

I am proud to say the House Republicans have a plan to increase and improve America's access to affordable and high quality health care. Association Health Plans will help employers, especially small business owners, afford quality health care for their employees and their families, will improve the quality of life and provide much needed health security. AHPs address both health care access and cost by allowing small businesses to create associations that may jointly purchase health insurance for their workers at a lower cost.

Specifically, AHPs establish eligibility requirements so that all AHPs are required to offer fully-insured and/or self-insured benefits. AHPs encourage broad participation and coverage by prohibiting discrimination of any kind against certain "high-risk" individuals. AHPs will cover specific diseases, maternal and newborn hospitalization and mental health issues. AHPs will be exempt from costly and burdensome state health insurance regulations to enable greater and more effective coverage. AHPs will be financially strong and responsible by reserving enough funds for potential costs and other obligations.

AHPs have enjoyed the support of a wide coalition, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, the American Farm Bureau, the Associated Builders and Contractors, the Latino Coalition, the National Black Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Women Business Owners and the National Restaurant Association.

These organizations have endorsed AHPs because AHPs will reduce health insurance costs for employers. For example, insurers selling directly to small employers typically incur administrative costs of 20 to 25 percent. By contrast, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that small businesses that obtain insurance through AHPs will save an average of 13 percent. Other estimates have indicated cost savings could be as much as 25 percent. AHPs will significantly reduce the number of uninsured Americans. AHPs, according to a study by the Research Corporation, estimates that up to 8.5 million uninsured workers and dependents could gain coverage from AHP legislation. And this study confirms even a small cost savings can result in large increases in purchasing power for all of our small businesses. The CBO has concluded, Mr. Speaker, that Association Health Plan legislation would extend insurance coverage for up to two million uninsured American workers with no cost to the government.

I encourage my colleagues to support the Small Business Health Insurance Act, H.R. 525, when it comes to the floor this week.

#### CENTRAL AMERICAN FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 4, 2005, the gentleman from California (Mr. DREIER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. DREIER. Mr. Speaker, this week we will address one of the most important national security issues of the 109th Congress. It also is an extraordinarily important economic issue, when it comes to the challenge of growth in this country and throughout this hemisphere. I am talking of course about the Dominican Republic Central American Free Trade Agreement.

As I listened to my colleague from Oregon just a few minutes ago decry the problems of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the fact that there will be overpromising when it comes to the Central American Free Trade Agreement, I was struck by the fact that he really did not get the message that was provided by that great former senator, democratic presidential candidate from Massachusetts, Paul Tsongas, who said, the problem with my democratic party is that they love employees but they hate employees.

The fact of the matter is, if you look all the way across the board, we know that globalization is inevitable. And as Prime Minister Singh said in his address to us a week ago tomorrow, right here in a joint session of Congress, we cannot ignore what is taking place in any other part of the world because of the fact that the globe is shrinking.

Now, Mr. Speaker, I am not going to overpromise and say passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement is all of a sudden going to solve every ailment of society. But I do know this, 22 years ago, we, with a huge bipartisan vote passed the Caribbean Basin Initiative, which, instead of sending aid, provided an opening, an opportunity for the Caribbean nations to have access to the U.S. consumer market. That has helped us and it has helped them.

Right now, with the Central American Free Trade Agreement, all we are saying is let us have a reciprocal arrangement. 80 percent of the goods, including 99 percent of agricultural products from Central America come tariff free, tax free to U.S. consumer. That is a good thing. It has allowed us, Mr. Speaker, to allow the high standard of living that we have as Americans.

Now, what we are saying is, through this agreement, let us open up their markets so that the 44 million consumers in the Dominican Republic and the 5 Central American countries can have access to U.S. manufactured goods.

Now, one of the challenges that we face, of course, is our competition that is going on with the Pacific Rim. We, at the end of last week, saw finally moves toward re-evaluation of the yuan, the Chinese currency. And we

know that if we are going to compete, it is important for us to implement hemispheric wide trade here so that we can compete with Asia and, specifically, with China.

One of the things we also know, Mr. Speaker, is that if you buy a shirt from China it has a little more than 1 percent of U.S. content. If you buy a shirt from Central America that is manufactured in Central America, over 60 percent of it has U.S. content. So this agreement is going to enhance our ability, not only as a Nation, but as a hemisphere to be more competitive.

We put together a wide range of agreements over the last several years, bilateral agreements with Jordan, Singapore, Australia, Chile, Morocco. They have all been great bilateral agreements. But right now, Mr. Speaker, we have the opportunity to put together a very important multilateral agreement with six countries. That also will lay the groundwork for the very important effort that we have that will begin in the coming days to proceed with the Doha round with the WTO in Geneva. Why? Because the goal as was set forth back in 1947 when the general agreement on tariffs and trade was established was to eliminate tariffs. And we all know, Mr. Speaker, that a tariff is a tax. And so cutting taxes enhances the standard of living and the quality of life for people. This is a win-win for the United States of America, for the Central American countries, and for our region as a whole.

I hope very much that our colleagues join in a strong bipartisan way, doing exactly what we did in 1983 when we passed the Caribbean basin initiative. Let us send this to the President so that it can be signed and so that we can have this win-win all the way around.

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#### RECESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 12(a) of rule I, the Chair declares the House in recess until 2 p.m. today.

Accordingly (at 12 o'clock and 49 minutes p.m.), the House stood in recess until 2 p.m.

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#### AFTER RECESS

The recess having expired, the House was called to order by the Speaker pro tempore (Mr. KOLBE) at 2 p.m.

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#### PRAYER

The Chaplain, the Reverend Daniel P. Coughlin, offered the following prayer: Loving God, bless all those who work for the U.S. House of Representatives.

May all House Members and all who serve as their staff be instruments of consultation and wisdom to accomplish the legislative work of the American people.