

**Statement Of Senator Edward M. Kennedy
Democratic Policy Committee Hearing on the Uninsured**

January 6, 2004

I commend Senator Dorgan and the Democratic Policy Committee for holding this hearing on the uninsured. I'm sure we each have our resolutions for the New Year – but as a nation we should resolve that 2004 is the year we act to end America's health care crisis. As Democrats, we have an obligation to do so as part of our continuing and long standing commitment to quality, affordable, health care for every American.

The crisis is worsening every year. The number of the uninsured is high and growing, and the cost of health care is soaring. Forty-four million Americans have no health insurance. During the course of this year, 73 million—one in every four—will go without coverage for an extended period of time. Every family with health insurance knows that they are just one pink slip away from being uninsured. Costs are pricing health care out of the reach of individuals and businesses alike, as more and more firms cut back on employees' coverage or cancel it altogether.

The faces of the uninsured are the faces of neighbors and friends.

--Workers who lost their jobs—and lost their health insurance as well.

--Retired workers who relied on a promise of health insurance from a former employer and now find themselves with a broken promise.

-- Single mothers who work two jobs to make ends meet – but still can't afford health insurance.

-- Parents who work forty hours a week, fifty-two weeks a year, but still cannot provide health coverage for themselves and their children—because their employer doesn't provide it and they can't afford it.

-- People with heart disease or other serious conditions who find that they can't buy insurance at any price because of their illness.

The statistics are bad enough. But no statistic can measure the deepening concern that faces so many families. In a nation with the best doctors, the best hospitals, and the best medical technology in the world, tens of millions of Americans have no opportunity to benefit from that care because they can't afford it. And tens of millions more are increasingly aware of the dangerous brink they are living on.

Some say that losing health coverage is no problem and that “everyone gets care eventually.” But study after study proves that lack of coverage means inadequate care, avoidable illness, and increased mortality.

A third of the uninsured – 15 million Americans – go without needed medical care each year. Sixteen million more fail to take medications their doctors prescribe – because

they can't afford the high cost of drugs. Unpaid medical bills account for 200,000 bankruptcies a year.

All of these problems are compounded by the tide of red ink that is overwhelming state budgets and their ability to provide health services for their people. The cutbacks are already painful. One and one-half million people—including more than one-half million children—have been dropped from the rolls of public coverage in the last two years.

Thirty-four states have implemented harsh new measures to withdraw coverage for low income families. The Bush Administration is making all these problems worse. Its Medicare bill is an unreasonable assault on Medicare itself that will leave billions of senior citizens worse off, not better off. In the councils of this Administration, the highest priority on health care is to protect the profits of the insurance industry and the drug industry, not the health of the American people.

Time after time, Democrats have proposed effective measures to expand coverage, only to have them rejected by the Administration. Our proposal to provide health coverage to the parents of children enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP, had strong bipartisan support. So did our proposal to expand Medicaid for children with disabilities, to prevent these families from being forced into poverty to meet the crushing burden of their children's expenses.

This new year is also an election year, and Democrats intend to make the most of it.

It is long past time to bring health costs under control and make good health care available and affordable for every American. Republicans understand they are vulnerable on these issues, and they may well resort again to their same old tired and truly dishonest tactic of promising relief, and then tilting it unfairly to their special interest friends.

This hearing restates our dedication to fulfilling our party's commitment to health care for all. We may not be able to enact it this year, but if Republicans stand in the way, I'm optimistic that we'll elect a President and a Congress in November who will genuinely meet the challenge. It's that important, and it's an idea whose time has come.