

SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

“Aging in Place: Can Advances in Technology Help Seniors Live Independently?”

May 6, 2015

Ranking Member Claire McCaskill

Opening Statement

Thank you Chairman Collins. Helping our seniors remain in their communities and age with dignity is an important issue and a top priority of this Committee. You have assembled a great panel and I’m looking forward to hearing about exciting innovations that can help seniors and their families.

There is a real disconnect between the number of seniors who say they want to stay in their homes and communities and the number of seniors who end up having to move to nursing homes. In fact, a recent AARP study found that 87% of older adults would prefer to remain in their communities as they age. While it may not be possible for every person, depending on a number of factors, to remain in their homes, for many of us, with the right supports, it is possible. And it is preferable both in terms of quality of life and the financial implications.

Recent advances in technology are providing new options for seniors and their families that can allow them to remain at home for longer by monitoring health status, detecting emergency situations and notifying health care providers about any changes in health status. These technologies can also make family members’ and caregivers’ lives easier by providing them with tools to support their loved ones and giving them peace of mind. This really is a win-win situation, seniors are much happier continuing their normal routines and social activities where they feel comfortable, family members can make sure their loved ones are safe and society as a whole benefits from significantly reduced health care and long-term care costs.

There are many assistive technologies that are already on the market. Home improvement stores, other big box retailers and even telecommunications companies all sell versions of connected home systems that can help keep seniors secure in their homes. Developers are creating senior-specific monitoring devices such as bed, toilet and pillbox sensors that can help monitor activity within the home. Pillbox sensors are so simple in nature, but can prevent tragic accidents by making sure that seniors aren't mixing medications or taking too many pills. Wearable devices are also popular for tracking physical activity and helping to prevent falls. Falls are the leading cause of injuries in older adults, with one out of every three seniors falling each year. Some of the newer fall monitoring devices don't even require the push of a button, they can detect when a person has fallen using an accelerometer. Technology has also been critical to the growth of telehealth and particularly helpful for seniors who, by using telehealth services, can have their most of their health monitored from the comfort of their homes rather than the doctor's office.

These innovative technologies are being developed by researchers all across the country, one of whom is here with us today. I am pleased to introduce Dr. Marjorie Skubic, Dr. Skubic is the Director of the Center for Eldercare and Rehabilitation Technology at the University of Missouri. The Center at Mizzou, in partnership with Americare, created TigerPlace, a specially-designed continuing care living environment that utilizes a number of advanced technologies in the senior apartments. Dr. Skubic and her team have even found a way to use radar and 3-D sensors to monitor seniors' risk level for falls. I look forward to learning more about this and other emerging technologies from Dr. Skubic's testimony.

I know that there are some concerns about preserving the privacy of seniors and that using webcams and video-monitoring might present some challenges. We definitely want to

ensure that the privacy of seniors using these technologies is protected while also looking out for their safety. I know that Mizzou has utilized privacy preserving techniques, such as using only silhouettes on video monitors that can help ease some of the privacy concerns of older adults. The challenge for those who develop these technologies is to find ways to maximize safety with a minimal invasion of privacy.

Thank you, again, to Chairman Collins and our witnesses, for taking the time to be here today and I look forward to listening and learning from your testimony.