

people—are either employees, employers, or members of the families of people employed in small business? Some 24 million people are without health insurance today because their chief breadwinner belongs to a small business that cannot afford health insurance.

I think that is just too many. The high costs of health insurance have made it difficult for small businesses to get the health insurance coverage they need. They do not have the bargaining power. They cannot spread the administrative cost. They cannot spread the risk. Basically, they cannot get as good a deal as a large corporation or a union or the Government can get.

We are very fortunate, as Federal employees, to have access to the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. That is because we have a great big pool and we can bargain to get the best rates and we have choices from health insurance providers. Those choices are not available to small business. So we have developed a plan, with the full support and leadership of the President, to authorize establishing association health plans. The time has come for those health plans to be set up by legislation.

On Monday of this week, we found that there has been a jump in the number of those Americans without health insurance. It is extremely timely.

Yesterday, I understand, the Secretary of Labor wrote to the majority leader and asked that we bring up and try to pass association health plans. It has already been passed by the House. It is just sitting here.

We need to pass it. I hope before we get out of here—I hope that is October 11; I am not sure from what the majority leader said whether we will make it by October 11—but before we go, I hope we have a vote on association health plans.

The Secretary of Labor has said this is the highest priority. And the Secretary of Labor would be the one who would regulate these plans to make sure they do not cherry-pick, that they are financially sound, and that they meet the requirements of the law.

The law is carefully structured to prevent picking out only healthy insured groups. You could not set up a group of fitness instructors, for example, in a health plan because that would take the lowest risk people and give them an unfair advantage over others, when health insurance is supposed to spread the risk over a broad population.

Association health plans are just one, but a very important, step we need to take in assuring that a significant number of those 24 or more million Americans who do not have health insurance get it.

This is something I have heard from small business groups, as I have listened to them in my State and across the country, in forums of all sizes. We get e-mails. We do not get letters very

often; they still get held up in the radiation process, but when we do get letters, they are still talking about the high cost of health care.

Association health plans are one way we could give small business the power to deal with the high cost of health insurance. I have spoken to my colleagues about this before. This has been an item of great interest in our Small Business Committee. I hope more colleagues will look into this question of getting adequate and affordable health insurance coverage through association health plans.

The President has made a very strong and clear statement in favor of association health plans. I would hope this body could follow the leadership of the House of Representatives, which has already passed the association health plan legislation. This would be something very important we could do for small businesses and their employees and their employees' families.

Madam President, I am happy to respond to questions from my colleagues to provide them further information. I invite their attention and I hope we can get action on that measure.

Madam President, I yield the floor. Seeing no one seeking recognition, 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. BOND. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

ELECTION REFORM

Mr. BOND. Madam President, I was interested to read in today's Washington Post an editorial urging us to move forward on the election reform bill. This bill has been championed by Senator DODD, the chairman of the committee, and Senator MCCONNELL, the ranking member. I have had a role in some antifraud provisions.

The Florida elections of this year seem to have brought more attention to the need for election law reform. The conclusion of the Washington Post is that:

At a time when voter turnout is at an all-time low, bolstering public confidence in the machinery of democracy is especially urgent.

I agree with that. That is why I worked so hard to see if we could get a bill passed that would do that. We need to make it easier to vote and tougher to cheat. Unfortunately, what we saw in Florida this year was the old truth: No matter how much appropriations in or what kind of legislation you have, if you have incompetence in local election officials, incompetence trumps everything. We know there were tremendous problems this year in an area where there were problems in 2000, even though they had new machines.

Nevertheless, we have worked on a bill that has many compromises and

has a good structure for getting the kind of equipment we need to improve elections, providing additional safeguards, voting machines for those with disabilities and, in my view, the very important role of preventing dead people, nonexistent people, and dogs from voting.

Many of my colleagues don't want to hear me talk anymore about Ritzzy Mekler, the dog that was registered in Missouri. Unfortunately, Ritzzy joins a very distinguished group of dogs registered to vote around the country because motor voter does not have protection against phony registration.

We spent more than 7 months last year negotiating a bill. We brought it to the floor. There was some backsliding. We got it passed late this winter. It has been stalled in trying to work out the final details.

I have been discouraged because I have worked with the leaders from the other side on the bill to offer some compromises. We want to get the bill passed. I believe, along with Senator MCCONNELL, that we have proposed reasonable means of dealing with the problems they have. Unfortunately, the negotiations at the staff level have been stymied. Every time we get the wheelbarrow full of frogs, we find, as we try to wrap up the final details and get the final frogs in, some of the frogs have jumped out of the wheelbarrow.

Election reform is another bill that is long overdue for passage. I see my colleague from Kentucky in the Chamber who has been a champion in this area. I appreciate working with him and Senator DODD. I hope we can work with our colleagues on the House side, if we will just move forward and deal with some very important protections against more fraud in voting.

Since I see the manager of the bill is ready to go, I yield the floor.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Vermont.

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, I also see my friend from Kentucky. I want to go back to the bill.

Mr. MCCONNELL. I say to the Senator from Vermont, I am looking at 10 max, probably less.

Mr. LEAHY. I am wondering, I know the distinguished Senator from Kentucky can say more in less time than most people I know, and brilliantly. Could he perhaps say it in 5 minutes?

Mr. MCCONNELL. If I could beg the indulgence of the Senator from Vermont, this is a speech I have hoped to make on homeland security for some time now. We are only talking about 10 minutes. I would appreciate the opportunity to make the statement.

Mr. LEAHY. Madam President, I am trying to be helpful. I ask unanimous consent that the Senator from Kentucky be recognized for 10 minutes and then the floor revert to the senior Senator from Vermont.

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