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Wyden Finance Committee Hearing Statement on Trump Nominees

As Prepared for Delivery

Today, the Committee will consider four nominees. Each of them, if confirmed, will be placed in positions of enormous responsibility over the health and welfare of American families.

It's unfortunate that the Chairman has decided it's business as usual at the Finance Committee, against the backdrop of a health care calamity that's about to hit American families. Not to mention day 29 of a government shutdown—now the second-longest shutdown in history. For months, Democrats have tried to negotiate with Republicans to prevent a doubling, tripling, and more of health insurance premiums for tens of millions of Americans. Every step of the way, even before the shutdown began, the door has been slammed shut by my Republican colleagues.

In two days, millions of Americans will start trying to renew their health insurance. When they log onto their accounts, too many, like Bart and Carla from Eugene, Oregon are going to fall between the cracks. In their case, that means paying 500 percent more for the same health insurance they had this year. Because of efforts by Trump and for-profit insurance companies to conceal these premium increases, most families are in the dark about how expensive their health care is about to get. They will be seeing this sticker shock for the first time.

Just days away from open enrollment, what are Republicans focused on? Building Trump's ballroom and bailing out a foreign country while families go hungry while Scott Bessent cosplays as a soybean farmer. It sure as hell isn't keeping costs down.

The Finance Committee could be working to keep health care affordable to make sure people don't lose their coverage. Instead, it's been silent. You can practically see tumbleweeds rolling across the floor of the House of Representatives, where Mike Johnson has given everyone a six-week vacation. There might as well be tumbleweeds rolling across this floor of this very hearing room. We should be using today's hearing as a chance to talk about the consequences of the premium increases families are going to face in the coming days.

In 10 months, the Senate Finance Committee has failed to hold a single hearing on health care. It's been 400 days since that last meeting on substantive health policy. With a health care affordability crisis for millions of Americans just days away, it's long overdue for this committee to fulfill its constitutional duty to conduct oversight and find solutions for families.

Democrats have made clear that we are more than ready to negotiate with Republicans to keep costs down and reopen the government. From day one, Democrats have stood up and tried to lower families' health costs, while Republicans stood in the way. The American people won't forget it.

Now, turning to the subject of today's hearing, starting with Mr. Bell, nominated to serve as Inspector General at HHS. Donald Trump has done more than any president in history to undermine the Inspectors General tasked with rooting out fraud and abuse in our government. He unlawfully fired nearly two dozen Inspectors General across the government, including at HHS. He replaced them with a wave of partisan Republican operatives, who stand ready to sabotage the independent oversight Inspectors General are supposed to conduct. So, Mr. Bell should not even be here today. The job he seeks from the American people is not vacant. Putting that aside, Mr. Bell is a dangerous nominee. He has spent his career running Republican smear campaigns, including heading up a witch hunt against Planned Parenthood under a special House Committee. And at this very moment, Mr. Bell is leading a highly partisan investigation into ActBlue to undermine Donald Trump's political opponents.

The Inspector General's office at the Health and Human Services Department is the largest such office in the government, and for good reason. There's a lot of work to be done to go after fraudsters who are stealing taxpayer dollars or hurting families. I fear Mr. Bell will use his position to target opponents of the Republican Party instead of using his power to root out legitimate health care fraud and abuse. Americans' ought to have faith that independent watchdogs will call balls and strikes without political interference. If confirmed, Mr. Bell is going to challenge that faith to its core.

Next is Arjun Modi nominated to be Deputy Commissioner of the Social Security Administration. Mr. Mody's appearance is timely, considering his new boss, Frank Bisignano, has just been deputized to be the acting head of the IRS after months of chaos at the tax-filing agency. As tax filing season kicks into high gear, that means Mr. Bisignano is going to be a busy man, likely leaving Mr. Mody as the de facto head of Social Security. I'm concerned about this state of affairs because Mr. Mody has zero experience working directly on Social Security policy, and has never managed a staff larger than a couple of dozen folks.

Social Security continues to face a customer service crisis and Americans deserve to have Social Security to be led by someone who knows how to right the ship. In yesterday's Washington Post, one of my constituents, Tim, from Lake Oswego shared how, after waiting on hold for over 2 hours to speak with someone from Social Security, received the cruelly-named "polite disconnect" in which he was hung up on because the office was no longer open. He was recently diagnosed with throat cancer and just wanted information about survivor benefits for his family. It took three more attempts of hours-long wait times for him to get a hold with someone at Social Security.

I'm skeptical that Mr. Mody is qualified to lead this agency in Mr. Bisignano's absence to address this customer service crisis.

I'll conclude by discussing the two trade nominees before the Committee, Julie Callahan to be Chief Agricultural Negotiator at USTR and Jeff Goettman to be Deputy USTR.

Donald Trump's trade agenda has been nothing short of a disaster for our country. Farmers and small businesses are struggling to stay afloat as he flip-flops on his tariffs. Prices on everything families buy, from groceries to cars to electronics, continue to skyrocket. Workers are wondering if they'll still have a job one month to the next. What's needed now more than ever is a consistent trade agenda that will put American workers, businesses, and farmers first. Instead, what we have is a trade agenda driven by Donald Trump's personal grievances. I'll be waiting to hear from these nominees exactly how they plan to restore stability to our economy and bring down costs for families.

I'll close with this. This is not business as usual. Senate Republicans are making a mockery of this process by advancing illegitimate nominees, like Mr. Bell, and voting to confirm over a hundred unqualified, partisan hacks in one fell swoop. The government is shut down, and Donald Trump is using it as another opportunity to trample over the constitution and use taxpayer dollars as his own personal piggy bank. I cannot support more nominees that are hand-picked to help him do it.

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