

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
Aging and Disability in the 21st Century: How Technology Can Help Maintain
Health and Quality of Life
May 22, 2019

Good morning. Today we will explore how 21st century technology is improving the quality of life for older Americans and those with disabilities. We have on display an array of devices that are available today. This pen, for example, the Pen Friend 2, allows one to put stickers on different items, and record voice labels to identify them, helping people with low vision to find items more easily.

These days, most of us carry in our pocket at least one device. This phone, while still used for making calls, today represents much more. A typical smart phone can track health measures like daily steps and blood sugar, and can pair with other devices to predict the risk of falls or diabetic episodes.

From the everyday technologies that we all use to assistive technologies that help seniors and those with disabilities improve function, these devices are poised to change the future of aging. Survey after survey indicates that seniors envision themselves aging independently at home in their own community for as long as possible and living their lives to the fullest. Technology can help make that possible.

With 10,000 Americans turning 65 every day, and one out of five Americans set to join this group by 2035, we are in the midst of a major demographic shift. The fastest growing segment of our population are Americans age 85 and older. While aging brings opportunity, it also comes with increased risk of multiple and interacting health conditions that can lead to disability, at times requiring long-term care, and making it more difficult to age at home.

As the population is aging, the need for care and support is increasing. In 2010, there were approximately seven potential caregivers for each person over 80. By 2030, there will be four, and by 2050, the number drops to fewer than three. So more people will have to rely on fewer caregivers – opening the door for technology to provide unprecedented assistance.

Advances in technology are working to bridge the “care gap,” improving function in activities of daily living, helping to manage multiple chronic conditions, reducing the risk of hazards, and making homes safer for seniors. Not only has technology helped seniors age in place, but it is also making it possible for individuals to move out of nursing homes or other institutionalized settings back into their own homes.

Through tools and technologies, Maine’s Homeward Bound program, for example, has helped to transition 141 seniors and people with disabilities back into their communities to live independently.

One particularly promising avenue for new technologies is in the prevention of falls. Falls are a leading cause of both fatal and nonfatal injuries among seniors, and are projected to cost our nation \$67 billion in the coming year alone. Falls-related injuries can have a devastating impact, requiring round-the-clock institutional care. But new technologies can reduce the risk of falls, as well as contact emergency services for help as soon as a fall happens. A different approach, developed by the University of Maine is smart glasses that detect edges, such as stairs or curbs to prevent falls, particularly for seniors who have limited mobility and eyesight.

Another area where technology holds great potential is in reducing social isolation. Social media and video chat on tablets and smartphones help to reduce social isolation and enrich seniors' lives by keeping them connected to their loved ones. Social isolation and loneliness can have serious, even deadly, consequences for the health and well-being of our nation's seniors. According to researchers, prolonged isolation is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. While not a substitute for people, technology can help to bring people together.

Older adults and people with disabilities have a role in the development of these technologies. Including seniors and those with disabilities at the drawing board increases utilization and reduces stigma, and ultimately makes for a better product.

Older Americans also have helped companies realize that they want technology devices that look just like those used by younger generations. For example, many of us are familiar with the decades-old phrase, "I've fallen, and I can't get up." That phrase was an advertisement for a medical alert system that, for many years, was among the most advanced technologies available to help seniors age in place. While many seniors still rely on this device, breakthroughs in modern technology have brought new options. Now, instead of wearing a pendant around one's neck that is connected to a bulky device plugged into one's phone line, newer smart watches may include a built-in fall monitor. These next-generation fall monitors can even make automatic calls to emergency services and family members if attempts to reach the older adult go answered.

Technology is opening doors for older Americans and those with disabilities to live the way they prefer. From better managing health and mobility to increasing connectivity and community activities, technologies on the market today and those on the horizon for tomorrow promise to usher in an era of aging.

I'm looking forward to today's hearing and will now turn to Ranking Member Casey for his opening statement.