Good morning. Four years ago, I challenged America to end welfare as we know it, to require work, promote responsible parenting, shift the system from dependence to independence. Just a few days after I took office, I met with the Nation's 50 Governors, and I urged every one of them to send me a welfare reform plan that would help to meet that challenge. In return, I pledged to waive outmoded or counter-productive Federal rules that get in the way of reform.

Most of the Governors took me up on that deal. So in the last 3 years, my administration has granted 38 States welfare reform waivers, clearing away Federal rules and regulations to permit States to build effective welfare reforms of their own. The State-based reform we've encouraged has brought work and responsibility
back to the lives of 75 percent of the Americans on welfare.

We're doing a lot more than signing waivers. We've also pressed ahead on fundamental reforms to make the welfare system reflect the basic values that have stood up so well for so long, that if you bring a child into this world, you must take responsibility for that child; that Government will not subsidize irresponsible or reckless behavior; that welfare is a second chance, not a way of life.

That's why I signed a Presidential order to require Federal employees to pay child support and increased Federal efforts to enforce child support orders across State lines. I toughened sanctions on welfare and food stamp recipients who refuse to work. I took action earlier this month to require teen mothers to stay in school and sign personal responsibility contracts if they are to receive welfare benefits. That's also why I sent Congress a sweeping welfare reform plan that would do all this and more.

Our hard work is paying off. America is in the midst of what the New York Times has called a quiet revolution in welfare reform under our administration. The number of Americans on welfare has dropped by 1.3 million since I took office in January 1993. Food stamp rolls are down by even more, and so are teen pregnancy rates. What numbers are up? Well, child support collections have jumped 40 percent, and the number of people who are required to work as a condition for receiving welfare is also way up.

Today I'm pleased to report that two States, Wisconsin and Maryland, are adding momentum to this quiet revolution. Last week, Wisconsin submitted to me for approval the outlines of a sweeping welfare reform plan, one of the boldest yet attempted in America, and I'm encouraged by what I've seen so far.

Under the Wisconsin plan, people on welfare who can work must work immediately. The State will see to it that the work is there, in private sector jobs that can be subsidized if necessary or in community service jobs if there are no private jobs available. The State says it will also see to it that families have health care and child care, so that parents can go to work without worrying about what will happen to their children. But then they must go to work, or they won't get paid. If they do work, of course, they'll have the dignity of earning a paycheck, not a welfare check. The plan would send a clear message to teen parents as well. If you're a minor with a baby, you'll receive benefits only if you stay in school, live at home, and turn your life around.

All in all, Wisconsin has the makings of a solid, bold welfare reform plan. We should get it done. I pledge that my administration will work with Wisconsin to make an effective transition to a new vision of welfare based on work, that protects children and does right by working people and their families.

Maryland also has come up with its own innovative welfare reform plan. It cracks down on welfare fraud, comes down hard on parents who turn their backs on child support, and helps working parents with child care so they won't be driven onto welfare in the first place.

The reforms in Wisconsin, Maryland, and other States are very encouraging for two reasons: First, they give us hope that we can break the vicious cycle of welfare dependency and, second, because they make it clear that there is now a widespread national consensus shared by people without regard to their political party on what welfare reform should look like. It should be pro-work, pro-family, pro-independence, responsible. Welfare should be a second chance, not a way of life.

So the States can keep on sending me strong welfare reform proposals, and I'll keep on signing them. I'll keep doing everything I can as President to reform welfare State by State, if that's what it takes.

But there's a faster way to bring this welfare reform to the entire Nation. There are bipartisan welfare reform plans sitting in the House and the Senate right now that do what the American people agree welfare reform must do: They require welfare recipients to work; they limit the time people can stay on welfare; they toughen child support enforcement; and they protect our children.

So I say to Congress: Send me a bill that honors these fundamental principles. I'll sign it right away. Let's get the job done. Let's do it now. Let's bring welfare reform to all 50 States. Then we'll move on to the other challenges we face as we stand at the dawn of a new century.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 3:40 p.m. on May 17 at the Italia America Bocce Club in St. Louis for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on May 18.