

SPEAKER WITHEM: Committee amendments are adopted. Prior to hearing Senator Wesely's opening on our bill, I would like to recognize guests of Senator Schrock. There are nine seventh and eighth graders from Phelps County Rural School 4 in Elm Creek and their teacher. Would you please stand and be recognized. Senator Wesely, to open on the bill.

SENATOR WESELY: Mr. Speaker and members of the Legislature, I'm pleased to present to you LB 837 which is a follow-up to LB 1222. That was my priority bill last year. I introduced it on behalf of the Governor. It was a bill that made a number of big changes on group health insurance and has made some major progress I think in providing for better health care for Nebraskans. At the time we passed the bill last year we decided on the figure of 3 to 25 employees would be covered under the act and we thought that we should go to a higher number. There was a lot of support to go to a higher number, but the insurance industry wanted the time to take a look at how this would move forward and to consider whether or not to do so. In deference to them and the major change we made last year, we kept the number from 3 to 25, but after the experience of working through and the attempt to implement the bill, I think the insurance industry has gained a comfort level with it and they are supportive of going to the 50-person level. So now under this bill, any company between 3 and 50 employees will have protections that I think are very important to their employees and to the employer. We were seeing situations where some employers were trying to get health insurance for their company and were having some insurers not provide health insurance to that company because of previous considerations of the company, the fact that they may have been a nursing home or a restaurant and an insurer didn't cover anybody who was a restaurant or nursing home, for instance. We heard testimony about entire categories of businesses not being able to get health insurance and we said, no, if you're a health insurer in the State of Nebraska you must offer to businesses between 3 and 25, now hopeful 3 and 50 employees insurance and you must offer a standard basic or basic plan available and that plan will not deny coverage to somebody who has a preexisting condition. It will not drop somebody from coverage who has previously been covered. It will have limits on how much you can increase rates. It is, in my view, a very, very major positive step forward on health insurance and health care. So the bill, I thought, was a very good one last year. We overwhelmingly, I think, maybe even unanimously, passed it last year, but we