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**Charting a Course for Health Care Reform:
Moving Toward Universal Coverage
Hearing before the Senate Committee on Finance
Opening Statement of Senator Max Baucus**

In the Wisdom of Ben Sira, in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles, it is written: "There are no riches above the riches of health."

And the Swiss poet Henri Amiel wrote: "Health is the first of all liberties."

America is the richest nation in the world. But to our shame, we remain the only industrialized nation that does not think itself rich enough to guarantee its citizens health coverage.

And America is the freest of all nations. But we remain the only major Western nation that does not guarantee the first of all liberties.

At the core of America's health care crisis is the debate over whether health care is a right, or a privilege. At the core of our crisis is the question whether health care is just another commodity, or a fundamental human need.

I believe that health care should be a right. I believe that America is rich enough, and good enough, to guarantee that right. And I believe that we must begin to work toward that goal today.

America spends more than \$2 trillion a year on health care. But we have 47 million uninsured. And we have relatively poor health outcomes.

America has many of the world's best doctors and hospitals. They perform the most advanced life-saving procedures. They successfully treat the most serious illnesses. They unfailingly expand the bounds of medical innovation.

But this best-in-the-world medical system is out of reach for millions of Americans.

One in six Americans does not have access to health care, except for in overcrowded emergency rooms. And in my home state of Montana, an even greater percentage of people have limited access to health care: one in five Montanans lack health insurance. Businesses struggle to continue to offer health benefits and remain competitive in the face of ever-increasing costs. Employees grapple with having to pay more for coverage, while getting less care.

For too long, Congress has remained idle, as health care costs have spiraled out of control. For too long, Congress has done nothing, as the ranks of the uninsured have grown. The people of Montana and the nation deserve better.

Today we begin down a long and arduous road. Today we begin again the journey toward universal coverage. It is a road that we must travel.

Everyone seems to agree that we need to do better. But discussions of how to proceed seem inevitably to end in stalemate. People seem inevitably to deadlock over who will make sacrifices, and which ideologies must bend.

But standoffs must become a thing of the past. The American people deserve better.

Why start down this road?

The short answer is that we must.

The problem has grown too large. And the situation has grown too dire, for Congress not to act.

Congress must engage in an extensive and thoughtful dialogue. Let it begin here today.

Health care reform will take time. But I am in this for the long haul.

We need better health coverage, so that all Americans can live longer, happier, and more-productive lives. And we need better health coverage, so that American businesses can maintain their economic leadership.

I have studied the innovative proposals being put forth. I am optimistic. I see consensus on the horizon.

I see five broad principles of reform. And I intend to hold a series of hearings to explore each principle in greater depth. By having an open and honest dialogue, I am confident that we can build momentum. We can find points of consensus. And we can bring about reform.

The first principle is universal coverage. That is our subject today. Universal coverage is essential if we are to make meaningful progress on the other four principles. We cannot address the health care system, and leave a growing portion of the country behind.

The second principle is sharing the burden. Neither the employer-based system nor the individual market can fulfill the demand for affordable, portable, quality coverage. The way to ensure affordable coverage is to create pooling arrangements.

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The third principle is controlling costs. America cannot sustain its current rate of growth in health care spending. Any serious proposal must reduce the rate of growth of health care costs. Our economy depends on it.

The fourth principle is prevention. American health care tends to address what happens when you are sick. By making prevention the foundation of our health care system, we can spare patients needless suffering. We can avoid the high costs of treating an illness that has been allowed to progress.

The fifth principle is shared responsibility. We want universal coverage. But the question is: Who will bear the burden of a new system? The answer is that everybody must shoulder the burden together. Health coverage is a shared responsibility. All should contribute.

Today's hearing is the first step on the road to reform. We will hear from four individuals who are lifelong experts in health care. They will help us start our journey. Along the way, we will have more help from more experts as we convene subsequent hearings in this series.

With their help and advice, let us set out on the road to health care for all Americans. Let us travel down a road that will keep America a rich nation, and a free nation. And let us also go down the road that will take our citizens to the greatest of riches, and the first of all liberties, that of health.

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