

approvals of safe and effective Duchenne therapies, but we would like more therapies to be approved in the future.

Duchenne muscular dystrophy is the most common fatal genetic disorder diagnosed in childhood, affecting approximately 1 in every 3,500 male children. The disease results in the gradual loss of muscle strength, usually beginning before age 5. The progressive muscle weakness leads to serious medical problems, particularly issues related to the hearts and lungs. By age 14, over 80 percent of these boys are using wheelchairs.

My work on Duchenne muscular dystrophy began when I was elected to the Senate. It was an issue my dear friend and former Minnesota Senator, Paul Wellstone, championed. Paul was instrumental in getting the Muscular Dystrophy Community Assistance Research and Education Act—or as it is known, the MD-CARE Act—signed into law back in 2001.

The bill dramatically increased investment at the National Institutes of Health for muscular dystrophy research and included funding for the creation of six centers of excellence. In recognition of his work, all of the centers share Senator Paul Wellstone's name. The bill also supported public health policies designed to improve quality of life and boost life expectancy of children and adults diagnosed with muscular dystrophy.

Since passage of the MD-CARE Act, \$500 million has been leveraged for muscular dystrophy research and education programs, half of which is Duchenne-specific. I then led the reauthorization of the MD-CARE Act in 2008, and it passed the Senate by unanimous consent. In 2014, Senator ROGER WICKER and I led the MD-CARE Amendments of 2014, which built upon the progress by ensuring that efforts are focused on the most critical needs of doctors, patients, and researchers. These are important accomplishments, but more needs to be done.

The Food and Drug Administration Safety and Innovation Act of 2012 gave the FDA increased flexibility to grant accelerated approval for rare disease treatments that have proven to be beneficial. The bill also directed the FDA to use patient-focused drug development tools during the drug approval process. The idea is simple: Patient experience should be a factor when the FDA considers a drug for approval. This gives the FDA the opportunity to hear directly from patients, their families, and caregivers about the symptoms that matter most to them, the impact the disease has on patients' daily lives, and their experiences with treatments.

To build upon that progress, Senator WICKER and I introduced the Patient-Focused Impact Assessment Act. The bill would help advocates understand how the FDA uses patient-focused drug development tools and how it engages patients, including those with rare dis-

eases, such as Duchenne, as it reviews drugs and therapies. Last month this bipartisan bill unanimously passed the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, bringing us one step closer to ensuring strong patient engagement throughout the FDA review process.

At an FDA meeting on Monday, there was one example of patient involvement in the drug approval process. It was a meeting that broke records. According to advocates, it was the largest gathering of Duchenne families in history. More than 900 members of their community were there. In fact, turnout was so large the FDA changed the meeting location to accommodate everyone.

Many stories were shared during the daylong meeting—stories of hope, stories of progress. Even seemingly small improvements—such as the ability to open a bottle of water on their own or lift their arm a little higher—make a huge difference in the quality of these boys' lives. These small victories have a ripple effect across a lifetime.

Monday's historic event shows the strength of the Duchenne community, the passion of the families, and the hope that treatments are on the horizon. This particular treatment was not approved that day, but we continue to hold hope that change will be on the horizon.

The fight against muscular dystrophy will not be won overnight, but we have already seen incredible progress in the last few years. I am confident that by working together—by bringing families to the table with policymakers and health care experts—we can accomplish some truly remarkable things.

One of the reasons Senator WICKER and I fought so hard to have the FDA officials listen directly to the families is that when you know your child has a disease that is 100 percent fatal, you might take different risks. You might see different improvements in a different way than a medical professional who does not have this experience. We hope going forward this kind of experience and testimony and information will make for better decisions by the FDA.

We need to continue to ensure the FDA has the tools and flexibility it needs to increase the number of safe, effective, and affordable treatments that are available for people with rare diseases. I also thank Senator HATCH, who has done a lot of work with me on the rare disease issue, and we will continue to push for cures for people who have so little hope.

I thank the Chair, and I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

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

VETERANS FIRST ACT

Mr. ISAKSON. Mr. President, this morning at 11 a.m., a big event happened in Washington, DC, on the third floor of this building when all members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Republican and Democrat alike, introduced what we call the Veterans First Act—a comprehensive overhaul of the Veterans' Administration to bring about accountability in services to our veterans by the Veterans' Administration. Every member of the committee, Republican and Democrat alike, came to that press conference.

