



TESTIMONY OF

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Good morning, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Kohl, Senator Dole, and other distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you so much for this opportunity to talk with you about how my community is preparing for the demographic changes facing the nation. My name is Gayla Woody and I am the Program Administrator of the Centralina Area Agency on Aging (AAA). My region covers nine counties in North Carolina: Anson, Cabarrus, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union counties. This is the largest region in the state and includes Charlotte, the largest city.

While the counties in my agency's planning and service area (PSA) range from a large, metropolitan area to a very small rural region, they share at least one characteristic. The aging of our nation's adults — in particular the demographic cohort known as "baby boomers" and the fastest growing population in the country, those 85 years and older — will present tremendous challenges and opportunities for all of these communities.

With the first wave of boomers turning 60 this year, and thus becoming eligible for Older Americans Act (OAA) services, we cannot afford to sit still and wait. To ensure that America's communities are prepared to meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's older adults, preparation and planning must start now.

The Aging of America

The rise in the number of aging citizens will impact the social, physical and fiscal fabric of our nation's cities and counties, dramatically affecting local aging, health and human services; emergency preparedness; land use, housing and transportation; public safety, workforce and economic development; recreation, education/lifelong learning; and volunteerism/civic engagement policies and programs.

An organized, informed and thoughtful community planning process to prepare for the aging of this nation's population is needed at every level. Preparedness is not just for disasters and emergencies, but should be used to help a community adapt to changing demographic needs. "Livable communities for all ages" refers to places where citizens

can grow up and grow old with maximum independence, safety and well-being. Although there is much that individuals can and should do to maximize their independence as they age, public policy makers must make critical decisions relating to housing opportunities, transportation systems, and land use regulations, for example, that affect the ability of an older adult to live at home and in their community.

One Approach: Mecklenburg County's *Status of Seniors Initiative*

I am proud to report that Mecklenburg County (which includes the City of Charlotte) has refused to just wait and see how the aging of the baby boomers will impact the community. The policymakers and leaders in the County know that they cannot afford to wait. Currently there are almost 90,000 people over the age of 60 in Mecklenburg County and there will be approximately one-quarter of a million people over 60 in the County by the year 2030. That's almost a tripling of the County's elderly population in fewer than 25 years.

In order to begin evaluating what this change will mean and to plan accordingly, the Mecklenburg County Commissioners convened a broad based group to examine this critical issue and launched "The Status of Seniors Initiative" (SOSI) to develop strategies to assist the community respond. Representatives from the hospitals, home care agencies, social service organizations, housing authority, transportation services, health department, the United Way and others were included in the group. The collaboration also included the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, local attorneys, and representatives from colleges and universities, the real estate industry and others. As the director of the area agency on aging, I serve as a member of the project's executive steering committee.

After four years of data gathering, research, analysis and strategic planning, SOSI has completed three reports looking at the impact of the aging of the baby boomers on our community and has identified seven recommendations to begin making changes to respond to this major demographic trend. Our motto is "A Senior Friendly Mecklenburg"

and our vision is a “senior-friendly community that values dignity and independence for all older adults.” (These reports and recommendations can be found online at <http://statusofseniors.charmeck.org>.)

To provide you with a sense of how we approached the demographic challenges, here are the categories we explored first:

- 1) *Need for Information.* How does our community ensure that older adults, baby boomers, caregivers and others can get the information they need about aging issues and services and, that they will know where to go for assistance?
- 2) *Caregivers.* One-third of current older adults believe they will be a caregiver in the next five years. Estimates of lost worker hours and income and the resulting reduced pension benefits related to caregiving are as high as \$11.6 billion dollars. How will our community provide the support caregivers need in order to continue to function?
- 3) *Physical Environments.* Does our community’s physical environment and infrastructure provide opportunities that older adults and baby boomers need in order to remain independent? For example: Do we have adequate, appropriate and affordable housing options for people as they age? Is senior housing (public and private) accessible to community and commercial services? Are crosswalks designed to allow enough time for an older adult to cross the street before the light changes? Are street signs actually large enough for older adults to read? Are sidewalks wide enough for wheelchairs or level enough for walkers?
- 4) *Transportation.* Are there programs in places to help older drivers access their driving and make adjustments to respond to physical limitations? Will we have enough adequate, appropriate and affordable transportation options available in our community to support older adults when they need to restrict or stop driving?
- 5) *A Focal Point Organization for Aging.* As a result of funding from various silos, our community has a fragmented service delivery system which

sometimes makes it very difficult to get information and services on aging in just one place. We think the boomers will expect more and thus demand changes. Can our community develop a uniform and seamless system to enable all people to access needed aging information quickly and easily, regardless of income status?

