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Remarks Announcing Budget Initiatives on Transportation for Working Families

February 23, 2000

Thank you very much. Let's give him a hand. [Applause] There you go. Wasn't he great? Thank you very much, Michael. We all know you don't do this public speaking for a living, and you did a terrific job. You may have a few more job interviews after the day is over. [Laughter] For those of you who don't know, Brocton, New York, is near Buffalo. So if this message goes out there to western New York, Michael is looking for a good job. [Laughter] And if he takes one, there are a lot of other people who are, too, out there.

I want to thank Secretary Glickman for being here and for his support of this endeavor. I want to thank our Deputy Secretary of the Department of Transportation, Mort Downey, for their work, he and Secretary Slater. And I want to say a special word of welcome to Senator Arlen Specter from Pennsylvania, who has kept our welfare-to-work policy completely bipartisan, and I thank you, sir, for what you've done, and I'm glad you're here.

I grew up with and served as a Governor for a lot of people like Michael Alexander. In my term of service in Arkansas we had, depending on what census it was, somewhere between 5 and 10 of the poorest counties in America. Some were in the Mississippi Delta, and they were predominantly African-American. Some were in the Arkansas Ozarks; they were overwhelmingly white. They were all full—they were all rural counties, and they were all full of people who lived in little places and had to go to bigger places to work. They all wanted to work, and they all wanted to do right by their kids.

And I saw this young man up here speaking, and I'm thinking about what it must be like to be his age with his whole life still before him, two little kids under foot, trying to figure out how to do right by them. Somebody like that shouldn't have to worry about whether they can go out and get in the car, whether the

car will start, and if they get in a car, whether they won't be able to get food for their children. That's what this is all about.

And what I want you to know is, there are lots of Michael Alexanders out there in America. They're from all backgrounds, all races, all faiths. And for those of us who grew up in places where a lot of Michael Alexanders live, we know that but for a bump in the road, a lot of others of us could be in the same fix they're in. That's what this is all about.

We have worked very hard for 7 years now, based on a vision I had in 1992 that everybody that was responsible enough to work for it ought to have a shot at the American dream. And a lot more people do today, for the reasons that Secretary Glickman said. The Congress has helped us not just by getting rid of the deficit and getting interest rates down and getting investment up but also trying to make work pay.

That's what the earned-income tax credit's all about. And I hope Congress will expand it again by trying to make sure that especially parents in his position can, under family leave, more of them can take a little time off without losing their jobs if their children are in trouble or their parents are sick. And I think we ought to expand the law to cover regular visits to schools, too. You heard Michael mention that.

And it's working, all right. And it's working—the poverty rate is way down, lowest in 20 years, lowest Hispanic poverty rate in 20 years, lowest African-American poverty rate ever recorded, since we've been keeping separate statistics for about 30 years now. But there are still a lot of people who are responsible enough to work and go to school, who are not being rewarded with a chance to succeed at work, at school, and raising their kids, and work themselves into a middle class lifestyle. And as you just heard in graphic terms, one of the biggest barriers today is transportation and not, interestingly enough, not just for people living in small towns

like Brocton but also increasingly for people living in inner cities.

Why? Because two-thirds of all the new jobs are now being created in suburbs, which means if you're living in the inner city or in a small town, you're someplace different from where the jobs are. And if you're living in a city with perfectly wonderful public transportation, 9 times out of 10 it doesn't run to the suburbs. So even if you have access to public transportation, it probably doesn't take you to where the jobs are.

Three-quarters of all the Americans who get public assistance live in central cities or rural areas; two-thirds of the new jobs are in the suburbs. It doesn't take Einstein to figure out that transportation is critical to matching the available work force with the available jobs.

Now consider this, just for example. A low wage job seeker living in Watts in Los Angeles who has a car can get to 57 times more jobs than a person living in Watts who does not have a car and has to depend on public transportation.

Nationwide, low income families with cars are 25 percent more likely to work than those without cars. If you want more people to work, you've got to help them get to work. The first step is to eliminate the roadblocks that keep them from getting or keeping a car. Among the most senseless of them are food stamp rules that force low income families to choose between the food they need for their children and the car they need to work. No family should have to make that choice. And today I want to take some action to help make sure fewer do.

Under current rules, a family that makes a few-hundred-dollar downpayment on a car immediately can become ineligible for food stamps, even though it's the bank, not the family, that owns the car. Today we are releasing a new regulation that will allow families with as much as \$1,000 of equity in a car to keep the car and remain eligible for food stamps. That will help 150,000 people like Michael have a car for work and still have food stamps for their kids—150,000.

