

You can say a lot of different factors caused this. One has been the concentration and growth in agriculture, where there are fewer farmers farming larger tracts of land. That is certainly accurate.

It is also the fact that a number of people in agriculture have, because of a lack of income, had to get off-farm jobs. There are not major urban areas in a lot of these places, so they have not been able to find that and they have had to move to major urban areas. So you have had this combination of difficulty in agriculture, difficulty of a lack of jobs on an off-farm basis. It has led to this huge out-migration.

If this were just Kansas, it would be problematic enough, but instead of a whole swath, particularly in the Middle West, from Texas sweeping up north all the way to Montana and Minnesota, you have a number of counties like this.

I believe nearly 90 percent of counties in North Dakota qualify because of the same feature: Concentration in agriculture, fewer off-farm job opportunities, and people saying: We simply don't have anyplace to work. We would love to live here. We would love to be able to stay here. We have to have a job. We have to be able to make a reasonable income.

This is the total population. If you look at the school-age population, it is even worse. It is even a more steep decline. I have been in cities in Rawlins County and far Northwest Kansas where the school-age population has declined nearly a fourth over the last 5 years. So while the overall population is going down like this, the school-age population is plummeting. As young people don't move back in the area, there are not the jobs and opportunities. They are saying: I would love to live here, but I can't.

I have been around a lot of rural development efforts that tried to push people back to rural areas. To me, this is a way to pull people back to rural areas, by providing economic incentives, the likes of which we did to populate the region in the first place. This is a region that was populated by the Homestead Act in the first place, telling people, if they will stay there and work 160 acres for 5 years, it is theirs.

We had people self-selected. It wasn't people saying: You are going to go, and we will select you, we won't pick you—it was the great American way. This is the opportunity. If you want to do it, it is your choice. You don't have to do it. People took it and moved out.

The New Homestead Act is recognizing the new economic realities and saying what can we do to pull people into these areas. These are ideas we tried in major urban areas, we tried them in Washington, DC, and a number of other places where we were having the hollowing out of urban areas, and they have attracted people back to the core in these urban areas. We are trying to take those same proven models,

proven tests, to another area that has been hollowed out in the United States.

That is why I am excited about this bill. I am hopeful it is something we can move in total, or in part, quickly. We need to do so. We need to move this forward aggressively.

It is providing new hope and new vision in areas where a lot of people were of a mind that: I guess nobody is listening or paying attention, and we are going to have difficulty making it. Our community is not going to make it.

Here we are saying, no, we want to provide this new hope and opportunity with the New Homestead Act. I hope our colleagues, if they have other ideas that could strengthen this bill, will bring those forward as well.

It is a very difficult issue for our State. I am delighted to be supportive of this effort. My colleagues and I are going to push aggressively here and in the House to make it happen.

It is simple: rural America—our history, our founding lifestyle—is suffering and the Congress must not turn our backs. Take, for example, the town of Nicodemus, KS, in Graham County. This town was started more than a century ago when some 350 freed slaves left Kentucky and made a new beginning for themselves on the plains of Kansas. For a while, the town prospered, showing a new life to these newly-freed slaves. Unfortunately though, the railroad never moved in—a devastating lost opportunity that was followed by drought, depression, and, finally, a post-war exodus. Suddenly, the town itself and its population seemed almost ghost-like. Today, Nicodemus is without a school, and there is only one full-time farmer left in the area.

Unfortunately, this story is not an isolated one, as hard times have hit throughout America. In fact, this kind of situation is happening across our heartland, and we are here today to provide the much needed incentives to preserve rural America and the values instilled there.

We must revitalize within our heartland that spirit of creativity and enterprise that has always allowed our nation to grow and adapt. It has long been the key to our success both philosophically and in the wealth of our nation. For example, Americans who once held jobs that relied on the production of natural resources, such as farming, now work in service or technology industries. As a result of new technologies, American industries, including agriculture, have become more profitable with fewer employees. We in the Congress have an obligation to ensure the economic viability of these rural communities, even in light of the major problems and out-migration these areas are suffering.

In 1862, the Homestead Act inspired many to move to places like Kansas with promises of 160 acres of free land to those settlers who would farm and live there for five years. Today, we are introducing the New Homestead Act.

While we aren't offering 160 acres, we are rewarding those individuals willing to take a risk and locate in a high out-migration county with the opportunity to get a college degree, buy a home, and build a nest egg for the future. Through loan repayment, small entrepreneurship credits, home tax credits, protecting home values, and individual homestead accounts, this bill reaches out to a new generation of Americans.

And it is this new generation of Americans that will help rejuvenate rural America. Since our founding, a strong and vibrant rural America has been essential to a strong nation—and this principle remains only more true today. Our continued national well-being depends as much, if not more, on the condition of our less populated areas as on our urban areas.

It is my hope that the Senate will take a serious look at this bill and move quickly to implement the provisions we have set forth. I appreciate the work that my colleagues Senators HAGEL and DORGAN have done on this bill. Their vision and drive have brought this bill to where it is today, and I hope that the same spirit will help propel this bill through the Senate so that we can start helping our rural communities as quickly as possible.

For, as we struggle through economic hard times nationwide, it would be wise to remember a comment George Washington made:

A people . . . who are possessed of the spirit of commerce, who see and who will pursue their advantages may achieve almost anything.

I know our rural communities are not only our history, but still have much to offer our nation today. Therefore, let us enable that spirit of commerce, and put these communities on the path to recovery.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. BROWNBACK. Mr. President, as in executive session, I ask unanimous consent that the cloture vote on the Estrada nomination occur at 2:15 today; provided further the order for debate remain from 11:30 to 12:30; I further ask unanimous consent at 12:30 the Senate begin consideration of Calendar No. 36, the Bybee nomination as under the previous order.

