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Testimony for the Special Committee on Aging
United States Senate
Aging in Comfort: Assessing the Special Needs of America's Holocaust Survivors
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Dirksen Room 562

Chairman Nelson, Ranking Member Collins, and distinguished Senators:

It is my honor to speak before you about the unique issues affecting survivors of the Holocaust and the social services available to meet their needs. My name is Lee Sherman, and I am the President/CEO of the Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies (AJFCA). AJFCA represents 125 social service providers throughout the U.S. and Canada that aid vulnerable populations of all faiths and backgrounds. We are part of the Jewish Federation system, the second largest network of charities on the continent. We partner with The Jewish Federations of North America, and our member agencies partner with nonprofits, state and local government, and community businesses and organizations to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and help families going through crisis. Throughout most of the country, our member agencies provide the vast majority of services to Holocaust survivors in the U.S.

It is our estimate that there are some 120,000 Holocaust survivors living in the United States today. It is impossible to determine exact numbers, as some Holocaust survivors choose not to self-identify, and some survivors are not known to the social service agencies in their communities. We do know that all of them are elderly, and that the vast majority of survivors we serve are in their 80s, 90s, or older. While they live in communities across the United States, most are concentrated in the population centers of New York, South Florida, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Many also live in Detroit, Houston, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Maryland, Atlanta, and other cities.

Approximately 25% of Holocaust survivors—some 30,000 survivors—live at or below the poverty line, and struggle to meet their basic needs for housing, food, health care, transportation, and meaningful human interaction. Without immediate action on behalf of these survivors, we risk losing them to the very things they should never have to face again - eviction, hunger, inadequate medical care, loneliness, social isolation, and despair.

Approximately half of Holocaust survivors in the U.S. today immigrated before 1965. These survivors assimilated into American culture, obtained jobs, and raised successful families. Their financial situation is comparable to that of other older adults who were not victims of Nazi aggression. The other half of Holocaust survivors arrived in the U.S. after 1965, largely from countries of the former Soviet Union. They suffered again under communism and faced greater

challenges assimilating in America. Many of them still do not speak English. About half of these survivors have annual incomes beneath the federal poverty threshold. They are extremely vulnerable and reliant on social services to meet their basic needs.

Economically vulnerable survivors need services to help them maintain their physical, financial, and social-psychological well-being. These services include:

- *Home-based services*, including home health care, personal care, home-delivered meals, and home modifications
- *Financial and legal services*, including emergency assistance to help pay rent and utilities; assistance with medical and dental bills and medications; assistance applying for public benefits; and legal assistance with any or all of the above
- *Counseling and socialization services*, including screening and treatment for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and cognitive impairment; caregiver support; and opportunities for socialization in a safe, supportive environment such as Café Europa, a social program for Holocaust survivors funded by the Claims Conference and organized by our agencies
- *Access services*, including outreach, information and referral, assessment and benefits screenings, case management, and transportation

It is crucial to ensure that Holocaust survivors can access these services. At times, survivors may not know how to access the services, may not think it applies to them, or may otherwise be hesitant to ask for help. Therefore, we provide assistance to help survivors benefit from these services.

Our members provide these services to many older adults to help them live independently in their communities. But for Holocaust survivors, *this is critical*. For survivors, removal from one's home results in the loss of autonomy, loss of independence, and loss of control over one's daily life. This loss of control has the potential to trigger psychological impacts from experiences in the Holocaust.

For example, some Holocaust survivors may resort to hiding food in their rooms, insecure about when their next meal will come, and how much food will be available to them. Waiting in line for meals may produce great anxiety; and restrictions of movement, such as a requirement to remain in their bedroom during certain hours, may remind some survivors of earlier, harsher periods of confinement. Some survivors learned long ago to fear and mistrust doctors, white coats, or uniforms because of their terrifying experiences with Nazi soldiers and medical experiments. Some survivors may unsafely attempt to stand or walk without assistance, because during the Holocaust, their strength sustained them, while the sick and the weak were marked for death. Unfamiliar showers are particularly traumatic to survivors of concentration camps, some

of which contained gas chambers disguised as showers. Even socially adjusted survivors who have adapted well their entire lives in America may experience these triggers later in life, especially if compounded by dementia or Alzheimer's.

