

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



RANKING MEMBER *Special Committee on Aging*

Sen. Casey's Opening Statement "Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness During the COVID-19 Pandemic" June 11, 2020

OPENING STATEMENT

"Chairman Collins thank you for this hearing today on social isolation and loneliness. I want to start today with a reference to the American family. So many families in our country are hurting right now. For them it is a dark night. We are over three months into a pandemic that continues to rage. In some areas, we know, it is re-intensifying.

"COVID-19 has claimed the lives of over 113,000 people in the United States, including over 6,000 people in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

"Across the country, people continue to experience grievous suffering in hospitals, nursing homes and at home—isolated and alone, away from their loved ones.

"Millions more are suffering extreme economic hardship. There are about 21 million Americans unemployed. In Pennsylvania, over 976,000 people are out of work. And yet, that data does not even paint the full picture. The impact of this terrible virus has not been evenly felt across this country.

"By all accounts, you that this is what we have been witnessing the last number of weeks, people of color, particularly black Americans, are disproportionately impacted. Over 23,000 black lives have been lost to COVID-19 to date.

"African Americans account for 13 percent of the US population, but 24 percent of deaths from COVID where the race of the individual is known. This means Black people are dying at a rate nearly two times higher than their population share.

"The unemployment rate for the overall population is 13.3 percent. It is 16.8 percent for black Americans. Consider this, for black men age 20 and older, only 54 percent are working, a 10 percentage point drop since February.

"The murder of George Floyd was described by one NAACP leader as 'A murder that shames us before the world.' The only way to even begin to attempt to right all of these terrible wrongs is through action. It is demanded of all of us.

“The African American community, however, is not the only community demanding of action in Washington. Seniors are also suffering disproportionately. As our hearing will explore today, seniors are living and dying scared and alone due to this virus.

“In Pennsylvania, nearly one third of COVID-19 cases have occurred among people over age 65. Even worse, most of the deaths that have occurred in my home state are among older Pennsylvanians.

“As I mentioned during our last hearing, people living in nursing homes represent a fraction of one percent of the population, yet more than 40 percent of all deaths nationwide have been either residents or workers in long-term care settings.

“Those who have recovered from the virus or who are trying to remain healthy are isolated from their family and friends – their sons and daughters, granddaughters and grandsons.

“It is interaction with our loved ones that sustains all of us, we all understand that. Instead, the social isolation and loneliness that older adults are experiencing is causing greater cognitive decline.

“Experts tell us that it is contributing to greater difficulties accessing proper nutrition and wellness services for our seniors. And, it is leading to a deterioration in both physical as well as mental health.

“Before COVID-19, millions of seniors faced social isolation and loneliness every day, we know that. Now, they are looking at relatives through window panes.

In March and April, I met with 51 out of our 52 Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) in Pennsylvania to discuss the needs of seniors during the pandemic. These AAAs are working double overtime to combat social isolation in the community.

“This work is being supported by over \$1 billion in the Families First Act and the CARES Act to address the needs of seniors. Much of that funding stems from a bill I introduced back in March, S. 3544, the Coronavirus Relief for Seniors and People with Disabilities Act. This was an important first step, but we cannot not stop there.

“Since the start of the pandemic, I have proposed over a dozen policies to help seniors and to combat social isolation – policies ranging from dollars for nursing homes to institute better practices and to more funding for meal and grocery delivery services. These are sound policies with broad stakeholder support and support from Democrats in both chambers.

“Instead of passing these bills, or any bills to address the pandemic, the United States Senate spent the month of May doing nothing but nominations except for one exception, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. Everything else was nominations the entire month.

“We cannot sit around in the Senate and just lament the impact of the pandemic. We cannot simply lament the deaths and illness that have been caused by the virus nor can we simply lament the economic toll on our families. We cannot simply lament the social isolation that people are experiencing. And finally, we cannot simply lament the racial injustice and police misconduct taking place across this country.

“We have to take action, we have to legislate, that is what the United States Senate is supposed to do. It is not supposed to be a nomination machine, it is supposed to be a legislative body. A body where we deliberate serious urgent issues, instead of just voting day after day and week after week on nominations.

“The Senate must continue to act to support our seniors, to support our families and to support all communities affected by the virus.

“Again, thank you, Chairman Collins, and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.”

#####