

**Remarks of Edwin Walker
At the
International Council on Active Aging Meeting
Washington, DC – September 27, 2004**

Before I tell you about the *You Can ! Steps to Healthier Aging* Campaign, I want to take a few minutes to talk about what the Administration on Aging is doing to advance the Secretary's Prevention initiative for older people.

AoA's mission is to promote the dignity and independence of older people and to help our society prepare for the aging of the population. The aging of America is going to require every sector of society to rethink the way it does business. This includes the business of Prevention.

We are also charged with promoting the development of a comprehensive and coordinated system of care at the community level that will help older people to remain active and healthy and, to be able to remain in their own homes for as long as possible.

We carry out our mission by working with and through a nationwide network - known as the Aging Services Network. Each year, we channel about \$1.4 Billion in federal funds through the states and tribes to support a wide array of home and community-based social service programs and interventions. Our 29,000 community providers reach over 8 million people each year, including 500,000 family caregivers.

In support of the President's and Secretary's prevention agenda, Assistant Secretary Carbonell has made keeping older Americans active and healthy one of the Administration on Aging's top priorities.

We are working to strengthen the capacity of our local community service providers to deliver interventions that have proven to be effective in reducing the risk of disease and disability as people age. Also, we are working with our providers to use the funds currently available for health promotion services under the Older Americans Act more strategically.

Our Aging Services Network has been in the prevention business since its inception in 1965. Many of the programs we fund include traditional health promotion and disease prevention services.

We also help people learn about and access health programs they are entitled to -- but may not realize they are eligible for -- such as Medicaid -- and the new prescription drug benefit and preventive services that have been added to Medicare.

And we provide older people with opportunities to continue to feel valued by society and to remain engaged in their communities through part-time employment and volunteer opportunities. These programs are also important for maintaining one's own sense of worth as well as one's mental health in old age.

Last year we launched a \$6 million Evidence-Based Prevention Grants program to demonstrate how we can translate some of the Department's best research into practice through our community service provider agencies.

We funded 12 community demonstration projects, and a national technical assistance center at the National Council on the Aging. We are implementing these grants through public-private partnerships with the National Institute on Aging, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the John A. Hartford Foundation, and a community foundation in the metropolitan DC area, the Horizons Foundation.

The projects are focused on the five areas:

- Disease Self-Management
- Medication Management
- Falls Prevention
- Nutrition; and
- Physical Activity

As part of our strategy, we are committed to raising awareness among the senior population about the importance of prevention and small steps that older people can take to maintain and improve their health – that's why we are launching the *You Can! Steps to Healthier Aging* Campaign.

Let's talk for a minute about the *You Can!* Campaign. On September 1, we launched our national outreach and public awareness campaign to get the Secretary's prevention message out to seniors all across the country. It is the aging component of Secretary Thompson's *Steps to a Healthier U.S. initiative*. *You Can!* is focused on encouraging seniors to eat better and exercise more.

We are pleased to announce today that we have enrolled more than 700 organizations as *You Can!* partners in just three weeks since the beginning of enrollment campaign.

We call it the "2-2-2" campaign – because our goal is to mobilize 2,000 community organizations;
to reach 2 million seniors;
and to do it within 2 years.

Some of you may ask why is there such a focus on prevention now? The messages are everywhere from newspapers and magazines to the McDonald's adult "Happy Meal."

But the good news is that we are healthier now! Today's older Americans are healthier than ever before. The demographics dictate that as the population ages, we need to ensure that we reduce possible conditions of chronic disease and disability so that older persons can remain healthy and active for as long as possible. The increases in life expectancy provide a sense that we all can expect to live a long life. But everyone would like that long life to be a good quality long life. Through our prevention messages, we can better ensure that outcome.

We are very fortunate to have a growing body of science in the area of prevention as it relates to older people. This science clearly shows that it is not too late for older persons – even for older persons with impairments -- to obtain substantial health benefits by making lifestyle changes. Eat sensibly, don't smoke or if you do, quit, and get moderate amounts of exercise on a regular basis.

The science also supports the idea that we can achieve substantial savings by targeting prevention programs at older people. In 2000, the total cost of obesity for all ages was estimated to be \$117 billion and health care costs associated with physical inactivity were more than \$76 billion.

But I think Secretary Thompson says it best:

"Prevention is the right cause, the right issue and this is the right time."

To illustrate the significance of prevention, new changes in Medicare have been enacted that begin to focus our efforts in the right direction – prevention to avoid illness, rather than just "treatment" once someone is ill. For the first time, Medicare will cover a "Welcome to Medicare" physical and also will allow for the possibility of payment for the treatment of obesity.

As we thought through how best to get our prevention message out, we learned through focus groups that the older adults we are targeting are ready to make a change. They can't do it alone. They need a friend, a neighbor, or a group to do it with them. They just need a little encouragement. So we need to provide programs that are simple and fun to do.

And just like older adults, we need help – help from our partners. We are asking our partners to:

- Help **spread the word** about the importance of lifestyle choices;
- **Share information** about improving food choices and increasing physical activity; and

- **Consider making activities and programs available** for older adults.

We can't do it without the collective effort of many kinds of organizations from both the public and private sectors.

In return, the Administration on Aging will:

- **Recognize** our partners;
- **Highlight** our partners' programs and activities; and
- Provide **networking opportunities**.

In addition, each partner will receive the *You Can! Toolkit* and be invited to participate in our national challenge events.

The *You Can!* toolkit provides many items for publicizing *You Can! programs* at the local level, and for educating older adults. It contains helpful tips, tools and information useful to our partners.

How do you get involved? Consider how your organization can help spread the word.

- National **non-profit** organizations can sign up at our Web site.
- National **for-profit** organizations may submit a brief proposal to AoA about how they plan to use the *You Can!* logo and how they would like to be involved.

You can make a difference! Please join us in helping older adults **add life to their years -- not just years to their life.**

Thank you. We look forward to engaging in a dialogue with each of you and strategizing how you can be an effective partner in this national effort.