

**Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
Older Voters: Opportunities and Challenges for the 2008 Election
January 31, 2008**

Good morning, I'd like to welcome all of you to today's hearing. Today the committee will bring our focus to older voters and the various barriers they face in exercising their right to vote. What sets this topic apart from others the Aging committee has explored is that voting is not a benefit of our great society, it is a right. Things like lower drug prices and consumer protection are things we would like to afford older Americans, and that we certainly think they deserve. But the right to vote is fundamental and undeniable, and it does not expire with age.

Twenty-four states will hold primary elections on Super Tuesday, just five days from now. Eight of these states facilitate voting in long-term care settings either by setting up public polling locations on the premises, sending election officials into the facility to assist seniors, or helping nursing home administrators obtain absentee ballots in advance. The other sixteen states – or two-thirds – currently make NO accommodations for voters living in a long-term care settings, and long-term care administrators are offered no direction from election officials as to how they should assist their residents with voting. Today I am sending a letter, along with Rules Committee Chairman Dianne Feinstein, to request that the Election Assistance Commission conduct research on voting within long-term care settings and develop voluntary guidelines to help states facilitate such voting. We hope this will help address barriers to voting within these settings.

There is also the matter of disabled older voters outside of the long-term care setting. Many states, like my home state of Wisconsin, have laws on the books requiring that all polling sites are accessible to disabled individuals. Unfortunately, such laws do not always dictate reality, and voting sites are often found to not be in compliance. During the 2000 elections, GAO found that only 16 percent of polling sites surveyed nationwide were fully accessible to people with disabilities. This has a real impact on older voters, because in spite of their tendency to be more engaged politically, older voters with a disability are 39 to 48 percent less likely to vote than their peers without a disability.

Several of my Senate colleagues and I will ask GAO to follow-up on their previous study and monitor the level of accessibility during the 2008 elections. There is no reason for states to fall down on the job of voter accessibility. We know that innovative mechanisms exist to allow older and disabled Americans to vote regardless of their physical abilities. Ranking Member Gordon Smith hails from Oregon, where all residents vote by mail. As I understand it, the state has seen an increase in voting between five and ten percent. We'll also hear about Vermont's vote-by-phone system today.

Finally, our hearing today will also touch on the issue of Voter ID. Currently the Supreme Court is considering whether an Indiana requirement to present a government-

issued ID when voting will actually result in discriminating against the elderly, minority and low-income populations who are less likely to have proper identification. Studies have found that seniors are more likely to lose their right to vote when Voter ID is implemented.

My state of Wisconsin has been battling over its own Voter ID proposals. A 2005 study by the University of Wisconsin found that 23 percent of people age 65 and older in Wisconsin – nearly 200,000 older voters – do not have a driver's license or other photo ID. A Supreme Court ruling on the Indiana law is expected by late June and is sure to have national implications for current and future voter ID laws.

As you listen to the witness testimony this morning, and when you leave this room and return to the barrage of nonstop election coverage, please keep in mind the message of today's hearing: if we do not remove the barriers that prevent elderly and disabled citizens from exercising their right to vote, then we are – for all intents and purposes – disenfranchising them.

Once again, I thank all of our witnesses for being here to take part in today's hearing. With that, I turn to our Ranking Member Gordon Smith for his opening statement.