

## Remarks to Senior Citizens at St. Monica's Episcopal Church January 5, 1996

Well, let me first thank Father Darko for his comments and for the work being done here at St. Monica's Church. I was hoping he'd say something—I've never seen a preacher pass up a podium. [Laughter] And I'm glad he didn't. [Laughter]

I want to thank the Friendship House for the leadership shown in being a true friend to our seniors. I want to thank all of you especially for working for this Meals on Wheels program. And I want to thank all of you for making me feel so welcome—me and, of course, the members of our administration: the Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Glickman; the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Secretary Shalala; Assistant Secretary Fernando Torres-Gil. And of course, we're joined here by Senator Leahy and by Congress—from Vermont, he came all the way from Vermont. And those that—he brought his wife with him, and she's a nurse. So if I get sick she can help me get out of here. [Laughter]

I'm delighted that Mayor Barry joined us, and it's good to see you in good health, Mayor. And I want to say a special word of thanks to Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton for the brilliant job she's done in sticking up for these programs in the Congress. I want to thank this fine couple that run this program here for the work they have done.

And I want to say a word of thanks especially to the folks who sat at my table and talked to me about this program and about Medicare and about what all is going on. I got a pretty good education. [Laughter] And I think most of what they said to me is true. Now—but the lady sitting next to me, she swears that she is 93 years old. [Laughter] You know, usually when somebody doesn't tell the truth about their age, they're kind of turning it low. But I'm not sure she didn't exaggerate a little bit. [Laughter] She looks awful young to me. And I thank you so much.

I know all of you know this, but all across this great country of ours, there are seniors like you and others who depend upon meals like this that are federally funded. In one year alone, more than 230 million of these meals are served to seniors all across America. And for a lot of seniors, this is the only really good, warm, nutri-

tious meal they get every day. Now, these meals are one of the things that are threatened by the shutdown that was forced by the Republicans in the House of Representatives.

This strategy has been abandoned, I want to say, by the Senate Republicans led by Senator Dole, and was never supported by the Democrats in the Senate and the House. And I want to thank all of them for not supporting that. And I understand that there are others in the House among the Republicans who may want to abandon it or change it.

But unless we do something within days, the regular Federal funds for the senior meals program, including the Meals on Wheels, could dry up. State and local charities all across America are stepping in to help in some cases, but the future of these meals programs could be at risk, and that would literally be a disaster for the lives of a lot of senior citizens in America. And we cannot allow that.

Where I can, as all of you know, I have acted in this crisis to keep services going to the American people. And today I am going to take some action that will keep providing food to these senior centers even if the Congress doesn't correct the problem today. I agree with Father Darko; this is not a politically sensitive program. This is a people program. It shouldn't have anything to do with politics. This has been a program that people in both parties have supported, and it ought to be again.

But in the event that Congress does not fix this problem, I am instructing the Secretary of Agriculture to provide temporary funding to help these centers continue to serve meals. And they have—Secretary Glickman can explain to the press later—they have some money that can be put into this meals program to keep it going for quite some time, to make sure that you don't get caught up in this, and we intend to do it.

We've been able to do some other things like this. We got some money through the low-income heating assistance programs to some of the States that are having such a cold winter, where there are a lot of seniors and some younger people who are living in homes that are poorly heated and without a little extra help