

ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR AGING – KATHY GREENLEE

ADDRESS THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF AREA AGENCIES ON AGING

(N4A)

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INTRODUCTION BY LYNN KELLOGG, PRESIDENT, N4A:

We're very excited today. We are delighted to have with us today Kathy Greenlee, the US Assistant Secretary of Aging. Secretary Greenlee has been on the job for about 2 weeks, and this is her first public appearance before the aging services network as Assistant Secretary for Aging. Prior to her appointment by President Barack Obama to the aging post, Secretary Greenlee was the Kansas Secretary on Aging where she oversaw a range of programs for older adults including the Older Americans Act, Medicaid long-term care and regulation of nursing homes. So she truly understands the issues we are all facing in our agencies and communities. Prior to leading Kansas' Aging Network, Secretary Greenlee directed the Kansas Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program and was General Counsel to the Kansas Insurance Department. She served as the Chief of Staff to the then-Governor of Kansas Kathleen Sebelius, who is now serving in the Obama Administration as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). So, now we have the best of both worlds. She's our friend, and

she has friends in high places. Secretary Greenlee, we are so pleased that you are here with us in Minneapolis today, but we are even more excited that you will be in Washington. Being there you can help us lead and help us go forward leading the charge to ensure that older Americans have the opportunity to age successfully and with dignity at home and in the community for as long as possible. Be assured, we are ready to work with you to advance our shared vision for aging in this country. We are a network on the move. This conference is all about sharing and advancing the innovations you need to assure America embraces the strength and power of its older population, including moving the network into its place as a key player to assure that all communities have the long-term services and support needed by their residents. We are so happy that you are here with us. Please help me in welcoming Assistant Secretary Greenlee.

(Remarks of U.S. Assistant Secretary for Aging Kathy Greenlee, as delivered)

Thank you very much. It's good to see you all. Thanks for being here. I haven't been on the job very long, but I'm thrilled. One of the things that is most exciting is quite simply that I love this work as much as you do.

It's a wonderful opportunity to be here today as the first speech in this position to talk to you a bit about my vision and the things that are important to me. I want to thank Lynn (Kellogg) and Sandy (Markwood) for inviting me to be here. I'm honored to have been nominated by the President for this particular position. I'm

very grateful that I was confirmed by the Senate. I am looking forward to working with Secretary Sebelius. I know that you all are looking forward to that relationship as well. That's clear to me!

What I will tell you about the Secretary is that she won't forget us, because she will not forget seniors, and I know that personally. Having worked with her for 14 years, I know that seniors have always been on her mind. She is a very consumer-oriented Secretary and has always had seniors, families, and children in mind. She won't forget seniors, and I think it will be a good relationship as we work with her both on programs here, but programs within the Department.

I also want to thank Jonathan Blum from CMS for being here today. It sounds like you had a good workshop, and you had good questions. It's important that we have relationships with CMS, and I value that --not just the Medicare piece but also the Medicaid piece. I know that the former Assistant Secretary worked hard to build those relationships. I will not let them drop. I know that we have many of our CMS partners here today with us, and I think that it's valuable that we work together.

When I accepted this new challenge, there's one thing that I had to do that was hard, above all the other things, and that was to resign the position that I had. I loved being the Secretary of Aging in Kansas. I was happy there. I had great staff, great support, good network and it was hard to leave. I have always lived in Kansas, and Kansas will always be home. So that was of the harder things

that I had to do to come here - to be with you all. I decided today, in talking to you that I would introduce myself to you the same way that I introduced myself to Kansas, three and a half years ago, when I became the Secretary of Kansas. To do that, what I would like to do is to tell you a story. You will learn this about me, I like to tell stories, and hopefully at some point you'll figure out that there's actually a point to the story. But, I would like to tell you a story -- it's a family story -- and I think that when I finish the story, that you will be able to hear in the telling, the things that I value, what my goals are for myself in this position as Assistant Secretary and my vision for all of us, as we move forward.