I want to start by thanking Senator RICHARD BLUMENTHAL of Connecticut, who is my ranking member on the committee, for his efforts and his work over the last 10 months to help make this a reality, and each and every member of the committee for the work they did. In the end, we adopted 148 provisions of the Senate to amend, reconstruct, and hold accountable the Veterans' Administration.

I don't know about the Presiding Officer, but every morning when I wake up in Washington, DC, and turn on the TV, whether it is CNN, FOX, or a local station, one of the lead stories is about a tragedy in the Veterans' Administration. This morning, in preparing for this press conference I didn't turn on the TV until after I read my notes. After I read my notes, I turned on the TV, and what, to my dismay, did I see? In Chicago, IL, at the Veterans' Administration hospital, they found cockroaches in the food of our veterans. What kind of accountability is that in the Veterans' Administration? For our veterans to be fed food with vermin in it is ridiculous and crazy.

We all know what happened in Arizona a few years ago when appointments were manipulated, so veterans missed their appointments, and three veterans died. We know what happened in Atlanta, where we had an outbreak of suicide by people who couldn't get to mental health services in time. We know what happened when cost overruns went awry in Denver, CO. When the costs of the hospital got out of line, the Veterans' Administration didn't know how to control it.

Every time we turn around, there is no accountability in the Veterans' Administration, so our committee decided it is our job to see to it that our veterans get what they deserve and what they fought for for us; that is, a Veterans' Administration that delivers on

the promise of good health care, good benefits, and the appreciation of a grateful country for the sacrifice each of them made.

To begin with, we want to make sure the Secretary of the VA can fire somebody and make it stick. A few months ago, the Merit Systems Protection Board overruled the firing of two Philadelphia employees of the Veterans' Administration and reinstated them with pay with no reason except they didn't like the way in which they were fired.

If we go around the country, we find out that the Veterans' Administration's best way to discipline somebody is to move them from one city to another, from one hospital to another, or from one location to another. Moving problems around doesn't solve problems. They just give the problem to somebody else. It is time that if somebody deserves to be fired for their lack of performance or their poor performance, we put our veterans first and make sure they are getting the attention they should get. If somebody is not willing to do their job or cannot do their job, then they are terminated.

We don't want to go through and take the rank-and-file, good employees of the Veterans' Administration and tell them "We don't like you, we don't appreciate you, and we don't trust you," but we want to tell those who don't want to be held accountable, those who are not doing their job, that we are watching.

We are going to encourage whistleblowers to tell us where the problems are. We created an independent office in this act for whistleblower status within the VA, so the VA itself is soliciting input within its own organization to point out those who may not be doing a good job. We need the VA to have a culture of support for our veterans, not a corruption of our veterans. It is critical that we do that.

We took a lot of other issues that have been big problems in the United States of America for our veterans and we addressed them.

Opioids. We have a major section on opioids to try to get medicines to our veterans that counteract the addiction of opioids and don't treat pain with opioids but instead treat it with the appropriate type of medicine.

We did a great job in terms of caregivers. I don't know about the Presiding Officer, but I am a Vietnam-era guy. I remember Vietnam. I remember the sacrifice of our troops there and the 58,000 men whom we lost in Vietnam. A lot of our Vietnam veterans came home with multiple disabilities. In fact, 22,000 of them are living with disabilities today, but they have never been covered by caregivers. Our post-9/11 veterans have been covered by caregivers but not our Vietnam-era or Grenada veterans or our Panama veterans. This bill makes them eligible as well, so a family member—a loved one who is giving care at home to a veteran who fought and was injured for our coun-

try—can get the same type of stipend and benefit that someone who has fought in Iraq or Afghanistan gets. It is only fair to see to it that they get the same benefit and the same treatment.

It is also only fair to see to it that Secretary McDonald himself can be held accountable. Bob McDonald is a good Secretary. He has done a good job. He has tried his best, but he hasn't had the tools he needs. Well, we want to give him those tools. We want to give him the chance to have discipline. We want to give him the chance to find the people he needs to put in place. One of the provisions in this bill allows the Secretary to hire physicians, directors, and hospital administrators who are capable of doing the job and pay them what the market will bear. Why not have good people who can do the job rather than temporary people who don't want to do the job? Right now in the Veterans' Administration, fully a third of its leadership is temporary, not permanent. We need a permanent commitment to our veterans that they are going to get the services they deserve and the services they need.

I could go on and on about this legislation, but the important thing to understand is that we are finally putting our veterans first. We are telling the Veterans' Administration: We appreciate the good job you do, but we want to make sure it is 100 percent of the time, not just 85 or 90 or 95 percent of the time.

