

**Department of Health and Senior Services
Commissioner Nominee Heather Howard
Senate Judiciary Committee Testimony
State House Annex
January 3, 2008**

Good morning and thank you, Chairman Adler, Vice Chair Girgenti and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee.

I am honored that you have invited me here to discuss my nomination by Governor Corzine to be the commissioner of the Department of Health and Senior Services.

In nominating me, Governor Jon Corzine has entrusted me with an enormous responsibility to safeguard the health of the residents of New Jersey. It would be an honor and a privilege to lead the Department.

I would like to thank Senator Turner for her gracious introduction.

I would also like to thank Dr. Jacobs for his introduction and his excellent stewardship of the Department.

Members of the Committee, New Jersey faces significant health care challenges.

Too many New Jerseyans – 1.3 million by recent estimates – lack health insurance.

Our health care delivery system is fragile. Fifteen hospitals have closed in the last ten years, and recent statistics from the New Jersey Hospital Association show that almost half the remaining hospitals are operating in the red.

We are screening an increasing number of children with special needs who are in need of early intervention services. In fact, we have the nation's highest prevalence of children with autism spectrum disorder.

There are unacceptable gaps in disease prevalence and mortality rates among minority and multicultural populations.

There is an ever increasing need to provide seniors with greater home and community-based long term care options.

And at the same time, we must meet these challenges mindful of the state's serious fiscal constraints.

The Department's mission is far-reaching and important to everyone in the State.

I am passionate about expanding access and improving the quality of health care for all New Jerseyans. And I am committed to a healthy New Jersey and a health care delivery system that works for all.

Briefly, I would like to highlight my background, qualifications and vision for the Department, as well as the principles that would guide me, if confirmed, as commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services.

I have devoted my career in public service to state and federal policy, with a special emphasis on health care — as a policy adviser, a developer of health care programs, and a litigator.

I served at the Department of Justice, investigating and litigating antitrust violations in the health care industry.

I then served as associate director of President Clinton's Domestic Policy Council, developing policy initiatives on children and family issues.

I also served as a senior policy adviser to First Lady Hillary Clinton, advising on health care and other policy matters. There I worked extensively on children's mental health issues.

I began working for then-U.S. Senator Corzine in 2001 as his counsel and was promoted to chief of staff. I managed his staff, supervising all aspects of policy development, legislation, constituent services and personnel.

As a manager, I have learned how crucial it is to be surrounded by a strong and diverse management team, and if confirmed I will build such a team.

I also believe that leadership is exhibited through issues management and through the setting of Department priorities.

My priorities will include:

- increasing access to health care services and insurance,
- promoting and protecting the public health,
- supporting New Jersey's seniors,
- strengthening the emergency response infrastructure, shoring up the health care delivery system, and
- improving the quality of health care.

Over the past two years I have worked closely with Dr. Jacobs and the senior staff at the Department on many of these issues and I intend to rely on the many excellent health care professionals there, including 14 doctors and 200 nurses.

At both the federal and state level, I have experience in hospital and physician regulation and legislation, as well as complex hospital distress issues. While in the Governor's Office, I have collaborated with the Department and the Commission on Rationalizing Health Care Resources, which will be reporting this month on ways to strengthen our health care delivery system.

I have worked directly with our congressional delegation and the Department of Human Services to protect our FamilyCare program from federal cuts. And, just last month we took an important step by announcing universal, affordable access to health care for children through the FamilyCare Buy-In program. With 250,000 children currently lacking health insurance, we can have no greater priority. I know many of you share an interest in universal health care and I look forward to working with you.

One of the public health areas that has always been a special focus for me is maternal and child health services.

I intend to be a strong advocate for improving the health of women, children and families. New Jersey ranks 40th overall among the states in terms of access to critical, early prenatal care. That is unacceptable. It is well established that prematurity can lead to lifelong health problems and significant health care costs. Preventing premature births and ensuring that all children have a healthy start at life must be a Department priority.

Certainly there are other priorities that we can discuss. But, I know that you have questions for me.

Let me close by saying that over my career and most particularly these last two years I have worked closely with many stakeholders and the public and I want to assure you that their voices will be reflected in our policies and priorities as we move forward. I also appreciate your legislative support for the Department and interest in health care issues and look forward to working with you if I am confirmed.

I pledge that if confirmed, I will do everything in my power as commissioner of the Department of Health and Senior Services to protect the health and safety and improve the quality of life of all of the residents of the state of New Jersey.

Thank you again for this opportunity and now I would be happy to answer your questions.