Congressman Fortenberry presents the Congressional Gold Medal Award to Autumn Sicking, Lincoln, at the U.S. Capitol

Today, as budget negotiations have broken down and serious questions loom over the United States' continued involvement in the conflict in Libya, Congress took a few moments to honor 246 outstanding young Americans who are strengthening their communities through initiative, service, and achievement.

Among those youth was Autumn Sicking of Lincoln, who I had the distinct honor of awarding with the 2011 Congressional Gold Medal Award today.

I met Autumn in my Lincoln District Office last year. Autumn had received the 2010 Bronze and Silver Medals for her service then. To receive Congress' highest honor for youth this year, the Gold Medal Award, Autumn completed more than 700 hours of community service, including work with animal rescue groups and food banks, taught weekly adult literacy classes, and served as a teacher's aide in an underprivileged elementary school. Among other personal development endeavors, including excelling at dance and sports, Autumn's commitment to service earned her national recognition as a young leader.

As I told Autumn, I have always believed that the strength of the nation depends on the strength of America's families and communities. As you well know, we face tremendous challenges as a nation, but despite this—or perhaps because of it—young leaders like Autumn continue to band together to serve the most vulnerable in our midst. I congratulate everyone who generously sacrifices time and assistance to improve the quality of life for persons who need help, and am especially proud that Nebraska leads the nation in this field. The Corporation for National and Community Service, in a national survey of volunteerism among the fifty states, has repeatedly ranked Nebraska near the top in its residents' rates of volunteer service. Nebraskans contribute more than 67 million hours of service to their communities each year.

Autumn's volunteer work is remarkable, and deserves great commendation. I hope her recognition gives us pause to realize that every effort, no matter how large or small, gives strength to our neighborhoods, state, and country.

For more information on the Congressional Gold Medal Award, please visit www.congressionalaward.org .