

STATEMENT OF SENATOR BENJAMIN L. CARDIN
IN SUPPORT OF THE BUDGET CONFERENCE AGREEMENT

June 4, 2008

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I rise in strong support of the Fiscal Year 2009 Budget Resolution Conference Report. As a member of the Committee, I want to recognize Chairman Conrad and thank him personally for his untiring efforts to craft a blueprint that will get our nation's fiscal house back in order.

Perhaps more than at any time in our history, it is imperative that Congress focus seriously on our nation's budget situation. The competing demands of an aging population, our current international commitments, growing competition in the global economy, our widening trade deficit, and shrinking revenues all require that we address our fiscal situation with urgency. Revenues are at an historic low point, while the demographics of the country are driving spending higher on needs that the private sector is ill-equipped to address. Now there is widespread consensus among working families that—regardless of the official definition—we are in a recession.

Employment growth during this Administration has averaged fewer than 50,000 jobs a month—the lowest monthly rate for any administration since Dwight D. Eisenhower's and less than one-quarter the average of 237,000 jobs per month created during the Clinton Administration.

Inflation-adjusted hourly wages have decreased by 1.3 percent since August 2003. Even median annual household income has decreased by \$1,700, or 3.6 percent, after

accounting for inflation. These are aggregate statistics, but behind each of them are millions of families who are falling behind as a result of inadequate investment in the right priorities.

For too long, we have been moving in the wrong direction. Over the past seven years, the Bush Administration has sent us budgets with the wrong priorities. They've contained drastic cuts to education and health care programs; they did not provide for investment in our nation's public transit systems, bridges, and roads; they did not address energy efficiency; they ignored veterans' health care needs and actually attempted to make it more difficult for veterans to access the health system we promised our troops; and they neglected the programs that help working families thrive, including child care, housing, community development, and job training. Recent Congresses supported those budgets, and exacerbated the fiscal crisis by enacting irresponsible tax cuts that America could not afford—tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefitted the wealthiest Americans, while providing very little help for working families. Last year, under new leadership in Congress, we passed a budget that began to change course. This budget continues that effort, and I am pleased to support it.

This conference agreement targets tax relief where it is most needed—at working families. This includes an extension of the child care tax credit, marriage penalty relief, and the 10% individual income tax bracket.

Equally important, this budget resolution is fiscally responsible. It will return us to a balanced budget, with a surplus of \$22 billion in 2012 and \$10 billion in 2013.

Even as crucial domestic programs have suffered under this Administration, the nation's debt has increased from \$5.8 trillion at the end of President Bush's first year in office to in excess of \$9 trillion.

If we fail to change course, we will leave our children and grandchildren an insurmountable legacy of debt. The fiscal policies of this current Administration have erased the \$5.6 trillion surplus that was projected in 2000 and replaced it with a projected deficit of nearly \$4 trillion over the next ten years.

The borrowing necessitated by deficit spending has jeopardized our economic position in the world, and it has clouded the outlook for generations of Americans to come. We have had to turn to foreign governments to borrow money. Our foreign-held debt has increased by more than 100 percent during this Administration. In fact, in just one year, the total has increased from \$2.1 trillion to \$2.5 trillion. According to the Treasury Department, as of March 2008, the United States now owes than \$600 billion to Japan, nearly \$500 billion to China, more than \$200 billion to the United Kingdom We owe \$150 billion to oil exporting nations, up from \$112 billion last year. These levels of foreign-held debt threaten our independence as a nation, and they are unsustainable.

That is why it is so important that we make the difficult budget choices that can return us to a balanced budget, and that this resolution contain tools needed to get there, including PAYGO.

This resolution calls for \$3.1 trillion in spending for the next fiscal year. It rejects the President's cuts to entitlement programs, and it funds domestic discretionary programs at \$21 billion above his budget request. This means that we can begin to make much needed improvements in the programs that help build our nation.

Mr. President, the many important areas that this budget addresses are particularly crucial in these difficult economic times for America's families. We provide for a reserve fund that will improve access to affordable housing for working families, we add \$40 million for emergency food assistance and we improve unemployment compensation.

