihood of filing for bankruptcy than the population generally. Single women with children often earn far less than single men aside for the difficulties and costs of raising children alone. Divorce is also a major factor in bankruptcy. Income drops, women, again, are especially hard hit. They may not have worked prior to the divorce, and now have custody of the children.

Are single women with children deadbeats? This bill assumes they are. The new non-dischargeability of credit card debt will hit hard those women who use the cards to tide them over after a divorce until their income stabilizes. And the "safe harbor" in the conference report which proponents argue will shield low and moderate income debtors from the means test will not benefit many single mothers who need help the most because it is based on the combined income of the debtor and the debtor's spouse, even if they are separated, the spouse is not filing for bankruptcy, and the spouse is providing no support for the debtor and her children. In other words, a single mother who is being deprived of needed support from a well-off spouse is further harmed by this bill, which will deem the full income of that spouse available to pay debts for determination of whether the safe harbor and means test applies.

Mr. President, you will hear my colleagues talk about high economic growth and low unemployment and wonder how so many people could be in circumstances that would require them to file for bankruptcy. Well, the rosy statistics mask what has been modest real wage growth at the same time the debt burden on many families has skyrocketed. And it also masks what has been real pain in certain industries and certain communities as the economies restructure. Even temporary job loss may be enough to overwhelm a family that carries significant loans and often the reality is that a new job may be at a lower wage level—making a previously manageable debt burden unworkable.

So what does this bill do to keep people who undergo these wrenching experiences out of bankruptcy? Nothing. Zero. Tough luck. Instead, this conference report just makes the fresh start of bankruptcy harder to achieve. But this doesn't change anyone's circumstances, this doesn't change the fact that these folks no longer earn enough to sustain their debt. Mr. President, there is not one thing in this so called bankruptcy reform bill that would promote economic security in working families.

When you push the rhetoric aside, one thing becomes clear: The bankruptcy system is a critical safety net for working families in this country. It is a difficult demoralizing process, but for nearly all who decide to file, it