

**Remarks of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging
December 5, 2007**

Forced to Flee: Caring for the Elderly Displaced by War, Poverty, and Persecution Abroad

I would like to thank Senator Smith for holding today's hearing; I would also like to thank the witnesses for their testimony and for being here today. The challenges facing elderly refugees are too often overlooked or ignored. I hope the testimony given here can shed some light on how we can better serve these individuals.

In July of 2004, as Wisconsin was preparing for an influx of thousands of Hmong refugees, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel ran a three part series on the challenges those refugees faced. The series painted a picture of a shared history – of fighting against Communist forces with the CIA during the “secret war” in Laos; living in refugee camps; fleeing to the U.S.; and starting anew in America. In relating the stories of individuals such as Chua Tong Vue, a 75 year old man living at the time in a refugee camp in Thailand, readers came away with a greater understanding for the obstacles refugees must overcome – both abroad and once they reach the U.S.

A greater understanding of those challenges and finding ways to lessen them is the goal of today's hearing. The federal government certainly has a role to play in the resettlement of refugees. That role begins with the determination of who is considered a refugee and continues through helping them to adapt to life in America. We must ensure that we serve them as effectively as possible. I believe there is a lot of room for improvement, and I look forward to hearing the ideas and recommendations of today's witnesses.

With more than 69,000 current and former refugees living in Wisconsin, I have a particular interest in this issue. Wisconsin is a leader in easing the transition for refugees with a strong record of combining federal, state and local resources. In addition, the hard work and coordination of volunteer agencies in the state – Catholic Charities, Jewish Families Services, United Refugee Services of Wisconsin, and Lutheran Social Services – is critical to the resettlement of refugees. Both the volunteer agencies and the State have proven their dedication to ensuring that refugees are granted access to all the tools they need to adapt. For example, in 2004, Governor Doyle appointed the Hmong Resettlement Task Force to study the needs of the Hmong refugee population. Comprised of a large coalition of interests and organizations, the Task Force made recommendations on how to improve access to a wide range of services – a testament to the State's dedication to serving this constituency.

The federal government can and should be doing more to ease the burden of resettlement – especially for the elderly. For the past several years, I have worked with Senator Smith on one of the biggest challenges facing refugees in the US – the loss of SSI benefits due to a 7 year time limit. As many of you know, Supplemental Security Income, or SSI, provides minimal cash assistance to elderly and disabled individuals with little or no income. Due to short-sighted policy passed in the 1990's, elderly and disabled humanitarian immigrants have seven years to become citizens in order to remain eligible for these benefits. This is an inadequate amount of time, given the bureaucratic delays and hurdles these individuals face. Thus, thousands have already lost their benefits, and tens of thousands more will lose this important benefit if Congress does not enact our legislation.

The Smith-Kohl bill, the SSI Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act, would extend SSI eligibility for two years for refugees and asylees, including those whose benefits recently expired. This legislation protects the estimated 40,000 individuals who will lose these benefits if Congress doesn't act, and restores benefits to the thousands who have already seen them cut. I am very pleased that the House has passed by voice vote an offset version of our legislation. While I remain hopeful that the Senate can enact the bill before the end of this year, time is running out.

I hope that today's hearing will help raise the profile of this and other challenges faced by elderly refugees in our country. Our policy toward refugees and asylees embodies the best of our country -- compassion, opportunity, and freedom. I am proud of the example our policies set with respect to the treatment of those seeking refuge. But our commitment to these individuals cannot end with the decision to grant refugee status. The policies of compassion and opportunity should continue throughout the resettlement process. I want to again thank Senator Smith for having this hearing and thank the witnesses for attending today. I look forward to today's proceedings.