

THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
NOMINATING SYLVIA MATHEWS BURWELL  
AS SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Rose Garden

10:54 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Hey! (Applause.) All right, everybody, have a seat. Have a seat. Have a seat. Well, good morning. In my sixth year in office, I am extraordinarily grateful to have so many aides and advisors who have been there since the earliest days. But it's still somewhat bittersweet when any of them leave for new endeavors -- even when their successor is wonderful.

In early March, Kathleen Sebelius, my Secretary of Health and Human Services, told me she'd be moving on once the first open enrollment period under the Affordable Care Act came to an end. And after five years of extraordinary service to our country -- and 7.5 million Americans who have signed up for health coverage through the exchanges -- (applause) -- she's earned that right. I will miss her advice, I will miss her friendship, I will miss her wit -- but I am proud to nominate someone to succeed her who holds those same traits in abundance: Sylvia Mathews Burwell. (Applause.)

Now, just a couple things about Kathleen. When I nominated Kathleen more than five years ago -- I had gotten to know Kathleen when she was governor at Kansas and had shown extraordinary skills there; was a great advisor and supporter during my presidential campaign, and so I knew that she was up for what was a tough job -- I mentioned that one of her many responsibilities at HHS would be to make sure our country is prepared for a pandemic flu outbreak. I didn't know at the time that that would literally be her first task. (Laughter.) Nobody remembers that now -- but it was. And it just gives you a sense of the sorts of daily challenges that Kathleen has handled, often without fanfare, often unacknowledged, but that have been critical to the health and welfare of the American people.

She has fought to improve children's health, from birth to kindergarten; expanded mental health care; reduced racial and ethnic disparities; brought us closer to the first AIDS-free generation. She's been a tireless advocate for women's health.

And, of course, what Kathleen will go down in history for is serving as the Secretary of Health and Human Services when the United States of America finally declared that quality, affordable health care is not a privilege, but it is a right for every single citizen of these United States of America. (Applause.)

Kathleen has been here through the long fight to pass the Affordable Care Act. She helped guide its implementation, even when it got rough. She's got bumps, I've got bumps, bruises -- but we did it because we knew of all the people that we had met, all across the country, who had lost a home, had put off care, had decided to stay with the job instead of start a business because they were uncertain about their health care situation. We had met families who had seen their children suffer because of the uncertainty of health care. And we were committed to get this done. And that's what we've done, and that's what Kathleen has done.

Yes, we lost the first quarter of open enrollment period with the problems with HealthCare.gov -- and they were problems. But under Kathleen's leadership, her team at HHS turned the corner, got it fixed, got the job done, and the final score speaks for itself: There are 7.5 million people across the country that have the security of health insurance, most of them for the very first time. And that's because of the woman standing next to me here today. (Applause.) And we are proud of her for that. That's an historic accomplishment. (Applause.) That's right.

And, by the way, in the meantime, alongside 7.5 million people being enrolled, health care costs under Kathleen's leadership are growing at their slowest rate in 50 years. I keep on reading folks saying, oh, they're not doing anything about cost, except they're growing at the slowest rate in 50 years. What does that mean? That's in part because of Kathleen's extraordinary leadership.

Health records are moving from dog-eared paper to high-tech systems. Kathleen partnered with the Department of Justice to aggressively pursue health care fraud and return billions of dollars -- record sums -- to the Medicare Trust Fund.

So, all told, Kathleen's work over the past five years will benefit our families and this country for decades to come. So we want to thank Kathleen's husband, Gary, the "First Dude" of Kansas. (Laughter.) We got two outstanding sons, Ned and John, who have been willing to share their mom with us these past five years. And, Kathleen, I know that your dad -- who

served as governor of Ohio, and who inspired you to pursue public service and who passed away last year -- would have been so proud of you today. So, Kathleen, we want to thank you once again for your service to our country. (Applause.)