So here's my story. I grew up in Clearwater, Kansas which is a very small town of 1800 people, 20 miles southwest of Wichita. My family has been in this community for generations. We're kind of unusual. All of us graduated from the same high school -- me, my sister -- I know there are other people here from small towns so you know this -- my grandparents, my aunts and uncles. We all came from there and have gone back a long time. My parents and my grandparents were wheat farmers, farming land outside of Wichita that originally belonged to our Native American brothers and sisters. We have wonderful family stories. I have one particular person that I would like to introduce to you and that's my Great Aunt, Verda Nickerson. For the Kansas people here, they feel like they know her already, because I talk about Verda a lot. I would like to tell you her story because she was a very unique individual and someone of whom I am very proud. I think you will understand why.

Verda was my Grandmother's sister. She was born in 1907 with a disability. She had a severe stutter, not a stammer, but a very significant speech disability in speaking. When she was little, her parents took her to doctors, to figure out if there was anything they could do to help her. They couldn't. She lived with this significant disability her entire life. She, like the rest of us, graduated from Clearwater High School, she went to college a little while, then got a job as a city clerk and stayed in Clearwater.

When she was in her 20's, there was something that happened that changed her life. There was a minister that came to town from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and he preached at a revival or some sort of event. He preached to her of a god who could understand her. For this woman who stuttered, this was significant. From that point on, faith became a cornerstone of my Aunt's life. She always supported and valued a god that could understand her.

A few years after this minister came to town, Verda moved to Chicago. Now, I think this was brave. It was probably the early 30's. She was a single individual with this disability, and she moved to Chicago to take classes at Moody and to work. She was there when her father quite suddenly died of a heart attack. Then she came home. She was the only daughter who was not married of three. So she came home to be with her mother. This is also a common story for unmarried daughters. She came home. At that point, her mother was healthy,

but her mother eventually, my Great Grandmother, had a stroke. So Verda became her caregiver, and she stayed in Clearwater the rest of her life. Verda was the city clerk - everyone knew her.

We, however, (the rest of the family), all moved away. Her generation - my mother's generation, my generation - we all left and there was only Verda at home in Clearwater. When she got to be in her mid 80's, we started to be concerned about how she was doing; whether or not she was able to take care of herself. So we did, what you all are familiar with, which is the family visit. We all came to town --my mother, my mother's sister and me. We all went down to Verda's house to check on how she was doing. We had a plan. My Mom and my Aunt took her to the doctor to see how she was because we didn't know how long it had been since she had seen a doctor. The doctor said she was healthy but frail. I stayed at the house and investigated the house. I was, (I was working at the Attorney's General office), and I was very concerned, because all I did was (investigate) telemarketing fraud. I was very concerned that she might be swindled, because she has the name Verda and they will know that she's old, and I know this happens. So, I went to the house. There weren't piles of that stuff people buy when they get taken by telemarketers. I didn't open her mail, but I looked at it and it didn't seem like there was any financial exploitation going on, so that was good. My other job was to look around the house, so I went into the kitchen. There in the kitchen were the gallon milk jugs with just a little bit of sour milk on the bottom. The kitchen smelled bad. When I opened the

refrigerator, there wasn't much food. It looked like the food that was there was a take-out box from a restaurant that she tried to re-heat. It didn't seem like she was getting the right food. I then looked at the dishes, and she obviously was rinsing them. There was still food stuck on these dishes, and it was very clear then that she was frail, and she needed some help.

So, we did what I hope all families would do. We called the area agency on aging. Now the one we called was Annette's (Annette Graham, Central Plains Area Agency on Aging). I know Annette is here from Wichita, and I hadn't met Annette at that point. But we called the AAA in Wichita and arranged to have meals delivered to her house, which seemed exceptional because we were 20 miles away from Wichita. It was like, "you'll do that, really?" So we got meals for her, and we also lined up someone to come in and provide some chore support to help clean her house. Those two supports helped her stay in her home for another year, and that's how simple it was to help her stay in her community. Just those two things.