We want to make sure they are putting our veterans first. We want to make sure that somebody who makes a mental health call to a veterans hospital doesn't get a busy signal or a wrong number. We want to make sure that when somebody makes an appointment and then shows up, there is somebody there to meet them for that appointment. We want to make sure that the services veterans earned, fought for, and in many cases sacrificed for, are available to them.

I thank the members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I thank this Senate in advance for what I am sure it will do later this year: put our veterans first.

When we return from our break next week, I am going to do everything I can to get this bill before the Senate before Memorial Day, to see to it that we get it to the House of Representatives so we can conference. The House has passed their bill. They have passed a good bill, and we have passed a good bill. We need to find common ground to put those two together because one thing is for sure: What has happened in the VA for the last few years is inexcusable and indefensible, and I, for one, am not going to be a chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee who did not try to make it right. I am going to use every strength that I have, every power that I have, and every ability that I have to bring people together to say: We owe our veterans everything.

The Presiding Officer wouldn't have his job, I wouldn't have mine, and our families wouldn't live in peace and se-

curity today in this country had millions of Americans not volunteered to fight and risk their lives so that we could be free, so that I could speak freely on the floor of the Senate about what I believe and the Presiding Officer could speak freely about what he believes and we could go home and assemble and gather together. All of those are guaranteed by our Constitution—a document which is preserved and memorialized not by the paper it is written on but by the veterans who sacrificed and risked their lives to see to it that it was preserved.

I am very proud to be chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am proud to have served with RICHARD BLUMENTHAL as ranking member and all the members of the committee whose contributions to this legislation have made it a great piece of legislation—one that we should pass. I hope we do so before Memorial Day, so on the day we honor those who have fought for us and sacrificed, we send them the signal: We have got your back and we are putting you first. We are putting America's veterans first.

I want to pause for a second at the end of my remarks and thank some people for all the efforts they have made over the past 10 months to make this a reality. As the Presiding Officer knows, legislation doesn't just happen. We Senators make a lot of speeches. We are full of a lot of hot air. But the hard work that goes on is done in the back rooms of the Capitol, in the committees, by the people who do the research to find the pay-fors, to make the decisions that have to be made to see to it that a piece of legislation works and is not just a hollow promise.

I thank Tom Bowman, my chief of staff on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, for the work he has done. I thank Amanda Meredith, Maureen O'Neill, Adam Reece, David Shearman, Gretchen Blum, Jillian Workman, Leslie Campbell, Lauren Gaydos, Tucker Zrebiec, Tommy Reynolds, and Chris Bennett. I thank the members of my staff: Jay Sulzmann, my chief of staff Joan Kirchner, Ryan Evans, and Amanda Maddox. I also thank everybody on RICHARD BLUMENTHAL's staff for all the contributions they made to make this happen.

Today we opened up a new day for the Veterans' Administration in America and a new day for America's veterans. We put America's veterans first today, and we are going to keep them first. They put us first when they sacrificed for us; it is time we did the same for them.

I urge each Member of the Senate during this break to get the information we send to your offices about the Veterans First Act, read and study it, and then come back and let's pass a bill that tells our veterans: We love you. We appreciate you. And never again will you have an appointment broken or not receive the services you need from the Veterans' Administration of the United States of America.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CASIDY). Without objection, it is so ordered.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

Mr. COATS. Mr. President, today's announcement by the Bureau of Economic Analysis that our economy grew, once again, an anemic rate of 0.5 percent during the first quarter of the year is more than discouraging but not surprising. Whether it is burdensome regulations, whether it is a broken Tax Code, or whether it is a continued plunge into national debt, the Obama administration's policies have been and will continue to be a deadweight on our economy.

The President continues to make big promises and insists his policies are effective, but the facts speak for themselves. Under President Obama, the median household income has decreased during his presidency and remains 6.5 percent below its prerecession level. If this were an average post-1960s recovery, individuals would have nearly \$2,700 more in their wallets. Instead, they have received a decrease of \$3,000 per year in their income. This is unacceptable.

While the President continues to say the economy is improving, it is clearly not reaching its potential or anywhere close to its potential. At some point, you have to acknowledge the policies aren't working. Here we are 8 years from the beginning of the recession, and the president in the White House insists that his policies are working: Hang in there with us, folks. Things are going to get better.

Then these statistics come out that things are not only not getting better, but are getting worse. We are not only not moving closer to the average level of recovery after a major recession, but we are moving further and further away from it.