- 6) *Safety & Security.* We found that older adults perceive safety as an important issue, regardless of the actual incidence of crime against older adults in their community. So how can our community communicate a safer, more secure environment for seniors? What can we do to help both reduce actual crime against older adults and to reduce citizens' fears?
- 7) *Public Policy.* One of the guiding principles of SOSI is that our community have a structure in place to allow those that wish to "age in place" to have the supports they need to do so successfully. We need to rebalance our systems to provide more options for older adults to get the care they need at home and in the community rather than in institutional settings.

With these goals in mind, several projects are already underway.

- 1) In partnership with the Charlotte Police Department, we have implemented a training program for new police officers called "First Responders." This training teaches law enforcement about the unique needs of older adults and how to recognize signs of abuse, neglect or exploitation.
- 2) In partnership with the Chamber of Commerce and a local Builders Association, a meeting was held with over 200 real estate and building professionals to talk about the SOSI report and its recommendations. The Charlotte Planning Commission Director and a representative from the Metropolitan Planning Organization are already engaged in discussions regarding initiatives in response to the report.
- 3) The community college and the local Council on Aging are co-hosting a conference entitled "Can Businesses Boom as Boomers Retire?"
- 4) While I was writing these remarks, our local government television channel ran a 30-minute program about the SOSI report and what we can

expect from the aging of the boomers. There have been newspaper articles, as well as presentations on the report to the County Commissioners, the City of Charlotte, the Chamber, the United Way, AARP chapters, and countless others. A very important part of the work is educating the public about what the aging of the population will mean for them and for our community.

It has been quite an adventure over the last four years as our Mecklenburg community has pulled together to begin preparing for the future. It is important to note that other than a “will” and committed volunteers, we have very little in the “way” of funds. Progress has been much slower than if we had had even one staff member dedicated solely to this project. Yet it has been so exciting to see the large number of people involved with SOSI, including many “non-traditional” stakeholders who aren’t normally identified as part of the aging community.

Scaled to Fit: Rowan County’s LIFE

Senator Dole’s home county of Rowan is also one of the counties in my AAA’s PSA. In 2003, I began to work with a group called Rowan LIFE (“Life Improvement for Everyone”) that included the local senior center (Ruffy Holmes Senior Center) and the county’s senior services department, all of which recognized that the community was in need of more planning for the future. Although a much smaller and more rural area, Rowan County shared several common denominators with Mecklenburg County, including:

- Recognition that the boomers would significantly increase the number of older persons in the community;
- Interest in Rowan County becoming a more senior-friendly community;
- A broad collaboration with many “non-traditional” stakeholders;
- Very little funding to support the initiative; and
- Committed volunteers.

Rowan LIFE has completed their first report and has identified five initiatives on which they are currently working. As Rowan LIFE completed their report, the local United Way was developing their community needs assessment. United Way decided to include the Rowan LIFE report for their section on aging. In addition, United Way's collaboration with the project has also resulted in the community getting a 211 county-wide information and assistance system established.

It is so exciting to see that the planning Rowan and Mecklenburg Counties have done has positioned them to leverage grants and other funding to achieve their goals. For example, in Rowan County, a uniform and seamless service delivery system is a major goal. Because of the collaborative work we have done with Rowan LIFE, this community is positioned to receive a State Rural Health grant of several hundred thousand dollars to help make changes to their service delivery system.

Another part of the grant that Rowan County applied for is about helping older adults with chronic illnesses manage their conditions for improved quality of life. One part of that management will include health promotion and disease prevention activities. Currently, Rowan County uses Older Americans Act Title III D funds for a very exciting evidence-based walking program our region calls "Walk Around the World." Participants in the program take a simple pre-test to determine baseline capacity, then maintain a regular walking schedule and record the actual number of steps taken. After six months, a post-test determines the individual's increased capacity. Working together, this community is making strides in helping people stay healthy.

