

**Opening Statement by Senator Tim Hutchinson
Chairman, Subcommittee on Aging
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
The Nursing Shortage in Arkansas: Perspectives from the Field
Donald Reynolds Center on Aging
Tuesday, April 17, 2001, at 1 p.m.**

As Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Aging, I am very pleased today to hold a field hearing here in Arkansas to examine the nursing shortage and its impact on our state. Earlier this year, I held a similar hearing in Washington D.C., and was pleased to have Linda Hodges, Dean of the College of Nursing at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, as one of our witnesses. Today, we are fortunate to have a very distinguished panel of Arkansans to testify in depth about the nursing shortage in Arkansas.

I don't know how many of you have seen the movie *Meet The Parents* with Ben Stiller and Robert DeNiro. Ben Stiller is a young man who meets his fiancé's parents for the first time. When he walks into the kitchen for breakfast, he is asked what he does for a living and when he replies that he is a nurse, the potential father-in-law and brother-in-law, both of whom are doctors laugh in what is a very funny scene. This is the exact stereotype of nursing -- that only females should be nurses -- that we must challenge and overcome.

Recent nursing statistics paint a grim picture for the future of the nursing workforce, when millions of Baby Boomers will retire and place an unprecedented strain on the health care system. By the year 2020, it is projected that nursing needs will be unmet by at least 20 percent.

This is in large part due to a shrinking pipeline. The average age of Registered Nurses is 43.3 years. Nurses under age 30 comprise less than 10 percent of today's nurse workforce. Minorities, including men, remain a minuscule percentage of the workforce. The cumulative effect of all this is that nurses and nurse faculty are retiring or leaving their profession at a rapid rate, and only a small number of nurses and nurse educators are taking their place.

Here in Arkansas, the numbers are equally disturbing:

- ❑ 63 percent of the nurses in Arkansas are over 40 years of age and 93 percent are women.

- ❑ In the past eight years, enrollment in Arkansas RN programs has declined by 44.4 percent, since their peak in 1992.

- ❑ Only 4 percent of Arkansas nurses have masters=degrees and 0.3 percent have doctoral degrees C both of these degrees allow an individual to become nurse faculty.

❑ Because of this dearth of faculty, 153 eligible nursing students in Arkansas were turned away in 1999 because there were no teachers to teach them.

❑ In the meantime, over 750 nursing vacancies have been reported by Arkansas hospitals, and this is just a snapshot of similar trends being experienced by many more health care providers across the state.

On April 5, I introduced the Nurse Employment and Education Development (NEED) Act, which is bipartisan legislation intended to address the nursing shortage in Arkansas and across the country. The NEED Act builds on the programs currently in the Nurse Education Act and adds several new, innovative approaches to alleviate the nursing shortage.

In the area of recruitment, the NEED Act establishes a Nurse Corps, which is essential to attracting able individuals into the nurse workforce to fill current and future health needs. In particular, the NEED Act expands the existing nurse loan repayment program under the Nurse Education Act and by adding scholarships for which nursing students can qualify in exchange for at least 2 years of service in a critical nurse shortage area or in a variety of health care facilities determined to have a shortage in nursing. In addition, the NEED Act adds

nursing homes, home health agencies, public health departments and nurse managed health centers to the list of eligible entities to fulfill this service requirement.

Changing the image of nursing and promoting workforce diversity, as illustrated by the movie *AMeet The Parents*,[@] is another key factor to get people, especially young people, interested in nursing careers. The NEED Act provides funding for multi-media campaigns at the federal and state level to reach out to individuals to encourage them to consider nursing as they make career choices.

The NEED Act also provides grants for community partnerships to develop innovative nurse recruiting and retention strategies tailored to a particular community, and authorizes additional funding for workforce diversity grants already provided for under the Nurse Education Act.

In order to strengthen the existing workforce, the NEED Act provides grant funding for: career ladder programs to facilitate educational advancement for individuals with existing nursing degrees or health care training; long-term care training for nurses who will inevitably be dealing with an older patient population; and nursing internships and residencies to meet the current demand for nurses with specialty training, be it in the ER or the labor and

delivery room.

Finally, the NEED Act provides for a fast-track faculty development program, which seeks to encourage master's and doctoral students to rapidly complete their studies through loans and scholarships. We must realize that getting people into the pipeline will mean very little if we do not have the teachers to teach them. Individuals receiving financial assistance through the fast-track faculty program must agree to teach at an accredited school of nursing in exchange for this assistance.

There is no doubt that nurses are a vital component our health care delivery system. I will work hard with all interested parties to pass the NEED Act, which I hope will be a step in the right direction for the future of nursing in Arkansas and nationwide.

I now have the privilege of introducing each of our witnesses. After I introduce you, you will have 5 minutes to present your oral testimony. Your complete written testimony will be included in the hearing record, which will remain open for two weeks. Once the witnesses have finished providing their testimony, I will have a number of questions for each of you.