

Comments of Melinda M. Adams

On behalf of the

Idaho Commission on Aging

Before

The United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

“Employment and Community Service for Low Income Seniors: Are We  
Getting the Job Done?”

The Senior Community Service Employment Program

Washington D.C.

April 6, 2006

Chairman Smith and Members of the Special Committee on Aging, good morning.  
Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

I represent the Idaho Commission on Aging. As the State Unit on Aging, we are responsible for funding and establishing policy for all Older Americans Act Programs and state-funded services for older Idahoans.

I serve as staff to Governor Kempthorne's State Workforce Council, am a member of the One-Stop Career System Leadership Team and have administered Idaho's Title V Program for the past 21 years.

We hold the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) in high regard -- for the unique population it serves, for the economic opportunities it affords and for the vital community service it provides.

### **Impact of Current Statute and Policy Changes**

In the past, our state SCSEP program, which serves the rural stretches of the state, has been very effective. To illustrate, the U. S. Department of Labor has ranked Idaho's program first in the nation seven of the past fifteen years for placement success.

Likewise, enrollment levels, historically, have been high. However, since the U. S. Department of Labor initiated eligibility and policy revisions, **our Placement Rate has decreased from 58% to 26%, our enrollments have decreased by 28% and the number of community service hours has declined by 46% (from 52,317 to 28,485 hours).**

The negative impact of the policy changes appears significantly greater in rural areas. We find ourselves in the unfortunate predicament of returning unspent funds to the U. S.

Department of Labor while turning away low-income individuals in dire need of work experience and training.

Our agricultural base and seasonal economy coupled with the frontier spirit of taking any short-term job, just to put food on the table, make many older individuals ineligible, because any part-time or short term employment is prohibited. A case in point -- our SCSEP participants were unable to take a one-weekend job delivering telephone books to rural communities, because the short-term job would render them ineligible for the program. Moreover, the cost structure of the program does not acknowledge the higher costs of providing services where towns are far from each other and the lack of public transportation severely limits the options available to participants.

#### **Creation of a “Frontier” Section within Title V of the Older Americans Act**

For these reasons, we propose the creation of a “Frontier” section within Title V of the Older Americans Act. The “Frontier” section would allow each **Governor to designate as “Frontier” Planning and Service Areas where there is a majority of “frontier” counties. For states having 80% or more Planning and Service Areas designated as “Frontier”, the entire state could be deemed “Frontier”.**

Each state could **amend existing income eligibility inclusions and exclusions based on the characteristics of frontier economies.** Individuals in “Frontier” areas could take occasional, short-term jobs and remain eligible for the SCSEP as long as their income at application and recertification remains at or below 125% of the Federal Poverty Level. The existing cap on enrollee wages and fringe benefits would be reduced to 50%. This would allow greater use of existing grant funds for transportation assistance, distance learning, skill training and front-line staff. This proposal is budget neutral; it does not take any money away from anyone. It provides both national and states grantees the flexibility they need to better serve frontier participants.

## **The Administration's Reauthorization Proposal**

With regard to the Department of Labor's Reauthorization Proposal, we oppose raising the age at eligibility from 55 to 65 because that neglects a significant population who are underserved by other programs, largely ineligible for Social Security and discouraged about their employment future. We support formula funding to the Governor and State Unit on Aging. We oppose national level procurement in favor of state-based open competition.

We support the 65% cost structure revision but with 50% designated for frontier Planning and Service areas. We favor inclusion of "under-employment" as an eligibility criterion as well as the proposal to change the income requirements to make them uniform with other similar federal programs. **We support inclusion of Community Service as a performance measure against which program success is judged.**

With Reauthorization impending, it is critical to make the right changes for the people this program is intended to serve. The Senior Community Service Employment Program is too great to lose.