

Senate Special Committee on Aging 50th Anniversary

Statement by John Rother, President and CEO

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Mr. Chairman, I am John Rother, President and CEO of the National Coalition on Health Care. I was privileged to serve as staff director of this Committee from 1981 – 1984, so take special pride in its long history of accomplishments. I have been asked to speak briefly about the difference this Committee has made in the lives of older Americans over the past 50 years.

Fifty years ago the situation of Americans 65 and older was very different than today. Economic security in retirement was limited to a relatively small part of the population, health insurance was unavailable or unaffordable for most, and there were few social services or housing alternatives to support those who became frail or disabled. Most seniors in 1960 were dependent on family, neighbors, or charity when faced with adverse events. Many died prematurely due to poor social and physical living conditions or lack of good medical care.

The changes in these characteristics and more have been profound in 50 years – two generations – as the accompanying chart summarizes. The Committee's work has helped to brighten this picture substantially for most seniors today.

The Committee's early focus on healthcare and health insurance led to the enactment of Medicare, which has assured access to affordable care for seniors and the disabled, transformed the medical system, and made possible a more financially secure retirement for all Americans. The Committee's investigations into pharmaceutical pricing and marketing led to the adoption of a drug benefit in Medicare, Part D, in 2003, and to the recent expansion of the drug benefit in the Affordable Care Act. As a result, millions of seniors each year are able to benefit from costly prescription drugs without needing to make the financial choice

between medicine or other life necessities. The Committee's work also contributed to the adoption of hospice services within Medicare, which supports humane quality of life at the end of life.

More recently, the Committee contributed several consumer protection provisions to the Affordable Care Act, which will improve the functioning of healthcare and health insurance for the all Americans.

Perhaps no aspect of healthcare received more attention from the Committee over the years than problems in long-term care. The resulting measures to strengthen quality and protect residents in the growing nursing home industry have resulted in vast improvements for our most vulnerable seniors. The Committee's focus on post-DRG hospital "quicker and sicker" discharges led to improvements in post-acute care following a hospital stay. And the Committee's long campaign to strengthen home and community-based options for those needing help has resulting in much better and more satisfactory care arrangements for the majority of seniors no longer able to live completely independently. I might add that millions of family members benefitted from these arrangements as well because they no longer face total disruption when a parent or spouse becomes ill.

The Committee also led efforts to promote research in aging that resulted in the establishment of the National Institute on Aging at NIH, which is investing in development of cures for Alzheimer's and other diseases associated with the aging process.

The Committee also advocated for a strong Administration on Aging within the Executive branch, which has been key to leadership of the large network of senior services and supports administered under the Older Americans Act in communities throughout the country. These programs today support and make independent living possible for millions of seniors.

Housing programs have also benefited, particularly the section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly program that finances senior housing projects. The Committee has advocated for greater integration of services within public housing

and congregate housing facilities. Continuing Care retirement communities were the focus of important oversight, resulting in much fairer practices for this growing housing option. The Committee has been a major force in promoting “age friendly communities” and age and disability accommodating housing and transportation design.

A wide range of consumer protections are now in place thanks to the Committee’s work. Consumer disclosure and prohibited practices have greatly improved such products as reverse equity mortgages, living trusts, and guardianship arrangements. The Committee has often focused on elder abuse issues, and through public exposure as well as legislation has greatly reduced these problems.

The Committee has long championed productive aging – promoting employment and volunteer service options for those who want or need to work beyond traditional retirement ages. Older workers today may still face some forms of age discrimination in employment, but on a much reduced scale. Legal remedies for discrimination have helped change employment practices, enabling millions to continue to live productive lives, and more older men and women now want to continue working beyond age 65. Many lower-income seniors have also been helped by inclusion in various jobs programs, particularly Title V, that would not exist but for the Committee’s advocacy.

Finally, income security in retirement is much stronger today due to the Committee’s long focus on this area. The Committee contributed directly to Social Security solvency provisions in the 1983 amendments, and to the enactment of ERISA before that. Just as importantly, the Committee helped defeat radical benefit cuts in Social Security proposed in 1981 and again in 2004. And the Committee’s oversight of problems in disability insurance provoked improvements in the speed and fairness of benefit decisions.

The Senate Special Committee on Aging continues to play a vital role in improving the lives of older Americans. Its work over the past 50 years has had a major impact in the lives of most seniors and their families. The Chairs and Ranking Members, in particular, have used their positions on legislative committees such

as Finance, HELP, Budget and Appropriations to achieve legislative changes. While major improvements have been accomplished, there are still serious problems that need to be addressed.

The Committee continues to be the only place in the legislative branch where the situation of the “whole person” can be reviewed, where in-depth investigations can be launched, and where the Members and staff have the time to delve into issues that other committees don’t have time to consider. Looking forward, the Committee faces the twin challenges of the retirement of the large “baby boom” generation and the ever increasing cost of healthcare. The Committee’s success in addressing these challenges will therefore be critical to the quality of life for all Americans for generations to come.