With the burgeoning of the boomers into the elderly population, it is absolutely critical that we increase funding for and emphasis on health promotion programs. We will never have enough money to take care of everyone, but teaching and supporting people to live healthier lifestyles will improve quality of life and will be the only way our service delivery systems will be able to continue to offer service supports to the most frail and needy elders.

Small Steps: Early Responses to Boomers

I would like to mention a couple of other programs that have been initiated in my PSA in preparation for the boomers. One of my smallest counties, Lincoln County, was the only county in North Carolina that did not have a congregate meal program where older adults could gather in a public place for meals and socialization. Since the late 1980s, I had been encouraging Lincoln County to begin a meal program. About two years ago, while meeting with the local service providers, I again asked the question about the congregate program. The service provider responded: "You know, I don't think baby boomers are going to be interested in a congregate program; I wouldn't. So why would I go to the effort of starting a program that is going to die?" I responded: "Ok, we're boomers sitting around this table, so what kind of meal program would we be interested in?"

Out of this conversation about the preferences of baby boomers, the "Restaurant Voucher Program" was born. The program provides a variety of opportunities for participants to attend programs on healthy living, where they receive meal vouchers to use in participating local restaurants. Boomers like to have choices so the program includes several restaurants. Boomers may not want to come to a congregate meal at a certain pre-determined time, but they will go to the participating restaurant for lunch or dinner during the restaurant's more open hours. The program also allows multi-generational families to go out together and the participant can still use their voucher (vs. congregate meal programs that are limited to eligible older adults). This program has very good partnerships with the local restaurants, most of which see it as a community service.

One of our other small counties, Cabarrus, has a pilot program for consumer-directed care. Again, for boomers, choice is a very important word. The Cabarrus County consumer-directed care program allows eligible participants to directly contract with providers and thus customize any services to their individual needs. While not workable for every consumer, this approach to offering services and supports is becoming

popular and may be one of many ways to prepare the long-term care infrastructure for the future. For example, a boomer is caring for an older parent in her home, which does not contain a washer or dryer. The parent's medical condition is increasing the need for frequent laundering, so the caregiver asks a AAA for respite care so she can go to the Laundromat, or the services of an in-home aide to do the laundry. But consumer-directed care could allow for the purchase of a washer and dryer for the home, eliminating the need for respite or chore services, which over the long run are more expensive than the two appliances.

What We Still Need to Do and Why

As the Centralina Area Agency on Aging director, I have invested a lot of time in supporting Mecklenburg and Rowan counties' community planning efforts. I believe that AAAs can offer tremendous technical assistance to local community planning entities to help them define their mission, determine their process and gather critical information. Unfortunately, I have only had the staff resources and time to support two of the nine counties in our PSA. Some of the other counties have expressed interest in starting similar planning processes, but with my agency's regular responsibilities under the Older Americans Act and the recent demands that Medicare Part D enrollment counseling and assistance has placed on my agency, I simply cannot do so at this time. I would urge Congress to consider adding resources to the Older Americans Act to encourage and support AAAs to take on this community planning role. In the long run, this is the most cost-effective and rational way to brace ourselves for the boomers and their effect on our nation.

Widespread public support for such a measure exists: The need to improve state and local integrated delivery systems to meet the 21st century needs of seniors became the 10th highest-ranked resolution at the 2005 White House Conference on Aging. Delegates suggested a new Older Americans Act title on community planning as one of several implementation strategies for this resolution. North Carolina's state unit on

aging has also identified community planning as a high priority and, with limited resources, we are trying to identify strategies for our aging network to adopt.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the boomers will change the way we do business. In North Carolina and in my region, we have also recognized that as an aging network, we must collaborate and work with many “non-traditional” players. Aging impacts all parts of life — our environment, our workforce, our caregivers, our health, our service delivery system and our leisure — just to name a few. It is critical that we educate our communities about what this change will mean and aggressively plan to meet the challenges it will bring with it. The Older Americans Act has been the framework for the aging network since 1965. Today in 2006, it must be modernized to help communities prepare for the boomers. Too much is at stake to ignore the age wave and too much will be lost if we delay.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you have today or in the future.