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This has been a hopeful day for the region, and we must continue to press forward to peace.

I want to thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:25 p.m. at the Bush Ranch.

Remarks at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, New Mexico

April 29, 2002

Well, thank you very much for that warm, New Mexican welcome. It's nice to be back in this beautiful State. I'm particularly delighted to be sharing the podium with a remarkable American, Pete Domenici. He didn't finish the story. After I interrupted him, he re-interrupted me—[*laughter*]—and gave me my marching orders. [*Laughter*] I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. Senator." [*Laughter*]

No, I really enjoy working with Pete, and I appreciate so very much that leaders such as Pete have been working to make America a more welcoming place for people with disabilities. The work is progressing. We are making progress, but it certainly isn't finished. There's a lot to do, and some of the greatest health needs and obstacles and stigmas concern mental health. We are determined to confront the hidden suffering of Americans with mental illness.

Pete and I share a lot in common. We love the Southwest. We care deeply about issues that face our country. And we both married above ourselves. [*Laughter*] I love being with Pete and Nancy, because their love and respect for each other is so evident and so profound. And I love watching Nancy's face, because it reveals and is a window into a compassionate heart. And I want to thank Nancy Domenici.

I also want to thank Charles Curie for coming. Pete introduced Charles. Charles is a good hand, and I appreciate him being here. I also want to thank Phil Eaton and all the good folks here at the University of New Mexico. I'm so honored also to be traveling today with Heather Wilson. Heather is a solid citizen who brings a lot of dignity to the office she holds and a lot of class. And I'm proud to call her friend. I want to thank the State officials who are here, the Lieutenant Governor, thank you for coming.

I also want to tell you about a lady I met named Lucy Salazar. Where's Lucy? Is she here? Lucy, thank you for coming. It's kind of off the subject but really not off the subject, because one of the things I try to do when I go into communities is herald soldiers in the armies of compassion, those souls who have heard the call to love a neighbor like you'd like to be loved yourself and have followed through on that call, the selfless citizens whose compassion for their neighbor is really one of the things that makes America so strong and powerful, particularly as we stand tall in the face of evil.

I like to tell my fellow citizens that if you're interested in fighting evil—which, by the way, we're going to do—if you're interested—[*laughter*]. But one way to help is do some good. And it's that collective good that will define the true value and character of our country.

And Lucy Salazar is a retired Federal Government worker. She teaches reading skills to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children. She's incredibly important. She helps those with disabilities participate in the fine and performing arts. She volunteers through her church. She is a great citizen, and oftentimes, citizens such as her never get the praise they deserve. Lucy, thank you for coming and representing thousands of people like you.

Millions of Americans—millions—are impaired at work, at school, or at home by episodes of mental illness. Many are disabled by severe and persistent mental problems. These illnesses affect individuals; they affect their families; and they affect our country.

As many Americans know, it is incredibly painful to watch someone you love struggle with an illness that affects their mind and their feelings and their relationships with others. We heard stories today in a roundtable discussion about that—what the struggle means for family.

Remarkable treatments exist, and that's good. Yet many people—too many people—remain untreated. Some end up addicted to drugs or alcohol. Some end up on the streets, homeless. Others end up in our jails, our prisons, our juvenile detention facilities.

Our country must make a commitment: Americans with mental illness deserve our understanding, and they deserve excellent care. They deserve a health care system that treats their illness with the same urgency as a physical illness. To meet this goal, we've got to overcome obstacles, and I want to talk about three such obstacles this morning.

The first obstacle is the stigma, the stigma that often surrounds mental illness, a stigma caused by a history of misunderstanding, fear, and embarrassment. Stigma leads to isolation and discourages people from seeking the treatment they need. Political leaders, health care professionals, and all Americans must understand and send this message: Mental disability is not a scandal; it is an illness. And like physical illness, it is treatable, especially when the treatment comes early.

Today, new drugs and therapies have vastly improved the outlook for millions of Americans with the most serious mental illnesses and for millions more with less severe illnesses. The treatment success rates for schizophrenia and clinical depression are comparable to those for heart disease. That's good news in America, and we must encourage more and more Americans to understand and to seek more treatment.

The second obstacle to quality mental health care is our fragmented mental health service delivery system. Mental health centers and hospitals, homeless shelters, the justice system, and our schools all have contact with individuals suffering from mental disorders. Yet, many of these disorders are difficult to diagnose. This makes it even harder to provide the mentally ill with the care they need. Many Americans fall through the cracks of the current system. Many years and lives are lost before help, if it is given at all, is given.

