

Thursday, March 22, 2012

Washington, D.C. – Congressman Ben Ray Luján of New Mexico's Third District joined Representatives George Miller (D-CA), Rubén Hinojosa (D-TX), and Donna Edwards (D-MD) and a number of young adults at a press conference yesterday to highlight the benefits of the Affordable Care Act for America's Young Adults. Below is a transcript of the press conference:

Congressman Miller. Good afternoon.

I'm Congressman George Miller from California, and I'd like to welcome the Members of Congress and young Americans here today to highlight the real success story of the Affordable Care Act. Two years ago on Friday, I was proud to stand next to President Obama as he signed the Affordable Care Act into law. Because for decades we debated about what to do about rising health care costs faced by families, businesses and government. For decades we debated about how to put American families, instead of the insurance companies, back in charge of their health care. And for decades we just kicked the can down the road; costs continued to rise faster than everything else in the economy, and millions of Americans lost access to affordable health care.

This ended with the passage of the Affordable Care Act, and the law has started working for millions of Americans. Today we come together to highlight one of the success stories resulting from the Affordable Care Act. Our nation's young adults are facing a tough economy, and they have the highest unemployment rate of anyone. And when they start their careers, they are least likely to be the new hires offered health care coverage and insurance. For many of these young Americans, buying an individual policy on the open market can be prohibitively expensive, or not available at all too them – especially those with pre-existing medical conditions.

But thanks to the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the law being signed by President Obama, young adults like Hunter and Spencer, who are here with us today, and many of the others, can now stay on their parents' plan up to their 26th birthday if they aren't offered coverage at work. More than two and a half million young adults have been able to take advantage of this already – nearly 8,000 in my district, alone.

But Washington Republicans, and some very powerful special interests, want to take health care coverage away from these two and a half million young adults, who are starting their careers and their lives with new families, just like Hunter and Spencer. They will be lining up next week across the street at the Supreme Court to argue to put the insurance companies back in charge of these decisions. And we're here to say "no" on behalf of young Americans all across this country. The families and young people ought to be in charge of their health care options, and that's what the Affordable Care Act gave them. The idea that we are now going to rip that away from these families and these young people, struggling to make their way in this economy, is just unacceptable.

As I said, for nearly 100 years, Americans tried to pass meaningful health care reform. And it wasn't until President Obama made it a priority, that we got it done. And now these reforms are really making a difference in people's lives. Now is not the time to put the insurance companies back in charge. Our nation's businesses can't afford it, families can't afford it, and Hunter and Spencer can't afford it.

Now I'd like to recognize Congressman Hinojosa.

Congressman Hinojosa. Thank you, George.

I want to thank Ranking Member Miller, and I would like to thank all of you for coming out today. My name is Rubén Hinojosa, and I have the honor of representing Texas' District 15.

It's shameful that Texas has the highest rate of uninsured children of any state in our country. One in five children has no health coverage. That is why the Affordable Health Act is so important. Since it was enacted, already one million kids have begun getting preventive [services] – like immunizations and wellness checks without out-of-pocket costs. That is helping kids avoid illness and stay in school, and it's helping all of us avoid unnecessary health care costs for preventable problems.

While this week also marks the second anniversary of the Affordable Care Act, it also marks two years for the birth of a little boy named Houston Tracy in Crowley, Texas. Born with a heart defect just days before the passage of the Affordable Care Act, baby Houston was deemed uninsurable from birth because of a pre-existing condition. His case drew national attention, and eventually his private insurance company backed down under pressure.

Today, under the Affordable Care Act, no child will suffer the indignity baby Houston Tracy met. Insurers can't deny coverage over a medical need. Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, fewer kids are needlessly winding up in our emergency rooms because manageable diseases like diabetes and asthma can be handled in a doctor's office the way children need. Kids and families are being protected against lifetime caps on coverage or benefits, so if a child beats leukemia at the age of 8, he will still be able to get the care he needs, even if it relapses at age 20.

There is room for different views, but not for different facts. And the fact is that millions of kids in Texas and across our whole country are better off because of the Affordable Care Act.

Thank you. And now, I would like to introduce Spencer Turner, who is living proof of how the Affordable Care Act is helping people every day.

Mr. Turner. Thank you, Representative Hinojosa.

Like most people my age, I was covered by my parents' insurance growing up. It doesn't sound so extraordinary, but it made a big difference in my life, whether it was dealing with asthma, or any of the sports injuries I incurred being young and having fun. After college I no longer qualified for their plan, and I was unable to find a job that offered me health benefits. I expected to have health insurance at my most recent position, but my status was relegated to part time, and therefore I am no longer qualified.

So, when the under 26 provision of the Affordable Care Act went into effect, I was able to rejoin my parents' plan and I have health insurance again.

I'm grateful. Thank you.

Congresswoman Edwards. Spencer, thank you very much.

I am Donna Edwards. I represent Maryland's 4th Congressional District, and as I listen to Spencer, and we're joined here with the young people who are standing with us, I can think of no stronger provision in the Affordable Care Act than to protect young people, under the age of 26, enabling them to go on their parents' health insurance plan.

