

Health care costs continue to rise by double digits every year. More employers are being forced to scale back the health care benefits they offer their workers; others are dropping health care coverage altogether. According to a new report by Families USA, 27 percent of South Dakotans today have no health insurance. Across America, 44 million people are in that category. And most of the people who are uninsured get up and go to work every day. They work hard. Some of them work two and three jobs to support their families. But they can't afford health insurance. You don't have to be an optimist to believe that we can do better than that.

Last week, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates for the first time in 4 years as protection against inflation. Most analysts predict that we will see additional rate hikes in the future. And the enormous budget deficits built up these last 4 years will put even more pressure on interest rates, making it harder and more expensive for families to borrow money and to pay off mortgages, loans and credit card balances.

The Gateway workers who have lost their jobs, and middle-class families across South Dakota and across America, don't lack for optimism. But it is not easy to be patient when you have lost your job and your unemployment benefits, and your savings are getting low. It is not easy when you are working harder every year and getting deeper in debt.

Middle-class families across America are getting squeezed between stagnant wages and rising costs. They are being hurt by an economy that is creating jobs too slowly to fill the demand, and by the fact that the new jobs pay, on average, 21 percent less than the jobs they replaced.

The choices we make must do right by these families. Middle-class families need more—and deserve more—than soothing words of optimism. They deserve action from the Federal Government—smart, sustained, realistic, bipartisan action to help people who have lost jobs find new ones and to make sure that American companies and workers can compete for, and win, the jobs of the future.

One of the fastest, easiest ways we can reduce the economic squeeze on middle-class families is by protecting overtime pay. The Senate voted overwhelmingly last year to reject the administration's outrageous effort to deny overtime pay to millions of workers, and we rejected that misguided proposal again this year when we passed the Senate version of the FSC bill. Overtime pay isn't extra money; it is essential family income and protecting it is doing right by America. We need to continue to stand together and make sure that the final FSC bill Congress sends to the President preserves overtime protections.

When it comes to helping workers whose jobs have disappeared or been

shipped overseas, we don't need to create a new government bureaucracy. We just need to invest in solutions that we know work.

The Commerce Department's Trade Adjustment Assistance program is one example. It helps manufacturing workers who have lost jobs because of globalization get back on their feet. Among other things, it provides access to community college so workers can learn new job skills and it helps workers maintain their health coverage until they can find work.

The Trade Adjustment Assistance program is a good program. The only problem is, it doesn't cover service-sector workers, who are among the workers hardest hit by "outsourcing" and "offshoring." During the debate on the FSC bill, the Senate considered a bipartisan proposal to expand the Trade Adjustment Assistance program to help service-sector workers whose jobs are being shipped to India and other low-wage countries. Not only did the administration oppose our efforts to help these workers get back on their feet, it continues to encourage companies to ship more jobs overseas.

Turning our backs on workers who are being displaced by this economic transition isn't optimism. And it isn't doing right by America. We can do better—by expanding the Trade Adjustment Assistance program to match the realities of today's economy and help more laid-off workers get back on their feet.

We should also extend Federal unemployment benefits for those workers who have exhausted their State benefits and still can't find work. It is the sensible thing to do. It is the decent thing to do. It is right for America. And with the average length of unemployment at a 20-year high, we need to do it now.

We can also do a better job of helping businesses create new jobs. Tax cuts are one tool. But they do not, by themselves, create jobs. Small businesses and start-ups need access to capital. They need technical advice. They need help developing marketing plans. In other words, they need the kind of help that is provided by innovative programs such as the Small Business Administration's lending and technical assistance programs, and the Treasury Department's Community Development Financial Institutions Fund. Both of these programs have achieved wonderful results with limited resources. Yet the President's proposed budget for next year drastically reduces or eliminates funding for many of their efforts. That is a mistake, and we should fix it.

Finally, EDA, the Economic Development Administration, which is part of the Commerce Department, was created specifically to "alleviate conditions of substantial and persistent unemployment and underemployment in economically distressed areas and regions." I have seen how EDA seed money can grow into real jobs in rural

areas, on Indian reservations and in other communities in South Dakota where private lenders weren't as optimistic as the EDA about the community's future. If we are looking to reward hard work and optimism, we need to make sure EDA has the resources to carry out its mission wherever it is needed.

Around the country there must be hundreds, if not thousands, of communities like North Sioux City, where well-equipped factories stand idle and well-trained, highly skilled workers are waiting for an opportunity. Even though they have had a tough time these last few years, these workers are not pessimistic about America. They believe in America. They believe the future can be better than the past and they're willing to work hard to make that happen.

Let's work together to show these workers that America believes in them. Optimistic words are not enough. We need a comprehensive economic plan that does right by all Americans. We need to reduce the squeeze on middle-class families and make sure that every American worker is able to find work that allows them to care for their family and live in dignity. We have done it before. Working together, we can do it again.

Mr. President, I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. CHAMBLISS). The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Mr. REID. Mr. President, will the Senator yield?

Mr. PRYOR. Yes.

Mr. REID. It is my understanding that on the matter we are about to consider there are 6 hours under the order before the Senate; is that right?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

Mr. REID. We are starting at approximately 10 after. We will have a little more than 2 hours before the lunch break, and we will come back at 2:15. So if all 6 hours were used, what time would we vote tonight?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Approximately 6 o'clock.

Mr. REID. OK. So if we are going to do what the majority leader suggests, someone would have to yield back some time for us to be able to vote at 5:30. That is doable. I appreciate that.