About a year later in January, she fell. She went outside to change a light bulb, fell and lay outside overnight. It didn't freeze, which is unusual in Kansas, because it's usually pretty cold in January. The next morning her neighbors noticed that the shades were wrong. I don't remember, she'd either forgotten to lower them or forgotten to raise the shades. The point is the neighbors knew her patterns well enough to know that something was different, and they came over

and found her. Her body temperature was in the 80's. They called the ambulance and the family and took her to the hospital there in Wichita. They found that she had an inoperable brain tumor. She then went from the hospital to the nursing home in Clearwater where she lived for 3 more weeks before she died.

What was interesting at the funeral, I found out from a friend is that the very end, she lost her stutter. The disability was brain-related clearly and only at the very end did she not have it. It was a life-long disability with which she dealt. I came home, spoke at the funeral, and thanked the community because we knew as a family that we were doing what we could. We weren't there, and it was the community that helped Verda stay at home. Then we went to the lunch after the meal at the church and we heard the stories, because this is what you do. You go talk about the person who's died and get the good stories at that point. Her driving, oh my goodness! She would go down to the post office, and she couldn't see over the front of the car, so she'd line up by looking at the top of the buildings. That's how she'd get to the post office. She had a garage that was built for a Model T - I mean this was an older house. She got the car wedged in the garage one time, and the neighbors had to come get it out. We found out that what Clearwater did to support her driving was to just stay out of the way, and they did and it worked. These were the great stories and the fun things - although kind of scary - to hear about.

I tell you this story, because this to me is a success story. This is exactly what we are about. It represents everything that we are trying to do as a network. It has a happy ending. She stayed at home nearly her entire life, and that's what she wanted more than anything.

There are things that I value, and I think they are pretty clear from this story. I believe in, value, and support the role of family and caring for our elders. I have a broad definition of family. Some families provide hands-on support; others provide support from a distance, like we did. But, I know that families are important. I understand that caregiving exacts a terrible toll, emotionally, financially, physically on caregivers. I am very proud that the Administration on Aging supports 700,000 caregivers each year through our programs, recognizing, of course, that it's just a drop in the bucket. There are many, many more people are caring for seniors.

Supporting caregivers will be one of my highest priorities, and something that I will dedicate myself to as I serve as your Assistant Secretary.

I also recognize the importance of faith in someone's life and believe that when we talk about faith and faith organizations, perhaps more than any other topic, it is very clear to see the rich cultural diversity of this country. The way that different peoples and different individuals express their faith in their creator, in their god - it is important to them, especially as they age. This was something

that was very important to Verda. She was a huge Billy Graham fan, and this was tremendously important to her, and there were reasons for it. I'm very proud that two thirds of the area agencies on aging have formed a partnership in their communities with faith organizations. I think it's important, and something that we will continue to support.

Whether you live in a big city, or a small town, or on a tribal reservation, I appreciate the value of living and belonging to a community - I think it's important. Verda lived alone to almost the very end with those few simple supports that I talked about. With the care of her family, there wasn't one of those items that were more important than the other, but the fabric of them all helped create the support around her, and network that allowed her to be independent. Those are the things that we bring to the table as a network, and that's what allows people to stay in their community, and to stay at home.

I understand right now that the economy is causing some real hardships for seniors. It's causing stresses on our programs, and I want to acknowledge that it's occurring. The upside to that bad scenario is that it is as important as ever the value that we bring to seniors, to their families and our communities. We cannot back away from the challenge even when times are tough. We are the community for each other, we must support each other as a network, and we will move forward as strong as ever, providing services that are critical to seniors.

The fundamentals of what we're doing have not changed. I see those in two ways. Fundamentally we're supporting health and we're supporting independence. Those are the critical things that we have in terms of services to provide. All of us both individually and collectively are the experts on how to provide those supports.