In addition to being a Member of Congress, I'm a mother. I'm a mother of a 23-year-old, and I can remember that day that I received the notice from our health insurance company saying that he would be dropped on his birthday. And I remember thinking what to do. And at the time, we'd passed the Affordable Care Act, but it hadn't gone into implementation yet. And so, I, like many parents across the country, had to go out and search for a COBRA plan that I could pay for, costing almost \$500 a month, because I couldn't keep my son on my health care plan.

And so I know that all of the young people who are here with us today, Spencer and Hunter, who'll be joining us, that their parents faced the same thing that I did. Only, the difference now, with the Affordable Care Act, is that they can look at that letter, discard that letter – maybe they didn't even get one, but they knew that they could keep their young people on their health care plan until age 26.

That's the difference that the Affordable Care Act makes in the lives of parents and of young people all across this country, whether that young person is in between finding a job after school, or whether that young person is working but isn't covered by health care, like we heard from Spencer.

Today, because of the Affordable Care Act, thousands and thousands of students and young people all across this country can stay on their parents' health care plan until they're age 26. And so, we should say thank you to President Obama, to the Affordable Care Act, and to the leadership here, the Democratic leadership in the Congress, for passing the Affordable Care Act.

And we will dare anyone to tell parents like Spencer's parents, and like me, that you can no longer keep your children on your health care plan. Let's try taking that away, we won't let it happen.

And, with that, I'd like to introduce to you another bright, young face, Hunter Driendling, who has her own story about being able to stay on her health care plan.

Ms. Driendling. Thank you for having me here today, and thank you for this opportunity to tell

my story.

As a result of the Affordable Care Act, I was able to stay on my parents' insurance after I graduated college. This allowed me to spend several years at the beginning of my career serving communities throughout the United States. It was a great opportunity for me to gain work experience and serve and give back to my country. I started volunteering at domestic abuse shelters straight out of college. Later, I did disaster relief work in Alabama, built community gardens in Camden, New Jersey, and helped raise funds for the American Red Cross. Each year, I made less than \$11,000. It was more important to me that I was the boots on the ground in communities that needed volunteers.

Had I not been covered, my opportunities would have been limited. I wouldn't have been able to afford health insurance on my own. I know how important health insurance was to me. One of the reasons is that I played rugby all throughout college, and I have had my fair share of doctors' visits. While volunteering, I ended up having to get surgery on my shoulder because of an injury that I got during college. Because the law had changed, I was covered under my parents' insurance, and they were able to afford it. Had it not changed, I would not have been able to afford the surgery on my own.

While I don't think my story is the most heart-wrenching story you'll hear of young people my age, I think it's a fairly common one. And thanks to the Affordable Care Act, two and a half million young people like me can reach for their dreams, and they can take risks, and they can contribute to society without worrying about whether or not they can afford to go to their doctors.

I'd like to thank groups like Young Invincibles and Campus Progress for speaking up for my generation. And I'd especially like to thank Congressman Miller and his colleagues for making affordable health insurance a reality for millions of people like me. You've given, and made, it possible for my generation to make the choice to serve and give back and become a part of their community, and not have to take a job right out of college simply so I can have health insurance. So, thank you for that.

Congressman Luján. Thank you very much.

I'm Congressman Ben Ray Luján from the state of New Mexico, and I'm honored to be joined by Spencer and Hunter and my colleagues, who put a real face on the benefits that health insurance reform is having for people across this country.

This generation of young people – those that you see behind me, and all around this great

nation of ours – are people that are leaders already in our community. We hear about the volunteer work and advocacy, of making a difference in people's lives. These are people making a change. These are people that care about the future of this great nation of ours, and we have a responsibility to this generation.

I feel that, if we really care about young Americans, we need to support an environment where they can grow up in a healthy environment and they have access to quality health care. Unfortunately, in the past, too many young people would finish college and try to find a job that would allow them to follow their dreams – we heard about one today – they finished school, hadn't quite found that job with benefits, and got kicked off their parents' plans. At a time when their focus should be on beginning their careers, they have to worry about an accident or an illness that could leave them facing a mound of debt or unable to receive treatment.

We all know that, sadly, we're one accident or one health care problem away from losing it all. Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, these young adults and millions of their peers across this country, now have the peace of mind that if they do not have health care through their employer, they will now have access to health care until they're 26 on their parents' plans.

In my district alone, in northern New Mexico, 6,500 young adults now have access to health care thanks to the Affordable Care Act. There are 6,500 young adults who can focus their efforts on making a brighter future for themselves, for their families, for their communities, without the fear and stress that is caused when they have to go a day without health care.

That's good news, not only for them, for their families, but for all of us.

Thank you for being here, and thanks to all the young people that are with us today to celebrate the importance of what the Affordable Care Act means.

I'll turn it over back to our friend and our boss, Mr. Miller.