Now, we know there's still more work to do at HHS. There's more work to do to implement the Affordable Care Act. There's another enrollment period coming up about six months from now. There's a whole array of responsibilities to meet over at this large and very important agency. And I could choose no manager as experienced, as competent as my current Director of the Office of Management and Budget: Sylvia Mathews Burwell. (Applause.)

Sylvia is from a small town -- Hinton, West Virginia. So she brings the common sense that you see in small towns. She brings the values of caring about your neighbor and ordinary folks to some of the biggest and most complex challenges of her time. She's a proven manager who's demonstrated her ability to field great teams, forge strong relationships, and deliver excellent results at the highest levels. And she's done it both in the public and private sectors.

As COO and later president for global development of the Gates Foundation, Sylvia worked on the cutting edge of the world's most pressing health challenges. As the head of the Walmart Foundation, and a member of the board at MetLife, she gained firsthand experience into how insurance markets work, and how they can work better for businesses and families alike.

Here, as my Budget Director at the White House, she's already delivered results. After all, in the year since she arrived, the deficit has plunged by more than \$400 billion. I'm just saying. (Laughter.) That's happened during that time. (Applause.)

When the government was forced to shut down last October, and even as most of her own team was barred from reporting to work, Sylvia was a rock -- a steady hand on the wheel who helped navigate the country through a very challenging time. Once the government was allowed to reopen, Sylvia was vital to winning the two-year budget agreement that put an end to these manufactured crises that we had seen here in Washington so that we could keep our full focus on growing the economy and creating new jobs, and expanding opportunity for everybody who is seeking opportunity. And all the while, she's helped advance important initiatives to bring the government into the 21st century, including her efforts to speed up job creation by dramatically speeding up the permitting process for big infrastructure projects.

So Sylvia is a proven manager, and she knows how to deliver results. And she'll need to be a proven manager because these are tough tasks, big challenges. From covering more families with economic security that health insurance provides, to ensuring the safety of our food and drug supply, to protecting the country from outbreak or bioterror attacks, to keeping America

at the forefront of job-creating medical research, all of us rely on the dedicated servants and scientists, the researchers at HHS and the FDA and CDC and NIH. All of them are an extraordinary team, and sometimes the American people take for granted the incredible network of outstanding public servants that we have who are helping to keep us healthy and helping improve our lives every single day.

So I want to thank Stephen, Sylvia's husband, and Mathew and Helene for sharing wife and mom with us a little bit longer. We'll miss seeing you around the White House, but I know that you're going to do an outstanding job as America's Secretary of Health and Human Services. I hope that the Senate confirms Sylvia without delay. She's going to do great. Last time she was confirmed unanimously -- I'm assuming not that much has changed since that time. (Laughter.)

And with that, I want to give them both an opportunity to say a few words, starting with Kathleen. (Applause.)

SECRETARY SEBELIUS: Thank you. Well, I want to start by thanking you, Mr. President, and Mr. Vice President, for giving me the opportunity of a lifetime to serve in this Cabinet. I want to thank my HHS family, many of whom are here -- at least the health leaders are here -- for their incredible work. And my personal family, represented today by our older son Ned, and my wonderful daughter-in-law Lisa; my husband Gary is on the Bench in Kansas today doing multiple hearings, which he does each and every day, and our younger son is in Ecuador. But they're with us in spirit.

The President has already made this case, but I want to remake it. HHS is an amazing department. It's full of bright and talented and hardworking people who believe strongly in our important mission: providing health care and essential human services to all Americans.

Now, inscribed on the walls of the Humphrey Building, where your office will be, are the words of the namesake. And what Hubert Humphrey said is, "The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadow of life." And that really, I think, describes what we do at HHS.

From our work on birth-to-kindergarten initiatives to providing for the elderly and disabled, our employees help their friends and neighbors every day. The researchers in NIH labs and scientists working to improve new drugs and devices are helping change the face of humanity by advancing new cures, research and innovation. We're advancing public health in

the U.S. and around the globe with anti-smoking efforts and promoting maternal and child health.

Finally, behavioral health and physical health issues will be considered both part of a central treatment, and that's a big step forward. Our workers, as the President said, look out for a safe and secure food and drug supply in a global market. And our smart diplomacy, sharing health expertise and advances, win the hearts and minds of nations across the globe. We have done transformational work in tribal communities across this country that will never be the same again.

So at any point in our history, that mission would be highly rewarding and some of the most important work anybody could do. But I've had an additional amazing opportunity -- no one has ever had this before -- I got to be a leader of HHS during these most historic times. We are on the front lines of a long overdue national change -- fixing a broken health system. Now, this is the most meaningful work I've ever been a part of. In fact, it's been the cause of my life. And I knew it wouldn't be easy. There's a reason that no earlier President was successful in passing health reform, despite decades of attempts.

But throughout the legislative battles, the Supreme Court challenge, a contentious reelection and years of votes to turn back the clock, we are making progress, tremendous progress. And critics and supporters alike are benefitting from this law. My professional work as a legislator and insurance commissioner and a governor have been tremendously helpful in navigating the policy and politics of this historic change.

But at the end of the day, health is personal. It's personal to all of us. Family illnesses and personal health challenges touch us to our core. I've spent time as a daughter navigating care for ill parents. As a mother and now a grandmother, I have experienced and worried about prenatal care and healthy babies. We've had family health challenges, as all of us have. And finding the right care can be difficult even with the best contacts and the right resources.

So the personal reward for me at the end of the day are the folks who approach me, the strangers who approach me at a meeting or pass me a note on a plane, or hand me a phone with someone on the other end saying thank you. Their stories are so heartening about finally feeling secure and knowing they can take care of themselves and their families.

Unfortunately, a page is missing. (Laughter.)

So I'm just grateful for having had this wonderful opportunity. The President was in Austin yesterday at the LBJ Library, commemorating 50 years in the civil rights efforts led by

Lyndon Johnson. And 50 years ago, my father was part of that historic Congress. He served in the Congress with the passage of Medicare and Medicaid, with Head Start. And those programs are now in the agency I've had the honor to lead. It seems like a wonderful passing of the baton.

And the Affordable Care Act is the most significant social change in this country in that 50-year period of time. So I am so grateful to have had this opportunity. I appreciate all of the effort and support. I thank my Cabinet colleagues who are here on the front row. And not only are they here today on the front row, but they've been part of an all-hands-on-deck effort making sure that that 7.5 million people were able to sign up for affordable health care.

So thank you, Mr. President. And what I know is that Sylvia -- in the year I've had the opportunity to work with her -- is a trusted and valued friend, a great partner. She will be a terrific leader for HHS. So I'll turn it over to Sylvia. (Applause.)

MS. BURWELL: First, I'd like to thank you, Mr. President and Mr. Vice President, for the trust you've placed in me at my role at OMB and your confidence in nominating me for this new role.

Second, as we all honor Kathleen's accomplishments here today, I also want to personally thank her for her support and friendship through this year. I want to express my heartfelt thanks to the team at the Office of Management and Budget and to our congressional counterparts, with whom I've had the privilege to work closely throughout this year.

OMB is an extraordinary institution. It's a credit to the professionalism and commitment of OMB's people that we've been able to meaningfully improve our nation's fiscal policy and government management over the past year. I also want to thank my family, especially my husband, Stephen. It's their support that allows me to serve.

I'm humbled, honored, and excited by the opportunity to build on the achievements that Kathleen, the President, and so many others have put in place. If confirmed by the Senate, I look forward to carrying on the important work of ensuring that children, families, and seniors have the building blocks of healthy and productive lives, whether it's through implementing the Affordable Care Act, supporting affordable childcare, or finding new frontiers to prevent and treat disease.

Thank you, Mr. President. (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Give these extraordinary women one more big round of applause. Thank you, Kathleen, for your service. Thank you, Sylvia, for your great work. (Applause.)

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11:16 A.M. EDT