

Opening Statement for “Medicare Forever: Protecting Seniors by Making the Wealthy Pay Their Fair Share”

Ranking Member Grassley and members of the Committee, today’s hearing is about guaranteeing Medicare solvency by balancing the tax system so it’s less rigged and more fair — two good goals.

In July, the Budget Committee held a hearing on protecting Social Security for all by taking away tax tricks that let those at the top pay lower tax rates than teachers and firefighters. Today, we turn to Medicare, our other pillar of retirement security, whose insolvency is predicted to arrive even sooner than Social Security’s.

Right now, a government shutdown looms because House Republicans are—once again—trying to make the tax system even less fair, to give more freebies to big businesses and billionaires. Republicans want to maintain the massive exemption for inheritances to wealthy heirs. They want to keep tax breaks for multinational corporations that send profits and jobs offshore. And they want to hamstring the IRS from catching wealthy tax cheats.

Nobody likes this, so they hold our government operations hostage. It will cost billions and add to the deficit, if they succeed at shutting the government down. At the end of the day, the point is taking care of the billionaires and big corporations. The rest is smoke and mirrors.

Any serious conversation about federal spending and deficits must also include Medicare. According to CBO, Medicare, along with Social Security, will make up more than half of spending growth over the next decade. And without new revenue, Medicare will cover less than 90 percent of scheduled benefits beginning in 2031. That is only eight years away.

Since its inception, Medicare has ensured that our nation’s seniors do not become impoverished due to illness. As a result, older Americans live longer, live better-quality lives, and suffer less discrimination in the health care system.

Today, nearly 80 percent of Americans either receive direct support from Medicare or have a family member or close friend enrolled in the program. Almost every senior in this country will receive Medicare benefits, which they have *earned* throughout their working lives, and which let them retire in health and dignity.

Rhode Island seniors understand the importance of Medicare on their quality of life.

Joyce from Pawtucket said, “Medicare is a lifeline for me. [Reduction in benefits] would cause me to neglect medical problems and I would actually end up in the hospital.”

Lisa from West Warwick said, “Without Medicare I would exhaust my finances and go without care and medicines.”

And Ana from Providence said, “Medicare helps me in countless ways. It helps pay for my wheelchair, shower chair, lift to get in and out of bed, doctor's visits, and medicine, among other things. All of these are essential and enable me to continue living my life.”

But for decades, some Republicans worked publicly to undermine Medicare, to have Medicare, as former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich put it, “wither on the vine.” They have proposed raising the Medicare eligibility age, turning Medicare into a private voucher program, and even sunseting the program altogether.

Then came the State of the Union address earlier this year, when Republicans and Democrats gave President Biden a standing ovation when he declared that cuts to Social Security and Medicare were off the table.

That bipartisan consensus, if it was real and not more smoke and mirrors, leaves only one option: raise revenue.

And we can raise revenue by unrigging our tax code. We can close loopholes that allow the super-wealthy to avoid taxes. It would be good to level the playing field so the wealthiest in this country can't play by a special set of rules and avoid paying a fair share.

We can and must protect Medicare. We can and must do so without cutting benefits. And we can do that by making our tax code fairer.

According to the CMS Chief Actuary—the authority on Medicare solvency—my Medicare and Social Security Fair Share Act would ensure Medicare remains solvent effectively *forever*. And we heard at our Social Security hearing that my legislation would also extend Social Security solvency indefinitely.

As I told my Republican colleagues at our Social Security hearing, I welcome serious proposals to protect Social Security and Medicare without cutting benefits. I've spent enough time in the Senate to know the difference between free-wheeling chat and actual proposals. Actual proposals are what lead to actual agreements, so join in.

My proposal ensures Medicare solvency forever. It does so by unrigging a rigged tax system, so those who can most afford to pay don't play by a different set of rules. It's available for everyone to see and debate.

It's simple arithmetic: raise revenue or cut benefits. Those are the options if we are to preserve Medicare. If we abide by what seemed like a bipartisan commitment not to cut benefits, we must safeguard Medicare by raising revenue. It's life and death for millions of older Americans.