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**Remarks of President Barack Obama – As Prepared for Delivery
White House Forum on Health Reform
Washington, DC
March 5, 2009**

We are here today to discuss one of the greatest threats not just to the well-being of our families and the prosperity of our businesses, but to the very foundation of our economy – and that is the exploding cost of health care in America today.

In the last eight years, premiums have grown four times faster than wages, and an additional nine million Americans have joined the ranks of the uninsured. The cost of health care now causes a bankruptcy in America every thirty seconds. By the end of the year, it could cause 1.5 million Americans to lose their homes. And even for folks who are weathering this economic storm, and have health care now, all it takes is one stroke of bad luck – an accident or illness; a divorce or lost job – to become one of the nearly 46 million uninsured or the millions who have health care, but can't afford it.

We did not get here by accident. The problems we face today are a direct consequence of actions we failed to take yesterday. Since Teddy Roosevelt first called for reform nearly a century ago, we have talked and tinkered. We have tried and fallen short, stalled time and again by failures of will, or Washington politics, or industry lobbying.

And today, there are those who say we should defer health care reform once again – that at a time of economic crisis, we simply cannot afford to fix our health care system as well.

Well, let's be clear: the same soaring costs that are straining our families' budgets are sinking our businesses and eating up our government's budget too. Too many small businesses can't insure their employees. Major American corporations are struggling to compete with their foreign counterparts. And companies of all sizes are shipping their jobs overseas or shutting their doors for good.

Medicare costs are consuming our federal budget. Medicaid is overwhelming our state budgets. And at the Fiscal Summit we held here last week, the one thing on which everyone agreed was that the greatest threat to America's fiscal health is not Social Security, though that is a significant

challenge; and it is not the investments we've made to rescue our economy; it is the skyrocketing cost of health care.

That is why we cannot delay this discussion any longer. And that is why today's forum is so important. Because health care reform is no longer just a moral imperative, it is a fiscal imperative. If we want to create jobs and rebuild our economy, then we must address the crushing cost of health care this year, in this Administration. Making investments in reform now, investments that will dramatically lower costs, won't add to our budget deficits in the long-term – rather, it is one of the best ways to reduce them.

Now I know people are skeptical about whether Washington can bring about this change. Our inability to reform health care in the past is just one example of how special interests have had their way, and the public interest has fallen by the wayside. And I know people are afraid we'll draw the same old lines in the sand, give in to the same entrenched interests, and arrive back at the same stalemate we've been stuck in for decades.

But I am here today because I believe that this time is different. This time, the call for reform is coming from the bottom up, from all across the spectrum – from doctors, nurses and patients; unions and businesses; hospitals, health care providers and community groups. It's coming from mayors, governors and legislatures – Democrats and Republicans – who are racing ahead of Washington to pass bold health care initiatives on their own. This time, there is no debate about whether all Americans should have quality, affordable health care – the only question is, how?

The purpose of this forum is to start answering that question – to determine how we lower costs for everyone, improve quality for everyone, and expand coverage to all Americans. And our goal will be to enact comprehensive health care reform by the end of this year.

In the past month alone, we have done more to advance that goal than we have in the past decade. We've provided and protected coverage for eleven million children from working families, and for seven million Americans who've lost their jobs in this downturn. We've made the largest investment in history in preventive care; invested in electronic medical records that will save money, ensure privacy, and save lives; and launched a new effort to find a cure for cancer in our time. We have also set aside in our budget a health care reserve fund to finance comprehensive reform. I know that more will be required, but this is a significant down-payment that is fully paid for and does not add one penny to our deficit. And I look forward to working with Congress and the American people to get this budget passed.

Now, as we work to determine the details of health care reform, we won't always see eye to eye. We may disagree – and disagree strongly – about particular measures. But we know that there are plenty of areas of agreement as well, and those will serve as the starting point for our work.

We can agree that if we want to bring down skyrocketing costs, we'll need to modernize our system and invest in prevention. We can agree that if we want greater accountability and

responsibility, we must ensure that people aren't overcharged for prescription drugs, or discriminated against for pre-existing conditions – and we need to eliminate fraud, waste and abuse in government programs. We can agree that if we want to cover all Americans, we cannot make the mistake of trying to fix what isn't broken. So if you have insurance you like, you'll be able to keep that insurance. If you have a doctor you like, you can keep that doctor. You'll just pay less for the care that you receive.

Finally, we can all agree that if we want to translate these goals into policies, we need a process that is as transparent and inclusive as possible. That is why I have asked all of you – representatives of organizations, interests, and parties from across the spectrum – to join us here today. And that is why we asked concerned citizens like the folks on this stage to organize open meetings across America where people could air their views. More than 3,000 meetings were held in all 50 states and DC, and more than 30,000 people attended. I thank them for their input and ideas, and I look forward to reading the report that Travis has presented to me.

In this effort, every voice must be heard. Every idea must be considered. Every option must be on the table. There will be no sacred cows in this discussion. Each of us must accept that none of us will get everything we want, and no proposal for reform will be perfect. But when it comes to addressing our health care challenge, we can no longer let the perfect be the enemy of the essential.

Finally, I want to be very clear at the outset that while everyone has a right to take part in this discussion, no one has the right to take it over. The status quo is the one option that is not on the table. And those who seek to block any reform at any cost will not prevail this time around.

I did not come here to Washington to work for those interests. I came to work for the American people – the folks I met on the campaign trail, and who I hear from every day in the White House. Folks who work hard and make all the right decisions, but still face choices that no one in this country should have to make: how long to put off that doctor's appointment; whether to fill that prescription; when to give up and head to the emergency room because there are no other options.

I have read some of the many letters they've sent asking me for help. They're usually not looking for much. They don't want a handout or a free ride. Some are embarrassed about their situation and start by saying they've never written a letter like this before. Some end by apologizing -- saying they've written to me because they have nowhere else to turn; asking me not to forget about them and their families.

Today, I want them, and people like them across this country, to know that I have not forgotten them. They are why we are here today – to start delivering the change they demanded at the polls in November. And if we are successful, if we can pass comprehensive reform, these folks will see their costs come down and get the care they need, and we'll help our businesses create jobs again so our economy can grow again.

It will not be easy. There will be false starts and set-backs and mistakes along the way. But I am confident that if we come together, and work together, we will finally achieve what generations of Americans have fought for and fulfill the promise of health care in our time.