Consider this example—and for the experts in the field, they will confirm this is a story which is oftentimes too true—a 14-year-old boy who started experimenting with drugs to ease his severe depression. That happens. This former honor student became a drug addict. He dropped out of school, was incarcerated 6 times in 16 years. Only 2 years ago, when he was 30 years old, did the doctors finally diagnose his condition as bipolar disorder, and he began a successful program, a successful long-term treatment program.

And to make sure that the cracks are closed, I am honored to announce what we call the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. It is charged to study the problems and gaps in our current system of treatment and to make concrete recommendations for immediate improvements that will be implemented, and these will be improvements that can be implemented and must be implemented by the Federal Government, the State Government, local agencies, as well as public and private health care providers.

To chair the Commission, I've selected Michael Hogan, Dr. Hogan. I appreciate your coming, Michael. Dr. Hogan has served as the Director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health for more than 10 years and is recognized as a leader in this profession. He has been focused, as a State official, on how our mental health system works and how it doesn't work.

I look forward to the Commission's findings. I look forward to their proposals. I look forward to making progress and fixing the system so that Americans do not fall through the cracks.

The third major obstacle to effective mental health care is the often unfair treatment limitations placed on mental health in insurance coverage. Many private health insurance plans have developed effective programs to identify patients with mental illnesses, and they help them get their treatment they need to regain their health.

But insurance plans too often place greater restrictions on the treatment of mental illness than on the treatment of other medical illnesses. As a result, some Americans are unable to get effective medical treatments that would allow them to function well in their daily lives.

Our health insurance system must treat serious mental illness like any other disease. And that was Senator Domenici's message to me at the Oval Office. [*Laughter*] And it was Nancy's message when we had them up for dinner. [*Laughter*] And I want to appreciate the fact that they have worked tirelessly on this problem.

I have a record on this issue. As the Governor of Texas, I signed a bill to ensure that patients who critically need mental health are treated fairly. Senator Domenici and I share this commitment: Health plans should not be allowed to apply unfair treatment limitations or financial requirements on mental health benefits.

It is critical that we provide full—as we provide full mental health parity, that we do not significantly run up the cost of health care. I'll work with the Senator. I will work with the Speaker. I will work with their House and Senate colleagues to reach an agreement on mental health parity this year.

We must work for a welcoming and compassionate society, a society where no American is dismissed and no American is forgotten. This is the great and hopeful story of our country, and we can write another chapter. We must give all Americans who suffer from mental illness the treatment and the respect they deserve.

Thank you all. God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:34 a.m. at the Continuing Education Center. In his remarks, he referred to Charles G. Curie, Administrator, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Department of Health and Human Services; R. Philip Eaton, interim vice president, Health Sciences, University of New Mexico; and Lt. Gov. Walter Bradley of New Mexico. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Executive Order 13263—President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health

April 29, 2002

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and to improve America's mental health service delivery system for individuals with serious mental illness and children with serious emotional disturbances, it is hereby ordered as follows:

Section 1. *Establishment.* There is hereby established the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (Commission).

Sec. 2. *Membership.* (a) The Commission's membership shall be composed of:

(i) Not more than fifteen members appointed by the President, including providers, payers, administrators, and consumers of mental health services and family members of consumers; and

(ii) Not more than seven ex officio members, four of whom shall be designated by the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and the remaining three of whom shall be designated—one each—by the Secretaries of the Departments of Labor, Education, and Veterans Affairs.

(b) The President shall designate a Chair from among the fifteen members of the Commission appointed by the President.

Sec. 3. *Mission.* The mission of the Commission shall be to conduct a comprehensive study of the United States mental health service delivery system, including public and private sector providers, and to advise the President on methods of improving the system. The Commission's goal shall be to recommend improvements to enable adults with serious mental illness and children with serious emotional disturbances to live, work, learn, and participate fully in their communities. In carrying out its mission, the Commission shall, at a minimum:

(a) Review the current quality and effectiveness of public and private providers and Federal, State, and local government involvement in the delivery of services to individuals with serious mental illnesses and children with serious emotional disturbances, and identify unmet needs and barriers to services.

(b) Identify innovative mental health treatments, services, and technologies that are demonstrably effective and can be widely replicated in different settings.

(c) Formulate policy options that could be implemented by public and private providers, and Federal, State, and local governments to integrate the use of effective treatments and services, improve coordination among service providers, and improve community integration for adults with serious mental illnesses and children with serious emotional disturbances.

Sec. 4. *Principles.* In conducting its mission, the Commission shall adhere to the following principles: