Good afternoon and thank you for coming. I am honored to be here with Lieutenant Governor Dewhurst, Speaker Craddick, Senator Staples and Representative Solomons.

Texas’ reputation as the home of some of the highest workers’ compensation costs in the nation is about to change. We have reached an agreement that will lead to lower workers’ compensation costs for employers, control the cost of health care provided for injured workers, and ensure injured workers get the care they need so they can get back to work as quickly as possible.

I give a lot of the credit to Senator Staples, Representative Solomons and the other eight conferees who have labored through intense negotiations. Their work will pay off in the form of improved benefits and care for those hurt in the workplace, real savings for employers, and increased efficiency and fairness for all parties involved in the system. I want to thank both of these outstanding leaders, as well as the members of their committees and the leadership of both chambers, for working with my office to find a real and lasting solution to one of Texas’ most pressing problems.

This compromise plan includes key aspects of the two laudable proposals put forth by each chamber, and it finds middle ground on sticking points that had prevented the bill from moving forward. Under this plan, the workers’ compensation system will be governed by a division of the Texas Department of Insurance, headed by an appointed commissioner. Injured workers will see the cap on weekly benefits increase by 12 percent, and they will have a stronger voice in the process through a new Office of Injured Employee Counsel. Employers will get some much needed financial relief on insurance costs, allowing more employers to opt into the system, and freeing resources to grow and create jobs. And by replacing government mandates on medical fees with free market principles, doctors will have a stronger incentive to participate, and injured workers can gain greater access to care.

This agreement represents a major victory for everyone who has a stake in the workers’ compensation system. It will give those hurt on the job the care they deserve, at a price employers can afford. And just as important, this bill will help create thousands of new jobs for our families as employers continue to flock to Texas for our excellent business climate. As the session nears its end, our success on workers’ compensation should remind every lawmaker that there is no challenge we cannot overcome, if we put aside our differences, work together in a spirit of cooperation, and make the goal of building a better Texas our only aim.

Thank you. We would be happy to take your questions.