Another roadblock in the law says you're ineligible for food stamps if the car you own, as Secretary Glickman said, is worth more than \$4,650, a limit set by Congress over 20 years ago. Since then, the price of the average car has tripled. Dan said nothing costs what it did

20 years ago. As I prepare to return to the ranks of ordinary citizen, I find that nothing costs what it did 8 years ago. [Laughter] I can tell you, it's hard to find a reliable car for under \$4,650.

Last summer I took executive action allowing more families moving off welfare to own their cars and still receive food stamps. But we've got to raise the limits again to cover all low income working families. The budget I submitted last month does that. It allows another quarter of a million families to have a car and to get to work and still keep the food assistance for their children.

That's in the budget, and that's Senator Specter's responsibility and why I'm so grateful to him for being here today, because this should be an American issue. This should not be a partisan issue. No American of any political party or philosophy has a vested interest in keeping somebody who's dying to work from getting there or in depriving children of the nutritional assistance they plainly need.

The budget also takes two other important steps. It helps more low income families save money for a car through the Individual Development Account program, the IDA. You may have heard—I talked a little about that in the State of the Union—this is an idea that has enjoyed broad bipartisan support to try to help even poor people have the tools to save. Currently, thousands of low income families use these IDA's to save for college, a first home, to start a new business. And the Federal Government matches their savings. I want to include in that list—saving for college, a first home, starting a new business—saving to buy a car to get to work.

We also budget our investment in the access to jobs initiative, which funds creative, locally designed transportation solutions, such as vanpools that a lot of nonprofits and faith-based groups have used. And I'm glad to see some representatives of those groups here today. They shuttle inner-city workers to suburban jobs.

Now, this is usually not a practical solution for small towns and rural areas, but it can work very well in inner-city areas where the jobs are close together in the suburbs or where there's a big suburban employment center where you can take 20, 30, 50 people from a given inner-city neighborhood to one site of employment. But this is also very, very important.

Feb. 23 / Administration of William J. Clinton, 2000

I mean, consider the irony of this: We have employers all over the country suffering labor shortages. You have people like Michael who are going to community college and working and supporting two children by himself—doing everything they can do. Such people should not be held back by the absence of transportation or punished if they have the initiative and enterprise to buy a car, especially if, like him, they help to repair it in the first place. [*Laughter*] That's a great story.

So, this is the smart thing to do. It's the right thing to do. If you want to keep the economy going without inflation, you've got to continue to train people to go into jobs that are already there. Then they become not only employees paying taxes, but they become consumers, and they add to the stock of our national wealth.

Now, despite all these obstacles, millions of Americans who don't have cars still make it to work. They get up at dawn; they travel 2 hours on three different buses to suburban jobs that pay 7 bucks an hour. They come home the same way, and somehow they still manage to get their kids to and from school and do the grocery shopping. They do it all without a car. They are, in so many ways, the real heroes of this country.

We normally think of heroism as something done in a moment of immediate danger. But it may take more courage to get up every day against all the obstacles and live your life and raise your kids and do what you're supposed to do and walk away from whatever illegal options are out there for you and just keep banging away at it. The people who do this not only deserve our admiration; they deserve our support. And we ought to work for a day in America when that sort of heroism is not required to go to work and take care of your kids.

If we can do these specific things we've talked about today, hundreds of thousands of people like Michael will be able to sleep better at night knowing they've done their work, taken care of their children, and their country wants them to be rewarded for it.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:08 p.m. in Presidential Hall in the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Michael Alexander, participant in a local program to help welfare recipients purchase a car, who introduced the President.

Videotaped Remarks on Rock the Vote's 10th Anniversary *February 23, 2000*

I am honored to be a part of Rock the Vote's 10th anniversary celebration. And it is with great pride and appreciation that I accept this year's Rock the Vote award. Thank you.

From our first days as a nation, the right to vote meant the right to participate and to be heard, although it's often taken for granted. We must not forget that generations of Americans before us had to fight to gain that right. When blacks and women won the right to vote, when we outlawed the poll tax and literacy tests in the South, when the voting age was lowered to 18, and when we finally recognized the voting rights of the disabled, more Americans gained the opportunity to realize what Lyndon Johnson once told us: "Voting is the first duty of democracy."

That's why Rock the Vote was founded and why you're all here today, to help more young Americans fulfill that right and to recognize the power and the impact of their votes. Your dedication to protecting freedom of speech, educating people about the issues that affect them, and motivating them to register and vote has helped countless young people across our country.

With your help, we've transformed voices into action. Year after year, starting with the motor voter bill, which you first championed, you've worked with our administration to make sure that young people get involved and stay involved and to remind them that voting is not only a right, it is a solemn, profound responsibility. Now, we approach the first election of the 21st