

Remarks of Sen. Chuck Grassley
Senate Special Committee on Aging 50th Anniversary Event
Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2011

Thank you to Chairman Kohl for organizing today's event. He and I have worked together on many initiatives, and he's doing an excellent job as chairman of the Special Committee on Aging. I'll miss him on his retirement but I look forward to working with him a lot before then.

And I'm grateful to Chairman Kohl and his staff for organizing today's event. Staff is critical to a chairman's success, as I know from my staff director, Ted Totman, who's here today. He did a great job.

It was my honor to serve as chairman of the Special Committee on Aging from 1997 to 2001. My predecessor was Sen. Bill Cohen. My successor was Sen. John Breaux, who was my partner on the committee as ranking member.

I know I'm biased, but the Aging Committee offers one of the greatest opportunities for service on Capitol Hill. The committee has a broad mandate to improve the quality of life for older Americans. Within that framework, there are endless opportunities. The Aging Committee is part consumer advocate, part policy wonk, part gumshoe detective, and part bully pulpit. No other committee in the Senate can claim such a broad platform. Each chairman appreciates the possibilities of this committee.

During my tenure, we had a former employee of a predatory lender testify with his identity hidden about how the lender preyed upon older Americans. Katie Couric testified about the importance of colon cancer screening. The family members of the victims of nursing home abuse testified about their experience during a two-day hearing. Their testimony came after whistleblowers presented serious concerns to the committee about nursing home abuse and neglect in California. At the committee's request, the General Accounting Office did a hard-hitting analysis that's been the benchmark for improving the quality of care ever since. And a lot of our time covered the impending Baby Boomer retirement and how to prepare Medicare, Social Security and the workforce for that sea change.

Aging Committee hearings then and now convey that certain issues are fundamental to everyone, regardless of age. What kind of society we choose to be and what role government plays in shaping that society are the Aging Committee's bread and butter. How do we increase the prospects of a safe, comfortable experience in a nursing home? How is Medicare waste, fraud and abuse putting beneficiaries at risk? How should everyone begin saving money for retirement, and how much savings is necessary?

As the Aging Committee explores these questions, the committee offers watch over the executive branch to ensure that priorities don't get lost to inertia. Federal agencies can move slowly. Initiatives like changing the predictability of nursing home inspections require a lot of people doing a lot of work to shake up the status quo. There are always dozens of topics that require attention.

Even now, Chairman Kohl and I are rattling the cages at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to implement our new law on sunshine for drug company payments to doctors. Our partnership on this and other issues raises another positive point about the Aging Committee – bipartisanship or maybe even nonpartisanship. The fact that this committee isn't responsible for legislation frees it from a lot of partisanship. Aging Committee work might translate into legislation on other committees, as it did for me on the Finance Committee.

But the Aging Committee itself is able to devote its full resources to educating, exposing and illuminating the issues of the day. It's a unique creation. It does valuable work for our entire society. Whether we're 22 or 92, we're all aging. The Senate Special Committee on Aging can't reverse aging, but it helps to make parts of the process better. I wish the committee continued success going forward.