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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on the Nomination of Xavier Becerra to be Secretary of Health and Human Services
As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee meets this morning for the second of three nomination hearings this week. I'm pleased to welcome Attorney General Xavier Becerra, President Biden's nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

With a pandemic raging, so many Americans struggling to get by, and our health care system strained to the max, there may not be a higher-stakes job in the executive branch outside of the presidency itself.

Attorney General Becerra brings more than two decades of experience in the Congress. He was a senior member of the House Ways and Means Committee, which overlaps with this committee on a lot of important health care subjects. He was closely involved in major accomplishments on health care, including the ACA. For four years he's led the second-largest Department of Justice in America, overseeing thousands of employees and a billion-dollar budget. Anybody who discounts the experience of leading a California agency that large and influential to the fifth-largest economy in the world is straining awfully hard to find something to critique.

AG Becerra defended the Affordable Care Act from absurd and dangerous far-right attacks. When the pandemic hit, he went to bat for Californians by increasing access and affordability for COVID treatments, protecting workers from exposure, and securing key safeguards for frontline health care workers.

Having started my career in legal aid for seniors as the co-founder of the Oregon Gray Panthers, I appreciate that AG Becerra got his start in legal aid for the less fortunate as well. This is a nominee with the right policy experience, the right leadership experience, and the right experience fighting for the little guy. That's exactly what's needed at Health and Human Services after four years of mismanagement that took us in the wrong direction.

In this committee, a special focus of our work during this Congress is going to be tackling inequality in every form. In America, inequality is a killer. If you didn't believe it before the pandemic, there can be no questioning it now.

People of modest means, people targeted by discrimination, people marginalized in society – they’re the Americans who’ve suffered disproportionately in this pandemic. That’s because they were vulnerable before the pandemic, too, and federal policies did not do enough to protect them.

I’ll tick through a few examples. First, Americans are still getting absolutely clobbered every time they walk up to the pharmacy window to pick up their prescription drugs. In a country as wealthy as ours, it is utterly shameful that you still hear about people rationing their own medicine and suffering terrible consequences because they can’t afford their prescriptions.

Second, the pandemic has proven that there needs to be a new focus on mental health in America. With so many lives lost and so many people out of work, it shouldn’t be any surprise that people in Oregon and across the country are struggling when it comes to mental health. Compared to physical health care issues, mental health has really gotten short shrift for too long. The law says they’re equally important, but that’s not how they’re handled in practice. I believe that needs to change, and I’m going to talk more about that in Q&A.

Third, the pandemic has also shined a spotlight on a lot of long-running disparities in health care in this country – many of them issues that stretch back through the generations. One of them is maternal health care. The American people want this to be a pro-family country. It is totally unacceptable that pregnancy and childbirth and the postpartum period are so dangerous to American women, particularly when you compare this country to other wealthy nations.

This is a particularly serious problem for Black and Native American women, and it’s getting worse as the years go on – not better. In fact, here’s a shocking statistic: women today are more likely to die in childbirth than their mothers were a generation ago. Addressing this crisis goes hand-in-hand with the need to expand and improve women’s health care overall, since the last four years have been a women’s health nightmare.

I’m looking forward to working with AG Becerra and the Biden administration on those issues and more. It’s been a difficult four years for too many vulnerable Americans who struggle to pay for their medications and find access to the health care they need.

If AG Becerra and his team start every day actually focused on expanding affordable health care and improving human services instead of limiting them, they’ll already be doing better than the last administration.

AG Becerra is highly qualified. He has a valuable range of experience that will help him succeed in this job. And this is an historic nomination, because AG Becerra would be the first Latino HHS Secretary.

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