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**Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing Examining the President's
2023 HHS Budget**
As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee meets this morning with Secretary Becerra to discuss the year ahead for the Department of Health and Human Services. There's a lot to cover, so I'll quickly tick through a handful of issues.

First, on telehealth. This committee began to open the door to telehealth in Medicare in the CHRONIC Care Act in 2017. Then in 2020, we pushed to include telehealth services in the CARES Act. In implementing the law, Medicare decided to also cover telehealth delivered audio-only on a temporary basis during the pandemic. That's been a health care game-changer for people across the country, particularly in rural areas. In this year's appropriations bill, Senator Crapo and I pushed to extend the audio-only flexibility beyond the public health emergency.

There is bipartisan interest in building on that progress on a permanent basis and making sure that the clock doesn't get turned back on patients who've come to rely on telehealth for basic services. I'm sure that issue will be part of our discussion today.

Second, Democrats and the administration are committed to protecting our bedrock health care programs — strengthening the Affordable Care Act, upholding the Medicare guarantee. Republicans have other ideas.

Senator Scott, the campaign visionary for Senate Republicans, recently proposed phasing out Medicare in five years. I'd like to know how America's 60 year olds feel about that. And Senator Johnson has doubled and tripled down on the same old crusade, repealing the Affordable Care Act. He says that Republicans should be preparing their repeal bill now to have it ready to go whenever they next take power. If it looks anything like it did last time, it'll gut health care for tens of millions and shower tax handouts on the wealthy. In my view, that's not what Americans are interested in seeing right now.

The biggest concern going today for millions of families in Oregon and all across the country is the rising cost of living. Bringing down health care prices and protecting Americans from getting clobbered by huge bills is one of the best ways for Congress to take some of the pressure off their pocketbooks.

A couple areas to highlight. For one, millions of Americans are getting a better deal on health insurance this year because of the rescue plan Democrats passed in March of 2021. Monthly premiums for

Americans who get insurance on the individual market fell by 22 percent this year — adding up to hundreds of dollars or more over 12 months. People across all income levels saved money. Six million new consumers got coverage.

Go back a few decades and Republicans would be shouting from the mountaintops about the incredible success of the private marketplace at work. Not so in 2022 — these days, every Republican has gone on record against the tax credits that made that success possible.

If the Republicans have their way, millions of Americans are going to get whacked by higher insurance premiums in 2023. That cannot be allowed to happen. Democrats must keep those savings going.

The administration and Democrats in Congress are also in lockstep when it comes to bringing down prescription drug prices. For too many Americans, every trip to the pharmacy counter means getting mugged by drug companies. Instead of using the bargaining power of more than 60 million American seniors to get lower drug prices, Medicare's hands are tied behind its backs.

Changing that by giving Medicare the authority to negotiate a better deal for brand-name drugs is the single most important reform on offer. Democrats also have a plan to cap co-pays for insulin at \$35 a prescription and set an out-of-pocket cap for seniors' prescriptions in Medicare Part D at \$167 per month. The plan would also create a tough new price gouging penalty for drug companies that increase prices faster than inflation.

This plan would save money for patients in Medicare and in the private market, and it would also save taxpayers billions every year.

Getting a better deal on health insurance and prescription drugs — those are the kinds of savings that millions and millions of Americans need desperately right now. Congress must step up and deliver them.

Finally, this committee is working hard on a bipartisan basis to guarantee that every American can finally get the mental health care they need when they need it. The budget includes smart proposals to help make that a reality, particularly within Medicare and Medicaid.

Getting rid of caps on Medicare coverage for care in a psychiatric hospital. Adding Medicare coverage for sessions with a therapist or counselor. Waiving cost sharing for up to three mental health visits a year in Medicare and private insurance. Permanently expanding nationwide Medicaid funding for Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics which Senator Stabenow has long championed.

These proposals from the budget could open doors to treatment for a lot of people who are struggling to connect with mental health providers today, or people who could face a crisis in the future. Members on both sides of this committee are laser focused on mental health care and we look forward to working with the administration on these issues.

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