We must continue to advance health and healthy aging. The way I see the meals program through the Older Americans Act - it is the fundamental health program that we have always provided. It's so intuitive that we forget to talk about it as a health program. Yet, all around us, we're talking about health and healthy aging, and at some point you want to say "it's the meals, folks." That's one of the things we've done forever, but it's not the only thing that we're doing to support senior health. We have broadened our commitment to senior health, by focusing on exercise and falls prevention. You have a wonderful program, Jean (Wood), here in Minnesota. I just love the name "***Keeping Minnesotans Right Side Up.***" Those are kinds of programs -- falls prevention and exercise -- that are also part of the health component that we provide.

We are also focusing more and more on chronic disease self-management. Chronic-disease self management is very, very important to support seniors. It's a fundamental part of helping support them, to maintain their health and stay at home. I know that as people age, their number of chronic conditions multiply. I'm also aware that minorities, in particular, are at a greater risk for conditions like

diabetes, stroke and high-blood pressure. If we support seniors and help them take control of their lives, then we are doing them much in terms of being able to help them help themselves to stay at home.

We must also continue to support independence. That's what this country stands for. You touch the lives of million of seniors everyday, providing something as simple as personal care support, adult daycare, transportation, and something as easy and critical as good information. Information and referral is critical, and I know that. These core services that we provide can't be under-estimated; they're valuable in what we're doing for seniors. For example, 96% of seniors say that the homemaker services itself helped them live at home longer. Those cores and purposes are valuable. I will be committed, as your Assistant Secretary to working to support and enhance the core services because they are critical to the future of the network.

We also have to talk about elder abuse. When I was the Kansas State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, I started hearing people talk about ANE. We would be doing an ANE workshop or going to an ANE workshop (ANE: abuse, neglect and exploitation). As a lawyer, I understand the distinctions between abuse, neglect and exploitation. As an advocate, I don't. When we talk about ANE in that phrase, we leave the victim out of the equation. We forget to refer to the elder. I think if we're talking about ane, we should be talking about elder abuse. I understand that seniors are sometimes financially exploited, and that sometimes

they're physically abused. I understand that there are differences, but its all abuse. We must work to address it and make it stop.

I also think we must continue to engage with the disability community and their advocates to support our common goals of dignity and independence for all people. We are united around a common mission - and that's to live and age at home, among our friends and family. We all want to be our unique individual selves and have lives that are meaningful to all of us. Only by working together, can we create systems that support an individual's ability to be themselves and live their own life.

I was proud that right before I came the President and Secretary Sebelius announced an initiative within the Department of Health and Human Services called "**The Year of Community Living.**" The President declared the Year 2009 as the Year of Community Living; meaning he has a commitment; the Department has a commitment, to supporting community services. Earlier CMS' Jonathan Blum talked about that on behalf of Medicare as well. Supporting individuals in the community is a key initiative of this Administration, and we will be heavily involved. I've already met with Henry Claypool several times (HHS Office of Disability Director). Henry is working on disability concerns on behalf of the Secretary, and I know we can work together to form stronger partnerships to focus specifically on what we need to do to support community living.

Its community living that makes my Aunt's story possible. The ability to stay and be at home. I talk about her this morning, because you invited me to speak and I'm up here. But I know that each of us doing this work having an elder in our life who's important.

Verda would have been 102 (if she were alive today), and all of us have someone in your life and elder in our life, either now or in the past -- or someone you're providing services to -- who serves as your inspiration, as Verda has served as mine. I think these people are critically important, they are the motivation that keeps us going.

While they're the inspiration, they are not the vision. We have to supply the vision ourselves, that's our responsibility. What each of us envisions individually must somehow hang together as a collective hold - that's a fabric that makes sense in the future. We can find ways to support independence and consumer choice and fund programs. We can find new and better ways of delivering services. We can innovate, we can explore and we can listen and to me, it all starts right there.

We have to listen to seniors. They will show us the way and they will teach us to grow old.

Thank you all very much for your attention. (Assistant Secretary Greenlee then took questions from the audience.)