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

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

MEASURE PLACED ON
CALENDAR—S. 607

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I understand that S. 607 is at the desk and due for a second reading.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator is correct.

The clerk will read the bill for the second time by title.

The senior assistant bill clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 607) to improve patient access to health care services and provide improved medical care by reducing the excessive burden the liability system places on the health care delivery system.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I object to further proceedings.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The bill will be placed on the calendar.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. TALENT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

Mr. TALENT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be recognized in morning business for a period of up to 15 minutes.

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

COVER THE UNINSURED WEEK

Mr. TALENT. Mr. President, this is "Cover the Uninsured Week" and there have been press events—and I guess you can call them rallies—around the country designed to inform America about the problem of the uninsured. I guess I am glad that is happening. It seems as though it happens a lot. We have been talking about the uninsured for a long time.

I think it is time we do something about the uninsured instead of just telling everybody that we have. And we can do that. I would suggest we are on the brink of doing it. We in the Senate just have to choose between the employees of the small businesses around the country, who are most of the uninsured, and the big insurance companies that have them under their thumb currently.

There are about 41 million uninsured people in the country at any given time. About 60 percent of those uninsured people are either owners of small businesses or employees of small businesses, or dependents of somebody who owns or works for a small business. Most of the people who are uninsured are working people. The reason they are uninsured and the reason they are not getting health insurance through their small business is that the small businesspeople are caught. They are stuck on a dysfunctional market. They are caught because all they bring to that market is a unit of 4 or 5 people, or maybe 20 or 30, or maybe 60 or 70.

And they have very few choices. They consistently pay higher costs for health insurance premiums, and they get lower quality insurance than people who work for big businesses or people who work for the Federal Government, as we do.

I have seen this all over the State of Missouri and, indeed, all over the country. I chaired the Small Business Committee for two terms in the House. In that capacity and since then, I have visited personally with hundreds and hundreds of small businesspeople and with thousands of their employees. This is their No. 1 issue. It is not fair for them to be laboring under impediments that the rest of us do not have.

I was in Farmington, MO, over the weekend. I stopped by an optometrist's office run by a couple of optometrists, and a couple of their employees were there. They gathered around and told me a very familiar story. In 1999—I think it was—they said, we just felt we had to start providing health insurance to our people, as expensive as it was and as difficult as it was.

They had to spend hours and hours soliciting bids, maneuvering, and trying to get insurance for their people. So they started it.

They said: When we started, it was a little over \$200 a month per employee. Now, 4 years later, it is over \$500 a month per employee.

They are not able to give wage increases to their people because health insurance costs are increasing so fast.

Everywhere I go, small business health insurance costs are going up 20 or 25 percent a year.

There is a further human side to this story. One of their employees—a really neat lady—I talked with for a while. She is a single mom and a cancer survivor. She is trapped, and the small business is trapped with her, because if they drop the insurance, she will never get reinsured anyplace else. They feel a moral obligation to continue that insurance for her. The other employees are doing without wage increases and dealing with substandard insurance in order to help their fellow employee.

I have seen this story over and over again. And it is not necessary. We can do something about it, and we need to.

Here is what we can do.

The House passed several times in the 1990s—and the President now supports the plan—a plan that would simply allow small businesses to pool through their national trade associations or their professional associations and get health insurance on the same terms and under the same regulatory apparatus as the big businesses, the unions, and the Government currently do.

That is all we need to do, just empower the small businesspeople. It will not cost the taxpayers a dime because it is not a Government program. It is just allowing people to do what is already happening all over the United States.

So here is how it would work: Let's say the National Restaurant Associa-

tion would sponsor national health insurance plans. They would start an employee benefit side, just like the big companies do. They would contract with national insurance companies. They would have a self-insured side. And then, if you are a restaurant employee, by joining the restaurant association, you would automatically be entitled to get this insurance. They would have to offer it to you. They could not tell you you could not have it. And you would be part of a pool of 20,000 or 30,000 people instead of in a unit by yourself with two or three or five or ten people, like my brother's situation. He has a little tavern kind of restaurant in St. Louis. Actually, it may be more of a saloon. But, in any event, he could join the National Restaurant Association to get coverage. It is just him and my sister-in-law who run this place. Apart from the money, which is impossible for him, he does not have the time and does not want to incur the risk of going out two or three times a year and soliciting bids.

And then, all of a sudden, what often happens to small businesspeople is they get called up because somebody actually filed a claim. The big insurance company tells them their rates went up astronomically. They have no power in this market. They are caught with few choices, with small groups, with high administrative costs. It is not necessary, and it does not even cost anything for us to fix it.

I was talking about this at a dinner the other day with six or seven people who were there to talk about how we could serve the underserved better with health care. This is part of the answer to it. We had a real good dialog with these folks. Many of them are operating a charitable enterprise where they are helping people get health care.

I laid this out for them, and one of the men said to me: Well, who wouldn't support that? Indeed, who wouldn't support it? I will tell you who doesn't support it: the big insurance companies, who control this small group market now. They are operating like monopolists. Monopolists ratchet down their output and raise their prices. That is what is happening. Fewer and fewer people are covered, and prices are going higher and higher. They are making money, and people around this country do not have health insurance. It is wrong, and it ought to stop.

One argument I hear about this is: Look, if we do this, the association health plans will engage in cherry-picking. What that means is, the healthy small business groups will go into the big plans, the sicker small business groups will prefer to stay out there in the small business market. This is actually an argument that the big insurance companies are raising. It is the exact opposite of the truth.

Common sense tells you if you have a history of illness, if you have cancer or had cancer or diabetes or kidney problems, or something similar to that, and somebody says to you, look, you can be