

**Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
Aging in Rural America: Preserving Seniors' Access to Health Care
July 31, 2008**

Good morning. I want to thank Senator Smith for holding today's hearing. Rural health care is the lifeblood of small towns in Wisconsin and across America. Not only does the availability of rural health care create job opportunities and drive economic development, but it is critical to the wellbeing of a community and its residents.

One of our witnesses today will be Tim Size, Executive Director of the Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative. As part of his testimony, he will talk to us about why, particularly in rural areas, it is so important to increase the health care workforce. As we have heard in other Committee hearings this year, the United States simply will not be able to meet the need for health care and long-term care without a workforce that is prepared for the job. Soon I will introduce legislation to train, support, and expand the workforce that is dedicated to providing care to older Americans. These efforts are critical. We need to plan now so that we are prepared for the surge in demand for health care by the Baby Boomers.

Mr. Size will also talk about the need to hold Medicare Advantage plans accountable to rural seniors. I agree that this is vital, especially given that enrollment in these private plans is growing more rapidly in rural areas than in urban areas. Last year the Committee launched an investigation into the misleading sales practices of some of those selling Medicare Advantage plans to seniors. Insurance commissioners across the country are finding that some seniors have been removed from traditional Medicare without their knowledge, signed onto plans they can't afford, and misled regarding coverage.

For a rural senior who does not have many health care options, it is devastating to be told that their local doctors and hospitals accept these plans, when in reality they don't. I have introduced legislation in order to give state insurance commissioners more power to regulate Medicare Advantage salesmen and put a stop to these practices.

I thank Senator Smith for raising this issue today in our Committee. I am delighted to have this distinguished group of witnesses assembled to explore these issues and offer solutions to ensure that rural seniors have access to the health care they need.