Our current annual growth rate in this recovery is less than 2 percent. In 2016, with this quarter's report, we are off to a very weak start. But if this were an average recovery, we would be seeing an annual growth rate of somewhere around 3½ to 4 percent.

I served previously in Congress in the Reagan years, and the growth rate during the Reagan recovery was 4.5 percent, which is well more than double what it is today. I have seen firsthand how pro-growth policies turn a dismal economic situation around, but I haven't seen it here in Washington under President Obama. Where I have seen it is in my home State of Indiana.

In 2005, under the policies of a Democratic administration, which clearly

weren't working, Indiana faced a \$200 million deficit, and our State had not balanced its budget for 7 years, even though the State constitution requires that we do that.

Under the leadership of former Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels and current Governor Mike Pence, Indiana has reduced spending, cut taxes, and paid off its debt. As a result, instead of a \$200 million deficit, we have a \$2 billion surplus today. We enjoy a triple-A credit rating from all the credit rating agencies, and we have been listed in index after index as the State to go live thanks to our low taxes and because we are business friendly, family friendly, and tax friendly.

The contrast between this body and the State that I represent is dramatic because of the differences in our policies. By the numbers and indexes, it is clear that this Federal economy under the policies of this administration is simply not making any progress. I think we see that playing out in the upcoming election for the next President. It has become a major campaign issue, and we hear both parties talking about it.

Over the past 2 years, in Indiana, private employment has grown by nearly 130,000 jobs, reflecting the results and success of Indiana's pro-growth policy. Employers are taking notice of our healthy business climate and coming into the State to establish new businesses. I think the resurgence of growth is proof that sound economic policy works.

I have seen how it works in Indiana, and I am simply not willing to accept the stagnant rate of growth here without trying to do something about it. I don't think anything is going to change since there is no indication from the White House or even from our colleagues across the aisle here that they are willing to at least debate this issue and put the policies that bring about economic growth into place.

In order to boost economic growth, we need to reverse the failed policies of this administration by overhauling our Tax Code, strip away unnecessary government regulations, give employers the certainty they need in order to grow their businesses and create jobs, follow the lead of States like Indiana, Ohio, and others that have turned their economies around and bring the prosperity to the people of those States.

Congress can take action to encourage our economy to grow, but we need a partner in the White House willing to cut the redtape, willing to enact pro-growth reforms and put in place a real plan to reduce the debt.

I hope I don't have to come down here to discuss another quarter of anemic rate of growth. The American people simply pay the bills, pay the mortgage, send the kids to college, and put aside money for the future. That is not happening, and it needs to change. Hopefully, we can take a lesson from what we have learned on these quarterly reports—that the policies in place are simply not doing the job.

With that, I yield the floor.

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

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

Mr. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, I am glad to see that my good friend from Indiana was on the floor talking about an important issue that the administration certainly won't talk about. To be honest, not many Members of this body talk about it nearly enough. As my colleague from Indiana mentioned this morning, the U.S. Commerce Department came out with some big news. They said that the U.S. economy grew at 0.5 percent GDP growth the first quarter of 2016. That is one-half of 1 percent. That is a horrible number.

I am going to make a prediction. I don't think anybody in the media, if they are still up there, is going to talk about this issue. Nobody talks about this issue. In the old days, it didn't matter if there was a Republican or a Democratic administration. If the U.S. economy was growing at 0.5 percent GDP—which essentially means it is not growing but has instead stopped—then almost certainly the Secretary of the Treasury would come out and say: Don't worry, America. We have this; we have a plan.

We know that 0.5 percent GDP growth is horrible for everybody, especially working-class families. At the very least the Secretary of Commerce would have come out and said: We know you are hurting, America, but don't worry. We have a plan. In previous administrations, that is what would have happened, and it wouldn't matter if the President was a Democrat or a Republican.

But I don't think we heard a peep out of this administration this morning. We have not heard from the President, the Secretary of the Treasury, or the Commerce Secretary. Nobody came out and spoke, and don't count on it. I don't think they will be talking about this number. They even seem to be satisfied with this number—0.5 percent GDP growth. They certainly don't want the American people talking about it because this is not a good number.

This is a really important issue for our country. This is an important issue for every single American, and yet we have an administration that doesn't want to talk about this issue because it is a big problem for them. It is a big problem for all of us. We can't grow the U.S. economy.

Some of my colleagues have come down to the Senate floor often to talk about what they view as moral imperatives. I respect everybody in this body, but there is a lot of talk about moral imperatives and nobody talks about this issue as a moral imperative. In my