

SENATOR JOHN BREAUX
Opening Statement
Patients in Peril: Critical Shortages in Geriatric Care
Special Committee on Aging
February 27, 2002

Good morning and thank you all for being here today. I especially want to welcome Mr. Steve Bizdok who traveled from Las Vegas in order to share his incredible story with us today. I also want to welcome the Committee's Ranking Member Larry Craig and my other colleagues, a number of whom I know have a specific legislative interest in today's topic.

This morning's hearing, *"Patients in Peril: Critical Shortages in Geriatric Care"* marks the seventh in a series of long-term care hearings that the Committee has held during the 107th Congress. The shortage of health care professionals with specific training in geriatric care takes us to the core of what I mean when I say that we must ensure that Americans not only live longer, but live better. We will hear today from a patient whose life was literally in jeopardy because well-meaning health care professionals lacked the training to diagnose his illness. He is not alone. While the senior population is living increasingly longer, more and more people will experience the effects of chronic conditions.

In the United States we train our future doctors at 125 prestigious medical schools. While each of these schools has a pediatrics department, only three have geriatric departments and only 14 require a course in geriatrics. As the population of people 85 years and older continues to grow at the fastest rate in the nation, we are experiencing an unprecedented shortage of nurses; and, less than one percent of those who remain are certified in geriatrics. As we move across the health care spectrum the outlook is increasingly bleak. Social workers, dentists, nutritionists, nurse assistants, therapists, and psychologists will all play an increasingly important role as the baby boom generation continues to age, yet none of these disciplines is adequately preparing its workforce to handle the illnesses and conditions specific to geriatric patients. Pharmacists, who often play an intermediary role between the doctors and patients, are just as unprepared. A recent report stated that each year nearly one million seniors are prescribed medicines which people their age should never take. Other studies indicate that 35% of Americans over the age of 65 experience adverse drug reactions at a cost of \$20 billion annually for treatment. Clearly we must do better.

I applaud the Veterans Administration for their efforts to train geriatricians through their fellowship program and I also recognize the work done by private foundations such as the Hartford Foundation, the Brookdale Foundation, and the Reynolds Foundation who have done much with little federal funding. The 35 Geriatric Education Centers across the nation should also be recognized for training hundreds of thousands of inter-disciplinary health care professionals to better serve older Americans. In addition, I am happy to note

that I've worked with Dr. Greg Folse, a geriatric dentist from Louisiana, to improve the oral care provision of CMS' nursing home survey and oversight efforts. While all of these efforts are commendable, they are simply not enough.

I believe it is important to note that this issue should not be taking us by surprise. For many years now organizations such as the American Geriatrics Society, the International Longevity Center, and the Alliance for Aging Research have come to Capitol Hill to urge Congress to address this looming issue. During the spring of 1998, the Special Committee on Aging held a forum to highlight and discuss the shortage of geriatricians. During that same time I was also serving as the Chairman of the National Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Medicare, and learned that by the year 2030 more than half of the nation's medical expenditures would be accounted for by older Americans. It is obvious that this shortage of geriatric-trained health care workers is not only a threat to an increasing number of elderly Americans, but also to the economic health of our nation.

I look forward to learning more about this issue from my fellow Senators and from our distinguished panels. I also look forward to hearing recommendations about what can be done to ensure that America's seniors continue to live not only longer lives, but better lives as well.