

along with 21 of my Senate colleagues from diverse political, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds, a bipartisan and bicameral bill to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Senate Judiciary Committee has had a very busy year. Last Fall, while the House was beginning its hearings on the Voting Rights Act, we were just finishing our hearings and final vote on the nomination of John G. Roberts, Jr. to be Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Soon after that, we began preparing for hearings on the nomination of Harriet Miers to replace Justice O'Connor on the Supreme Court. When that nomination was withdrawn, we had to start over with a new nominee, Samuel Alito. We held hearings for Justice Alito in January, and since then, we've had a very full schedule which has included several hearings on the legality of the President's domestic spying program and, of course, countless hours marking up comprehensive immigration legislation.

So, we are just now beginning our work on the Voting Rights Act. But our relatively late start here in the Senate should not be interpreted to suggest that the Voting Rights Act is not a priority compared to the other matters we have had to address. To the contrary, the actions we take with respect to the Voting Rights Act—like the actions we took during the Supreme Court confirmation hearings—will dramatically impact the rights and lives of American citizens for generations to come.

The Voting Rights Act has been hailed as the single most effective piece of civil rights legislation that we have ever passed. The Act does not simply guarantee the right to vote, but it ensures the effective exercise of that fundamental right. In 1965, when President Johnson signed the bill into law, there were only 300 minorities elected to State, local, or federal office. Today, just 4 decades later, there are some 10,000 minorities serving as elected public officials.

Leaders from both parties, including President Bush and Attorney General Gonzales, have said they support reauthorization. Today, leaders from both parties of both houses of Congress have come together to introduce this reauthorization bill.

The magic of the Voting Rights Act is apparent in my own hometown, New York City. New York City is one of the most diverse cities in the country, and the Voting Rights Act has been extremely effective in ensuring that all of our citizens are able to participate equally in the political process. But many of the Act's successes in New York have come only since the last time we renewed its major provisions.

For example, the first African American mayor of New York City wasn't elected until 1989, and the first African American wasn't elected to statewide office until 1994. In 2002, the first Asian American was elected to the New York City Council. And finally, just last

year, a mayoral candidate became the first Latino to win his party's nomination.

These strides are important, but they are too few and too recent to say for certain that the goals of the Voting Rights Act have been met. There is still a lot of work to do, and as a member of the Judiciary Committee, I look forward to reviewing the evidence and testimony that is going to be presented at our hearings in the weeks to come, and to working with my colleagues from both Houses and on both sides of the aisle to ensure that this bill is passed well before the deadline.

SMALL PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITIES PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT

Mr. SUNUNU. Mr. President, I rise to speak on legislation I introduced yesterday, the Small Public Housing Authorities Paperwork Reduction Act. This legislation is an important step toward alleviating some of the burden placed on our Nation's smallest public housing authorities. PHAs play an important role in meeting the housing needs of the Nation's low-income individuals, families, seniors, and the disabled. Unfortunately, they face a challenge when balancing the housing needs of those they serve with the, oftentimes, consuming and duplicative reporting requirements placed upon them. The legislation I am introducing today seeks to address just one annual report that will free up a significant amount of time and resources, allowing housing authorities to focus more attention on the individuals they serve.

Specifically, this legislation would exempt PHAs with 500 or fewer public housing units and any number of section 8 vouchers from the requirement of submitting an annual plan to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The 1992 Public Housing Reform Act required PHAs to submit separate 5-year and annual plans to HUD. The redundancy of the annual plan process creates an undue burden for small PHAs by requiring them to provide identical information to HUD every 12 months. For example, an annual plan outlines a PHA's goals, policies, eligibility guidelines, and other information that is unlikely to change from year to year. Under this bill, small PHAs would only be required to submit their 5-year plan—a more appropriate timeline for reevaluating their goals and policies—to better allow them to use scarce human and financial resources to directly serve the needs of their communities. Additionally, this bill would only exempt those PHAs that have demonstrated compliance with HUD regulations. PHAs that have been designated by HUD as troubled would not be exempted from the annual plan.

It is also important to note that PHAs would still be required to conduct an annual meeting in which residents and community members are in-

cluded in the planning and development of a housing authority's objectives and priorities. My legislation makes certain that residents have an opportunity to comment on any changes to the goals, objectives, and policies of the agency. Housing authorities are also required to notify tenants of any proposed changes at least 45 days before the public hearing occurs. The annual public meeting, in combination with State and local public meeting requirements, will continue to ensure that any changes made to a PHA's policies are well vetted, with particular attention paid to resident concerns.

PHA directors in my State and across the country contend that this legislation is a significant step toward reducing the excessive paperwork and reporting requirements that burden their agencies. I agree, that by mitigating some of this burden, we will allow PHAs to focus more time and energy for their mission-driven service to their housing residents. Not all PHAs have the time, staff, or resources available to complete these annual plans. Some PHAs have had to hire outside consultants to complete the plans, a costly expense for these agencies. Given the fiscal constraints PHAs are facing, it is more important now than ever to give housing authorities the flexibility needed to work within these budget constraints. This legislation is one simple way Congress can assist in providing needed relief to PHAs.

My colleague, Congressman RANDY NEUGEBAUER, has introduced similar legislation which passed in the House of Representatives on December 13, 2005, by a vote of 387 to 2. The overwhelming support in the House for such an initiative makes very clear the need for this type of relief. I am hopeful my colleagues in the Senate will also see the value of providing paperwork reduction for those agencies that have demonstrated their ability to comply with current regulations.

Finally, I am pleased to have the support of the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority and local agencies across my State in this effort. New Hampshire's PHAs continue to do an exceptional job of providing for the housing needs of those who need it most. State and local housing agencies perform an invaluable community function by securing housing for families and individuals in need. I remain committed to working further with them throughout this legislative process and to reducing unnecessary federal regulatory burdens for housing.

COVER THE UNINSURED WEEK

Mr KOHL. Mr. President, this week has been designated Cover the Uninsured Week. It is week that we mark every year to spur our Nation to act to address the growing number of Americans who lack health insurance. Sadly, that this has become an annual event shows that we have made little