

**Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl –
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
“A Generation at Risk: Breaking the Cycle of Senior Suicide”
September 14, 2006**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing. We all admire your steadfast leadership and commitment to helping our nation’s families prevent tragic cases of suicide. We look forward to today’s discussion of how to make sure seniors who suffer from depression find the help they need.

Our nation is slowly making progress in removing the stigma of mental illness. But today, too many seniors still fall prey to depression. Some are ashamed, some believe it’s just a fact of life in old age, and some don’t know where to turn for help. In fact, a survey of seniors found that only 38 percent believed depression is a health problem, and more than half responded that it was a normal part of aging.

But depression is not a normal part of aging, and it is treatable. Yet, too often, seniors are left untreated and suicidal. Seniors make up 13% of our population but account for close to 20% of suicides. In fact, 75% of older people who commit suicide have seen their primary care doctor within the last month of their lives. Our health care system has failed them.

We must do more. Doctors must be trained to recognize and respond when their senior patients are depressed. We also need more geriatric specialists to manage the care of older patients who face multiple health problems. Today there are only 5 geriatricians and 1.4 geriatric psychiatrists for every 10,000 seniors. We have pushed for funding for the Federal geriatrician training programs to address these shortages, and we hope that program will be restored.

As the nation prepares for the retirement wave of 77 million baby boomers, we need to rethink the way mental health care is provided to seniors. Today, we will hear from two panels of distinguished experts who will explain the problem of senior suicide and suggest creative models to prevent it. I am very pleased that Dr. Art Walaszek, a leader in this field in Wisconsin, is here to share his experience and work. Again, we thank Senator Smith for organizing this hearing.