

**Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
Meals, Rides, and Caregivers:
What Makes the Older Americans Act So Vital to America's Seniors
May 26, 2011**

Good afternoon. I'd like to thank you for joining us here today.

In 1965, the same year Medicare was created, President Johnson signed another landmark bill for America's seniors: the Older Americans Act. Today, the programs authorized by the OAA serve more than 10 million older Americans nationwide and over 386,000 in my home state of Wisconsin. They help seniors live independently in their communities through home care, home-delivered and group meals, family caregiver support, transportation and other services.

While the need for such vital OAA services has increased during these difficult economic times, federal funding for OAA programs has not. This year, OAA programs were cut by 17 percent from 2010.

Every five years, Congress takes a fresh look at OAA programs to assess whether they are meeting the needs of the people they serve. Last September, I held a field hearing in Milwaukee to gather ideas for strengthening and improving OAA programs. Since then, I have incorporated many of the recommendations we received into priorities that I will work with my colleagues to include in the new bill.

One of my priorities will address helping the nearly 44 million family members providing care to an older relative by simply asking them "what do you need?" By permitting states to assess whether family caregivers need services such as respite care and counseling, we can delay more costly institutional placements of frail and disabled seniors.

I also believe we must strengthen the long-term care ombudsman program, which provides an advocate for elderly and disabled patients to help resolve complaints of abuse and neglect in long-term care settings. I will work to expand the capacity of the National Ombudsman Resource Center and increase the Ombudsman's access to resident health records so that they can be more efficient and effective.

Thank you again to all of you for being here. I look forward to hearing your input on ways we can improve the Older Americans Act.