

## **STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN GORDON H. SMITH**

### **U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging “Innovation in the Aging Network: The Future of Social Services for Older Americans.”**

**May 3, 2006**

Good morning, and thank you all for coming.

Today’s hearing will focus on the need for the Aging Network to prepare and evolve for the coming retirement of the Baby Boom generation. We will also explore the upcoming reauthorization of the Older Americans Act and the need to support efforts within the act that prepare social services for future older Americans.

To meet the diverse needs of the growing numbers of older persons in the United States, the Older Americans Act of 1965 created the primary vehicle for organizing, coordinating and providing services to older Americans and their families. This system, now known as the National Aging Network, is a national network of federal, state and local agencies created to plan and provide services that enable older adults to live independently in their homes and communities.

Today, this network includes 56 State Units on Aging, 655 Area Agencies on Aging, known as triple As, 243 Native American aging programs, over 29,000 service providers and thousands of volunteers.

As we have discussed many times in this Committee, the share of the population that is over age 65 is projected to increase significantly in the coming years. Due to the dramatic increase in life expectancy, the 77 million Americans born in the United States during the boom years of 1946 to 1964 can expect on average to live to age 83. However, many will live well into their 90s.

Baby Boomers represent the largest single sustained growth of the population in the history of the United States. Their mass alone has had an enormous impact on the national psyche, political arena and social fabric. From the youth culture they created in the 1960s and 1970s to the dual-income households of the 1980s and 1990s, this generation has reinterpreted each successive stage of life.

As the oldest of the Baby Boomers approach later adulthood, they again are poised to redefine the next stage of life – retirement. This redefinition will pressure social services and the Aging Network to change.

To prepare, many aging organizations are currently attempting to become more mobile, technologically advanced and individualized. Other organizations are considering uprooting their centers for services strategy and creating livable communities for aging. This model hinges

on engaging seniors on the community level and inspiring collaboratives to enhance civic engagement and create communities that help seniors stay independent, involved and healthy.

We must work to strengthen the Aging Network to maximize effectiveness through coordination. To do this the federal, state and, most importantly, local level aging service providers will need to begin to view themselves not as separate sectors that occasionally overlap, but as integral parts of a unified approach to senior services.

We also need to support efforts to enhance healthy aging with fewer health dollars. I applaud the Administration on Aging for initiating conversations about how this can be done. While funding concerns have been raised regarding the Choices for Independence proposal, I believe the Administration on Aging should be applauded for bringing this issue to the table.

Baby Boomers are more knowledgeable about health and health resources than prior generations. Baby Boomers also have high expectations that they will remain healthy, and have invested in nutritional plans and exercise programs. They also use the Internet to find information to ensure they are up-to-date on the most recent health discoveries. To respond to these behaviors the Aging Network may need to adjust to provide services that are less focused on acute problems and more focused on healthy aging and preventative services.

Finally, we must promote civic engagement to benefit Baby Boomers as well as their communities. Studies show that older volunteers live longer and healthier than those who are not engaged with their communities. A Business Week report on June 27, 2005 found that with increased Boomer interest in working longer, “the financing problems of Social Security and Medicare will be easier to resolve” and increased productivity of older Americans and higher labor-force participation could add nine percent to the gross domestic product by 2045.

Today, we will hear from a director of a very large triple A, who has maximized the impact of her funds by providing opportunities for healthy older adults to contribute to their communities. It is important to note that seniors who are involved in civic engagement activities often volunteer in Older Americans Act programs and also serve other vulnerable populations in innovative ways.

The reauthorization of the Older Americans Act represents an exciting opportunity to modernize the Aging Network for the Baby Boomer population and to create new opportunities to integrate newer aging concepts like civic engagement into the Aging Network. I urge Congress must to forward in a timely fashion with reauthorization of the Older Americans Act.

I’d like to thank all of our witnesses who have joined us here this morning. I am eager to hear your thoughts as we engage in a meaningful and productive dialogue that will shed light on innovative proposals for the future of the Aging Network.

With that, I’ll turn to my colleague Senator Kohl for his opening remarks.