

**Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
“Honoring Final Wishes: How to Respect Americans’ Choices at the End of Life”
September 24, 2008**

Good morning. Senator Whitehouse, thank you for holding today’s hearing. We are pleased to have you as a member of this Committee and as one of its burgeoning leaders. You are tackling a very sensitive, but extremely crucial issue this morning, and I thank you. Today we will discuss end-of-life care, a topic which includes how to best treat patients at their most vulnerable stage in life. Most importantly, we will discuss how to encourage advanced planning about what kind of care people want for themselves at the end of their life.

At a time when shifting demographics are about to unleash an unprecedented number of older Americans, this Committee often focuses on planning for the foreseeable events ahead. Through our work, we urge our constituents to save for a secure retirement, make sure they will have health care coverage, and think about their future long-term care needs. In terms of foreseeable events, perhaps it’s cliché, but the end of one’s life is as inevitable as they come.

Advanced planning is meant to provide clarification at a time that can be fraught with pain, confusion, and sadness. We will learn about how many Americans have acquired advanced directives and how likely the instructions are to be followed by our nation’s health professionals. My home state of Wisconsin is engaged in promoting advanced directives on many levels, all over the state. For example, Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center in LaCrosse has streamlined advance directives into their electronic medical records system. In Milwaukee, businesses have partnered to provide advance planning material to employees. Both of these efforts help ensure that people get the health care they want at the end of life.

Unfortunately, we will hear from some of today’s witnesses about the many barriers to advance planning. I think we can all agree that nothing should get in the way of providing comfort and solace to a person at the end of their life. My hope is that this morning we will discover some policy solutions to promote the use of advanced directives within our nation’s medical institutions.

I would like to particularly thank and welcome our witness from Wisconsin today, Joan Curran, for being here to testify on end-of-life care. And thank you once again, Senator Whitehouse, for offering the Aging Committee your leadership on this issue.