In health care, I want to mention two specific areas. This budget makes room for critically needed increases in health research funding. The National Institutes of Health is headquartered in Maryland, and its grants fund research in my state and across the nation. Unfortunately, this is the sixth year in a row that NIH has been essentially flat-funded. I have the privilege of meeting often with biomedical researchers from my home state. They are working to find treatments and cures for our most challenging diseases—cancer, diabetes, arthritis, ALS, and others.

During the period when Congress doubled NIH funding—between 1998 and 2003—researchers' chances of securing NIH funding for a worthwhile grant proposal was one in four. Since 2003, their chances have dwindled to one in eleven. Undergraduate and graduate students alike are beginning to question their career choices and wonder if there is a future for them in biomedical research. With medical research

inflation at nearly 3.5 %, we must increase the agency's funding by at least that amount in order to break even. To make progress in the fight against disease, we must increase our spending substantially. I am pleased that our resolution rejects the President's planned cuts for this critical agency and makes room for additional funding.

This budget resolution also makes room for improvements to pediatric dental care. Mr. President, I have come to the floor of the Senate on several occasions to talk about a twelve year old named Deamonte Driver. He lived just six miles from here in Prince George's County Maryland. The Driver family, like many other families across the country, lacked dental coverage. At one point his family had Medicaid, but they lost it when they moved into a shelter, and their paperwork fell through the cracks. When advocates for the family tried to help, it took more than 20 calls just to find a dentist who would treat him.

Deamonte began to complain of headaches in January 2007. An evaluation at Children's Hospital found that he had an abscessed tooth, but the condition was advanced and he needed emergency brain surgery. He later experienced seizures, and a second operation. Even though he received additional treatment and appeared to be recovering, medical intervention had come too late. Deamonte passed away on Sunday, February 25, 2007. At the end, the total cost of his treatment exceeded a quarter of a million dollars – *more than three thousand times* the \$80 it would have cost for a tooth extraction.

There is no excuse for us, in the wealthiest nation on earth, to watch a child die for lack of access to basic dental care. It is difficult to find dentists to treat low-income

children for two reasons. First because there is shortage of pediatric dentists—only 4.3% of dental school graduates in 2001 reported pediatric dentistry as their specialty of choice; and second, because the reimbursement from public programs such as Medicaid and SCHIP is low.

Our budget rejects the President's cuts to dental training programs, and it is my hope that we will continue to work to increase the number of pediatric dentists and improve reimbursement for public programs. But there are thousands more children, like Deamonte's brothers who also need dental care—who cannot wait for us to recruit and train more dentists. I want to thank both Senator Whitehouse, who joined me in offering an amendment in Committee to address this, and the members of the Budget Committee, who unanimously supported it. My amendment would establish a deficit-neutral reserve fund in the budget for legislation to improve access for low-income children who are in either Medicaid, SCHIP or are uninsured. As a result, this budget will allow Congress to fund legislation to improve oral health care and more appropriately reimburse the providers who are willing to treat low-income children. These are the offices, clinics, and dental schools whose doors are open to underserved patients, but whose ability to treat large numbers is compromised by inadequate payments.

This budget also fund critical investments in homeland security. The President's budget reduced funding for important first responder programs, including the SAFER (Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response) Grant program. The SAFER grant program directly funds fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations to

help them increase the number of trained, "front-line" firefighters. This budget rejects those cuts and will give firefighters needed resources to protect our communities.

Mr. President, I am proud that this resolution also addresses another issue that is critically important for Maryland. It calls for pay parity between civilian and military employees. With tens of thousands of federal employees in Maryland, I have witnessed the additional burdens placed on our civil servants, particularly since the 2001 terrorist attacks on our nation. These dedicated employees are called upon to assume greater risks with lower comparable pay to private sector wages. In addition, many federal agencies now face a human capital crisis, with thousands of our most experienced employees eligible to retire in the next few years. Pay parity is necessary if we will be able to recruit and retain a quality federal workforce, and this budget provides for it.

Finally, Mr. President, I also want to note that this budget supports our veterans. We rightly reject the President's misguided proposals to increase enrollment fees and copayments for veterans' health care services. We increase funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs so that we can improve VA health care facilities and improve access to rehabilitation, mental health services, traumatic brain injury services, and speed the processing time for disability claims.

Again, Mr. President, I want to thank Chairman Conrad for his leadership in helping to bring forth this agreement. As he has said previously, it truly marks a new path forward for our country. I urge my colleagues to support it.

