

**OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BARBARA A. MIKULSKI
AT THE NURSING SHORTAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON AMERICA'S
HEALTH CARE DELIVERY SYSTEM@
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AGING
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Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for calling this timely hearing on the nursing shortage. I also want to thank Dr. Georges Benjamin, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and Chair of the Maryland Statewide Commission on the Crisis in Nursing, and Kathryn Hall, Executive Director of the Maryland Nurses Association, for sharing their expertise and testimony today.

This is not the first nursing shortage that I've seen, but I'm committed to finding real solutions so that it will be our last. Because if we don't address this crisis effectively, the future is likely to be even worse due to our aging population. Today, there are about 35 million Americans aged 65 and older. This number will double to about 70 million in 2030 and be an increasingly diverse population. Older individuals have more complex health care needs and often multiple conditions that require treatment simultaneously. This means that nurses and the care they provide will be even more important than they are today.

The impact of the nursing shortage on our aging population is compounded by the fact that our nursing workforce is also aging. Fifty percent of all working nurses will reach retirement age in 15 years. Maryland and many other states across this country are experiencing nursing shortages as more nurses retire, fewer people go into nursing, and the economy offers more opportunities for nurses and higher salaries than nursing. Maryland hospitals reported that, last year, it took 68 days to fill a registered nurse vacancy.

Today's shortage is causing great distress for patients. According to a new survey by the American Nurses Association, 75 percent of nurses surveyed feel the quality of nursing care at the facility in which they work has declined over the past two years. About half of the nurses surveyed feel "exhausted and discouraged" when they leave work, and over half of those surveyed would not recommend their profession to their children or their friends.

Nurses tell me that they feel undervalued, overworked, and underpaid. In this country in 1999, a nurse with 15 or more years of

experience could expect to earn on average only about \$7,000 more than a nurse with three years experience or less. I asked the Maryland Higher Education Commission if there were waiting lists in Maryland for nursing scholarships or admission to nursing programs. I was not surprised to find that there are no waiting lists.

But nurses are truly the unsung heroes in health care. They are advocates, medical professionals, and healers who fight death and disease and bring compassion to the patients for whom they care. The care they give is high-tech, high-touch, and highly skilled. Nurses are at the bedside of premature infants in the neonatal intensive care unit, they are assisting in the operating room during cardiac bypass surgery, they are riding snowmobiles to provide home health care to rural seniors, and they are helping nursing home residents manage complex medications.

Why are people not coming into nursing and why aren't they staying? Because while nurses have sophisticated training and education, they get skimpy and spartan pay and respect. We need more nurses, but we as a society must get behind our nurses. That means more than just more

financial aid or bigger scholarships. And it definitely means more than collecting data about the problem. Getting behind our nurses means paying them what they deserve. Because the dedication and devotion shown by countless nurses doesn't pay the mortgage! And because the best way to recruit more nurses is by having a satisfied nursing workforce that reaches out to a new generation of women and men.

I was excited about the television series "Hopkins 24/7" on ABC last year. I was proud of the doctors, but the shows provided an incomplete picture of the health care provided in hospitals. It left out the nurses and other health care professionals who work around the clock to care for patients. That's why I'm so pleased that the Discovery Health Channel discovered nurses. I spoke to nursing groups last month to celebrate the launch of the "Nurses" television series on the Discovery Health Channel. It is similar to "Hopkins 24/7", only it's about nurses. I think this series will be a terrific tool to educate the American public about who nurses are and what they do. I thank the Discovery Health Channel and Johns Hopkins and for sharing with us clips from this series that we'll view shortly.

Today's hearing will shed light on the nursing shortage and the challenges it presents, but I hope it will also be an opportunity to talk about solutions in the short and long term. We must look at what nurses, hospitals and other facilities, nursing schools, states, Congress and the federal government can do to combat this crisis. I know that my colleagues on both sides of the aisle care deeply about this issue. I look forward to today's testimony and working on this important issue with the Chairman and my other colleagues. Thank you.