consider our responsibilities before the end of this session of Congress.

ORDER OF PROCEDURE

During the Democratic period this morning, I ask unanimous consent that Senator KENNEDY be given 10 minutes; Senator MURRAY, 5 minutes; Senator CONRAD, 25 minutes; and Senator REID, 5 minutes.

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

Mr. DASCHLE. I ask, as is always the case, the leader time not be taken from the Democratic time.

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

THE SKYROCKETING COST OF HEALTH CARE

Mr. DASCHLE. Mr. President, recently, a new study confirmed a trend that most American families and businesses have known and felt for the past 3 years. Health care costs are rising at an unsustainable rate, straining family budgets, weakening our economy, hampering job growth and forcing millions more Americans every year to go without insurance.

According to the annual survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, health premiums increased 11.2 percent last year, more than five times the rate of wages. This is the fourth consecutive year of double-digit increases. Since 2000, health care premiums have increased 50 percent and 5 million fewer Americans have access to employer health care coverage.

Last month the Census Bureau also reported that in 2005 alone, the number of uninsured Americans jumped by 1.4 million. Seniors are among the hardest hit. In addition to facing record inflation, they worry that they are one layoff, one bad crop, one accident, or one illness away from being totally vulnerable, and they fell helpless to protect themselves.

Not long ago, I heard from the Imm VanDerhule, who runs VanDerhule Moving and Storage, in Yankton. Even after raising employee premiums and copays, Skip’s monthly premiums have risen 252 percent in 6 years. Skip has moved and stored, but he cannot find an insurance policy he can afford. He did not have to pay it in India. He did not have to pay it in countries abroad. He pays it here at home.

Small businesses, which employ 50 percent of the Nation’s workforce, face even greater challenge. Because they are not big enough to bargain with insurers for better rates, and they cannot spread risk among larger pools of employees, small businesses too often are forced to pay for the nation-wide increase in health care costs.

In the past year, in the midst of the toughest business environment in a generation, the total cost for insuring employees of small businesses alone rose 18 percent. Those small businesses that try to do the right thing and offer their employees health benefits are finding it more difficult to do so with each passing year.

I was recently contacted by Skip VanDerhule, who runs VanDerhule Moving and Storage, in Yankton. Even after raising employee premiums and copays, Skip’s monthly premiums have risen 252 percent in 6 years. Skip has tried to look for better coverage, but recently an employee needed a kidney transplant. The $120,000 per year in medicine alone just to keep his body from rejecting the new kidney.

As soon as the insurer sees that, they don’t want us. And they’ll quote us a price to make sure that we don’t want them.” So Skip is stuck with the prospect of higher health care costs with absolutely no end in sight.

In most businesses, the costs are passed along to their employees. Jana Schroeder, a medical professional from Sioux Falls, wrote me to say that even with good, dependable health insurance, her family pays $10,000 a year in health care costs.

A recent, routine mammogram cost $2,700, of which she was asked to pay $850. She said:

I guess I should feel lucky I have insurance, but $850 is a full paycheck [for me]. So, do you pay that medical bill or the house payment? I surely can’t pay it all at once.

Even with 100,000 Americans losing their health insurance every month since January of 2001, the White House has not provided any real options, no leadership in stopping the growth of this crisis.

Some of the most promising possibilities for bringing down the cost of health care, such as drug reimportation, the administration has opposed. Yet this crisis will not solve itself. Unless we act, health care premiums will continue to rise, driving more people into the ranks of the uninsured, and holding back more businesses from earning profits and creating jobs.

We have to do better. This is a national problem and it demands national leadership. Medical research is producing miracles quite often. Yet we are not solving a problem that is dragging tens of millions of Americans into poverty and poor health. This is not a question of ability or capacity; it is a question of will and leadership.

It is time we seek out new ideas to help bring down the cost of health care.

One promising new initiative would create a reinsurance system to help blunt the cost of catastrophic medical illness. Some researchers have suggested that such a program could save South Dakota employers tens of millions of dollars each year and billions nationwide.

We need to debate these issues in Washington, but, regrettably, we have not had the opportunity to do so. In the past 2 years, we have spent 30 days discussing ways to limit access to the courtroom, but not 1 day to debate real ways to bring down the cost of health care for all Americans.

It is time for real action. We have an obligation to focus on the troubles of our economy and the Americans who are struggling to work and raise families. Our citizens are asking for leadership, and we have an obligation to answer that call.

I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, there will be a period for the transaction of morning business for up to 90 minutes. The first 45 minutes is under the control of the majority leader or his designee and the next 45 minutes is under the control of the Democratic leader or his designee.

The Senator from Nevada.