Congressman Miller. Thank you very much. I want to thank my colleagues and again thank Hunter and Spencer for joining us – and the young people behind me, to make this point: that for millions of families across this country, having access to health care for their children is a vitally important element of how they plan for their current status, for their future, and the best hopes for the young people as they send them off to college and into the American economy. And we'd be glad to take one or two questions here quickly.

Q: You mentioned earlier that [inaudible]. However, the White House isn't planning a big anniversary event, Senate Democrats aren't really doing any big events centered around health care, the only people really doing it are House Democrats and one could argue that that was part of you guys losing the majority in 2010. [Inaudible]

Congressman Miller. That has nothing to do with any of that. It has to do with the celebration of the passage of the Affordable Health Care and the 54 million Americans who are now getting benefits that they weren't entitled to before. Seniors who are getting free check-ups. Health care providers and insurance companies that are avoiding costs now because that preventative check-up is now allowing them to catch illnesses at an early stage as opposed to later on, when it becomes traumatic or becomes very expensive in the emergency room. The young people behind me who now have the assurance that they will have access to health care. Whether they want to start a business, go to graduate school, volunteer in their community – we heard from Hunter, and all of the things that their looking forward to in their careers. They will not be held back. For people who are now giving birth to new children, to their new babies, and not concerned about preexisting conditions.

So, this is a celebration. It will be under attack in the Supreme Court of the United States next week. And the Administration has put together its brief, its put together its arguments, it's been supported by groups all across the country and that was where the contest will be on this act in the near future. But we're going to continue to support the Health Care Act, we're going to continue to see the benefits that are coming to our communities – not just in dollars and cents – but in healthier communities. So we're very excited about that.

Yes?

Q: How confident are you that the Supreme Court of the United State will uphold the individual mandate?

Congressman Miller. I'm very confident. I wouldn't of signed a brief for the mandate if I wasn't confident. I'm very confident about it.

Congressman Hinojosa. Can I add something, George? The first question reminds me of what happened decades ago when Social Security – it reminds me, your question reminds me of the Social Security when it was passed. How there were so many people outraged because of Social Security. And they tried to tear it up and remove it. It reminds me, also, of Medicare, and how there were so many people against Medicare and, again, they tried to destroy it and bring it down – look at what it is today and the same thing will occur with this new health act that was passed two years ago.

Q: So, the Administration has offered a regulation under Obamacare that says: “all women with reproductive capacities,” think college age women, “must be offered free sterilization in their health care plans.” Do you support the mandate for free sterilization for college women?

Congressman Miller. It's not a mandate to begin with. I don't know if anybody wants to respond to it?

Congresswoman Edwards. Let's just be very clear about what the Affordable Care Act does and the administration's implementation of it. And especially for women, because women are some of the greatest beneficiaries of the Affordable Care Act. From preventive services, mammograms, screenings that they wouldn't get otherwise that contribute greatly to their health care. And reproductive health care is an important component of every single bit of a woman's health care. And so I'm actually excited about that. I'm excited for our young women. And I'm excited for women ages 19 to 64 who will get the benefit of preventive services under the Affordable Care Act.

Congressman Miller. The fact is, in the history that this nation has lived with, prior to the Affordable Care Act, women were discriminated greater than any other group of individuals in our society on preexisting conditions – became the point where almost just simply being a woman was a preexisting condition. And it knocked you out of eligibility for health care, or major health care – much more expensive, or made it much more restrictive, or you just couldn't get it at all. And that's the change that is taking place here on behalf of women's health and women's access to the health care they need throughout their lives.

Q: While it's true that many more young adults will have health insurance, the uninsured rate has gone up in virtually every other age category since the Affordable Care Act was passed, do you see that as a problem?

Congressman Miller. Well we also know that the economy is taking away, because people have lost their jobs and because it's an employer based system currently, they've lost their health care. One of the things we can say with the Affordable Care Act is, in the future, whether you lose your job, or whether you get sick, you will have access to health care. And that's the difference. We're phasing this in. And we know that in 2014, those people will know that whatever happens to them in the future, they will continue, because of the existence of the exchanges, they will continue to have access to health care. So that's the tragedy. That without an Affordable Care Act, without a national policy, we had millions of American families put at huge risk – it's the number one cause of bankruptcy, because they don't have health insurance, but they have health crises that are existing in those families. So this provides them a great deal of assurance, a great deal of comfort and a great deal of coverage, for no matter what happens to them in their lives and conditions that they aren't able to control. And it also means that they will probably be able to survive other economic downturns in the future, because they'll have the assurance of access to health care for them and their families. And that's a huge difference in the law, with the Affordable Care Act, as it was without it.

Congressman Hinojosa. I believe that there's lack of communication to you, because in the area that I represent in deep south Texas, 40 percent of the families were uninsured before the passage of the Health Reform Act. Today, that has been reduced to 25 percent and as it is being implemented within the four year period, we anticipated that there will be less than 10 percent uninsured. So, we are making great headways throughout the whole country, including my region.

Congressman Miller. Thank you.

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