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PRESIDENT CLINTON
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On May 3, 1995, I will become the first Democratic President to convene a White House Conference on Aging. I look forward to addressing the more than 2,200 delegates and 250 observers from around the country who will travel to Washington to help shape a national aging policy. I have no doubt that the wealth of experience and wisdom of the participants will produce an exciting and productive Conference.

The Conference is an example of government at its best: working together with the people it serves. The public participated fully in developing the theme and the agenda of the Conference. Since February of 1994, when I called for the convening of this White House Conference on Aging, tens of thousands of Americans have participated in more than 700 forums, town meetings, roundtables and other events all over the country centered on the issues that will be debated during the Conference.

Thanks to the wide participation in preconference events, we have already learned a great deal about the issues that are important to seniors. Although our nation's more than 30 million senior citizens are generally optimistic about the future, they have serious concerns about what it will hold for them and for their children and grandchildren.

As I said in the State of the Union address, "Our senior citizens have made us what we are." When I made this statement, I was speaking not only of the hard work and sacrifices our parents and grandparents have made in the past, but also of the continuing contributions of our nation's seniors. Seniors are contributing in the workplace, as caregivers, as loving and supportive family members and friends, and as volunteers in Senior Corps programs and in thousands of other places -- including the White House.

But seniors have told us that they are concerned that the federal programs that make it possible for millions of older Americans to live in dignity -- programs that today's seniors supported for the benefit of their elders -- will be destroyed. I recognize the vital role of these programs in the lives of our senior citizens. I am determined to preserve, protect and improve Social Security and health care services for today's senior citizens and for the generations that follow.

This year, we mark the sixtieth anniversary of Social Security, the single most important step our nation has taken to ensure the economic security of our senior citizens. We must never forget the commitment we have made to present and future beneficiaries of this long-standing program. I will fight to make sure that the promise of this program is fulfilled for this generation and for generations to come.

The Social Security Administration operates effectively and is continuously improving its customer service. For example, SSA is becoming more accessible through its 800 number, reducing the number of pending disability claims, and mailing statements to Americans that let them know the amount of retirement benefits they can expect.

Seniors have also stressed to us the importance to their well-being of federal health care programs. Although everyone recognizes the role Medicare plays in the health care of older Americans, it is important to understand that Medicaid also provides important services to vulnerable elderly and disabled Americans. In fact, approximately two-thirds of all Medicaid expenditures are for services for the elderly and disabled.

Over the next five years, almost 40 percent of the growth in all federal spending will come from rising costs in federal health care spending. For the sake of our nation's economic future, we must contain costs in these programs. But we must recognize the imperative of doing so in the context of reforming our health care system. This is why I have consistently opposed deep and arbitrary cuts in programs serving our elderly that do not address the underlying problems of our health care system. And it is why I have consistently stated that I will not permit Medicare to be sacrificed to pay for tax cuts for the wealthy.

As part of our efforts to reform our nation's health care system, my Administration has worked to improve federal health care programs. We have increased efforts to combat fraud and abuse to make sure that tax dollars are used to provide health care services, better publicized the availability of Medicare-covered services like flu shots and mammograms, supported states in reforming their Medicaid programs, and worked to increase choices and ensure quality of care for Medicare beneficiaries. We look forward to hearing more from the Conference on Aging delegates about how to improve these programs further.

The White House Conference on Aging also provides an opportunity to tackle another difficult and critical aspect of health care reform -- long-term care. Seniors have told us how much they value their independence. They have shown us that our current health care and social service systems make it hard, and, in many cases, impossible, for senior citizens to remain in their own homes and communities. That is why I have called on Congress to work with me to help Americans provide long-term care for their sick or disabled family members. That is why we need to look at ways to promote insurance for long-term care. That is why we need consumer protection standards that will ensure that long-term care policies are worth ^{more than} the paper they are written on. I am confident that the Conference delegates will make an invaluable contribution towards resolving the issue of long-term care.

This issue as well as the others I have discussed here are often lumped together as "seniors' issues." But seniors have reminded us that they are personally affected by many of the same concerns about personal and economic security as are younger citizens. And they have shown us that "seniors' issues" are everyone's issues -- not only because those of us who are not yet senior citizens will, God willing, become senior citizens, but because older Americans are an integral part of our families and our communities. Similarly, older Americans are concerned about issues that, at first glance, affect only younger people -- issues like public education, student loans, job training, and health care and nutrition for pregnant women and children. We have heard repeatedly from older Americans that what they want is a future filled with opportunity for their children, for their grandchildren and for the young people in their communities. The Conference theme, "generations aging together," is a wonderful expression of the fact that we share one another's lives and the fate of our nation.

Lately, I've been speaking about a New Covenant -- a partnership between our government and the American people that recognizes that every citizen has the right and responsibility to reach their full potential, and to give something back to society in return. The New Covenant is a crucial element of my vision for a better America, and seniors play an important part. Our government must provide seniors with the opportunity to continue

to lead independent and productive lives. In turn, our senior citizens have a great deal to contribute to younger generations of Americans and to our nation as a whole. Participants in the White House Conference on Aging -- of all ages -- will make a tremendous contribution when they gather here in Washington and put their creativity, experience, wisdom and energy to work shaping a national aging policy that will benefit us all.