For these reasons, our agencies will go to great lengths to help any survivor in need access the services to enable them to live safely in their homes and communities. Many of these services are the same services that all low-income seniors need to age in place. The difference for survivors is in how the services are offered and presented to them. For example, Holocaust survivors are particularly proud of their independence and may be hesitant to ask for transportation assistance. A specially trained social worker can assist the survivor by telling them about the transportation program and explaining that the service and the driver are safe and reliable. Drivers can be trained to be sensitive to the needs of survivors and to know how to react if a survivor speaks about the Holocaust.

This again is where our agencies come in. We work with survivors' families to make sure they have the proper care and supports to help them age in place. We raise awareness in the community and we fundraise. We provide opportunities for survivors to socialize in safe environments and avoid the devastating consequences of loneliness and social isolation.

The need for these services will continue to grow as survivors age, and our agencies are already struggling to meet the demand. Our member agencies receive funding from their partner Jewish Federations, and they receive money for home care and emergency services for Holocaust survivors through The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which is the largest funder of social welfare services for Holocaust survivors in the U.S. The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany provides additional support such as the dissemination of best practices for serving Holocaust survivors. Still, the funding is not enough, and our agencies report that they require an additional \$100,000 to \$4,000,000 per year to provide for the basic needs of Holocaust survivors in their communities. AJFCA and our local agencies have commenced fundraising campaigns to bridge the shortfalls.

AJFCA works closely with The Jewish Federations of North America to educate policymakers and build public support for the goal of ensuring that Holocaust survivors have their daily needs met.

We are grateful for the bipartisan support of members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. In particular, we thank the champions of the Responding to Urgent needs of survivors of the Holocaust, or the "RUSH" Act, Senator Cardin and Senator Kirk, along with Chairman Nelson, Chairwoman Mikulski, Senator Portman and the other bipartisan cosponsors of the RUSH Act, to help more Holocaust survivors access services to age in place. Many of the necessary services are funded through the Older Americans Act, and we are inspired by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions for recognizing this need. We thank the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions for approving the bipartisan Older Americans Act (OAA) reauthorization bill on October 30, 2013, and for

including in it a requirement for the Administration on Aging to consult with organizations serving Holocaust survivors and issue guidance on outreach to the survivor population for OAA programs.

We also welcome Vice President Biden's recent announcement about the Obama Administration's commitment to helping impoverished Holocaust survivors. The White House has offered a three-pronged approach to help Survivors:

- The appointment of a special envoy in the Department of Health and Human Services to serve as a liaison to Holocaust survivors and the organizations that serve them.
- The commitment of the Corporation for National and Community Service to deploy VISTA volunteers to help build the capacity of organizations serving Holocaust survivors.
- The exploration of public-private partnership opportunities to increase the resources to serve Holocaust survivors.

We are extremely grateful to President Obama, Vice President Biden and the talented White House staff for their thoughtfulness and innovative ideas on how to address the social service needs of Holocaust survivors. AJFCA and The Jewish Federations of North America are glad to serve as leaders implementing these initiatives.

After all, Holocaust survivors are proud Americans. They remember the young, courageous American soldiers who liberated the concentration camps. They are grateful to the United States for providing them the freedoms denied earlier in life, and for making possible the opportunities to succeed through hard work and commitment. Holocaust survivors have contributed greatly to the fabric of our nation, becoming Nobel laureates, doctors, scientists, philanthropists, academics, and business owners. As we know, the late Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor, served as Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. They have raised families and their children and grandchildren continue to enrich our nation. Holocaust survivors have taught us, and continue to teach us, the most valuable lessons about humanity, diversity, and the strength of the human spirit. They have made America a better place.

Yet, as we know too well, thousands of Holocaust survivors have had difficulty adjusting. Living in poverty, plagued by immeasurable loss, they are at risk of falling into isolation and despair. It is for them—and to honor the memory of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust—that we commit ourselves each and every day to ensure they live with respect and dignity. It is our greatest honor to ensure that those who suffered the most heinous brutality of the last century are able to live their twilight years with dignity, comfort, and security. Holocaust survivors are living, breathing triumphs of survival over bigotry and hatred. I thank this Committee, my fellow witnesses, and concerned members of the community for shining a light on their unique needs and circumstances. Thank you.