

STATEMENT OF SENATOR GORDON H. SMITH

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging
"Forced to Flee:
Caring for the Elderly Displaced by War, Poverty, and Persecution Abroad"
December 5, 2007

I want to begin by thanking you all for being here today. I especially want to thank Senator Kohl for allowing me to chair this hearing and for his strong interest and commitment to the issues we will discuss here today.

Many of you have come a great distance for this hearing— including some who have traveled from the west coast including my home state of Oregon. However, I can safely say that probably none of us have come so far as the populations that we are here today to discuss – elderly refugees and asylees.

The goal of today's hearing is to learn more about the refugee populations that we have here in America and the needs of those who tend to be more frail and require supportive services – those who are elderly and disabled. The elderly refugees that come to our nation have many of the same needs that the non-elderly refugees have, a place to live, a job, a safe environment, and a means to connect to their new country. However, due to age and frailty, these needs become more difficult for many elderly refugees to obtain.

In their times of need, there are resources to support them. Through the work of the State Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other non-federal organizations like the United Nations and refugee resettlement agencies there is a network of support that aid in their transition to life in America. Today we are here to learn about these programs and to hear from the experts on how we can make improvement for elderly refugees.

As I learned as a child here in America, our nation is one of immigrants and refugees. Many of our own families left their native countries to find religious freedom and to escape war, poverty and persecution. As our nation has grown and advanced, we have held close our obligations to those in the world who are less fortunate and who seek a better life – one safe from harm.

Many of the individuals we will discuss here today are elderly refugees who fled persecution or torture in their home countries. They include Jews fleeing religious persecution in the former Soviet Union, Iraqi Kurds fleeing the former Saddam Hussein regime, Cubans and Hmong (MUNG) people from the highlands of Laos who served on the side of the United States military during the Vietnam War.

Many of these refugees are elderly and some are disabled and unable to work. Some have come with their families, some have come alone. Many are working to learn, at an advanced age, a new language and a new culture.

In my home state of Oregon we have welcomed more than 55,000 refugees from around the world since 1975. Nearly two thirds of Oregon's refugee population are from the former Soviet

Union or Vietnam. Many of these refugees found themselves fighting or otherwise helping the United States in wartime. The remaining one third of Oregon's refugees come from many nations who have found themselves in troubled times – Somalia, Cuba, Bosnia, and Afghanistan are just a few. Of these refugees, many are elderly and some will require additional services and supports as they age.

To help refugees who are elderly and disabled, I introduced a bill with Senator Kohl that would allow them to retain their Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments as they go through the process of gaining American citizenship. The bill, "SSI Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act" is one important step we can take to make a significant impact in helping our most vulnerable asylees and refugees.

As many of you may know, Congress modified the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program to include a seven-year time limit on the receipt of benefits for refugees and asylees. Unfortunately, the naturalization process often takes longer than seven years. Applicants are required to live in the United States for a minimum of five years prior to applying for citizenship. In addition to that time period, their application process often can take three or more years before resolution.

Because of this time delay, many individuals are trapped in the system and faced with the loss of their SSI benefits. In fact, we know that to date more than 7,000 elderly and disabled refugees have lost their SSI benefits and that another 16,000 are threatened to lose their benefits as well in the coming years.

The Bush administration, in its fiscal year 2008 budget, acknowledged the necessity to correct this problem by dedicating funding to extend refugee eligibility for SSI beyond the seven-year limit. The legislation I introduced with Senator Kohl builds upon those efforts by allowing an additional two years of benefits for elderly and disabled refugees, asylees, and other qualified humanitarian immigrants, including those whose benefits have expired in the recent past.

In a similar bill that has passed the House and which I am working to pass here in the Senate would allow benefits to be extended for a third year for those same refugees who are awaiting a decision on a pending naturalization application. These policies are limited to 2010 and are completely offset in cost by a provision that will work to recapture federal government funds due to unemployment insurance fraud.

I hope that the Senate will soon pass this package as it would send a message that we have not and will not turn our back on our most vulnerable refugees. To penalize them, as we currently do, because of delays encountered through the bureaucratic process seems unjust and inappropriate.

I look forward to the testimony that we will hear today from our panelists. We have a wide array of expert and dedicated witnesses ranging from the United Nations, to the U.S. State Department and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to representatives of many organizations that are the backbone of the services refugees can access in our nation. They all are truly dedicated to helping those who have suffered so much.

With that I turn to Senator Kohl for his remarks.