

On January 12, the impoverished Caribbean nation of Haiti was struck by a catastrophic earthquake which, according to reports, leveled most of the capital city of Port-au-Prince. Tens of thousands of lives are feared lost, and much of the country's infrastructure is destroyed and communications are severely disrupted.

The people of Haiti have endured much hardship throughout their history – from civil unrest to hurricanes and great poverty. The American people stand ready to assist our Caribbean neighbor just as many nations came to our aid in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

President Obama has pledged strong U.S. support in the rescue and recovery and international relief efforts are already underway. To learn about organizations participating in relief programs for the Haitian people, visit the White House Haitian disaster response web site: [www.whitehouse.gov/haitiearthquake](http://www.whitehouse.gov/haitiearthquake).

The U.S. State Department advises that those seeking information about the welfare of U.S. citizens living or traveling in Haiti should phone 1-888-407-4747. For more information about contacting persons in Haiti, visit the State Department web site: [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov).

Sunshine in Health Care Talks:

On another note, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid continue to meet behind closed doors to craft their final health care bill. Despite calls from the Republican leadership of both Houses to allow public access to these critical meetings, Pelosi and Reid have deliberately chosen to keep the final bill a secret until the last possible moment.

Before taking office, President Obama promised eight times to bring a new era of openness and transparency to Washington. However, during this final drive to force a government takeover of Americans' health care and effectively one sixth of our economy, the president has done nothing to make such monumental decisions affecting all our lives open to public scrutiny. He and his Congressional lieutenants have resisted calls from all quarters, including conservatives in Congress and even C-SPAN, to allow media access to these critical negotiations.

The public has a right to know what's being included in the final health care bill and, accordingly, have good reason to wonder what the president, Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid may be hiding.

In order to hold the president accountable for his promise of greater government transparency, I have signed a discharge petition to bring the "Sunshine Resolution" to the House floor for a vote. This bipartisan legislation would require the Congressional leadership to conduct their health care bill talks in the light of day for all Americans to watch. Support for the Sunshine Resolution is gaining momentum.

As you may know, I opposed the Speaker's health care bill that passed the House in November, and I reject the premise that greater access to health care can only be achieved by a government takeover. America already has the best quality health care in the world and what ails our system does not require major surgery in order to repair.

I continue to support the House Republican alternative health care bill which expands access to care, allows small businesses to pool coverage, reforms medical malpractice lawsuits, and gives Americans the ability to buy health coverage they want regardless of where they live in the country. Moreover, it does not seek to limit your choice of care or doctors or penalize you for not buying coverage as the Democrat health care bill does.

Dr. Benjamin Sworn in:

Last week, before an audience of friends and family from Alabama, Dr. Regina Benjamin was sworn in as the 18th Surgeon General of the United States. The Washington, DC ceremony made official Dr. Benjamin's appointment, which was originally announced last July.

Dr. Benjamin is the founder and chief executive of the Bayou La Batre Rural Health Clinic in south Mobile County. In her medical practice she has shown remarkable dedication to her patients' well being. During the destructive aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, she rode from house to house in a pick-up truck, dispensing treatment to each patient while repairs were made to her clinic.

The recipient of a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" and the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights, Dr. Benjamin has been featured in the national media for her devotion to delivering health care. As the nation's new surgeon general, Dr. Benjamin is making preventative care a priority of her office.

Congratulations to Dr. Benjamin, an exceptional choice and a well respected south Alabama physician, who will serve our country well as surgeon general.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.