

Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing – July 18, 2007

“Abuse of Our Elders: How We Can Stop It”

Good Morning. I would like to welcome our witnesses and everyone who is here, as well as those who are watching these proceedings.

Today we are going to be tackling a really important subject – elder abuse, and the need to prevent it.

I want to talk about solutions. I want to challenge Congress to do something more to combat elder abuse and I have a concrete proposal for action. Congress must enact a commonsense bill, the “Patient Safety and Abuse Prevention Act,” which I introduced with my friend Sen. Pete Domenici. This bill will protect our most vulnerable Americans who need long-term care by making sure that the workers who care for them do not have criminal backgrounds. We need to keep predators out of our system, not just prosecute them after they have ruined people’s lives.

I am pleased to say that several members of our Committee are co-sponsors of this bill including Sen. Clinton, Sen. Lincoln, Sen. Collins, Sen. Whitehouse and Sen. Casey. I thank you all very much for your support. I also have good news. Today this bill will be introduced in the House of Representatives by Congressman Tim Mahoney, who understands how important this issue is to our nation’s seniors.

My bill is modeled on a pilot program that has been occurring in seven states. The program has been extremely successful. Over the last three years, more than 5,000 individuals who had a criminal history have been identified and excluded from working in long-term care facilities. In Michigan, the most comprehensive state program, 5 percent of applicants for long-term care jobs were excluded because their background check uncovered a serious criminal history. The bottom line is that, in every state where the pilot programs have been established, they have worked. That’s important. That’s a victory for our elders.

Unfortunately, the pilot program is set to end this September. We must move to finish the job and translate these pilot programs into a comprehensive background check system that covers the entire country.

Our witnesses today will also discuss the importance of the Elder Justice Act. My colleague, Senator Lincoln, introduced this bill and I am an original cosponsor. Both Sen. Lincoln’s bill and mine protect seniors and save lives and must be passed this Congress.

We will start today's hearing with a story from a brave young woman who has traveled from New York to talk about what happened to her grandmother one day, when a predator who never should have been allowed to work in a medical facility found her alone. We will then have testimony from two federal agencies about the federal government's attempts to address elder abuse. Finally, we will hear from four of the leading experts in the U.S. who are working at the frontlines of advocacy, of law enforcement, and of service delivery to stop the scourge of elder abuse.

I welcome you all. Now we will call the first panel.