

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN GORDON H. SMITH

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging “Employment and Community Service for Low Income Seniors: Are We Getting the Job Done?” April 6, 2006

Good morning, and thank you all for coming.

Today we take the first steps toward reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. The last reauthorization of the Act in the year 2000 included significant changes to Title Five, the Senior Community Service Employment Program, otherwise known as SCSEP. The amendments to the Act sought to increase employment opportunities for seniors through greater integration with the country's workforce training system. The changes also emphasized the placement of participants into unsubsidized employment and sought greater accountability through the creation of new performance measures.

As part of the critical oversight responsibility of this Committee, I have been working with the Government Accountability Office to review the progress that the Labor Department and SCSEP grantees have made in implementing program changes brought by the 2000 reauthorization. I hope the findings discussed at today's hearing will be instructive to Congress as we move forward with reauthorization this year.

As we have previously discussed in this Committee, our country is about to experience a dramatic demographic shift. In the coming years Baby Boomers will begin retiring en masse, and by 2030 America's population over age 65 will be twice as large as it was in the year 2000.

To avoid future labor shortages and a “brain drain” of experienced talent, we must develop policies that encourage older Americans to stay in the workforce and remove barriers to working longer. Senator Kohl and I have requested that the Labor Department convene an interagency task force to develop legislative and regulatory proposals addressing the issues raised by the aging of our workforce. Last spring this Committee examined some of these issues, particularly the challenges confronting older workers when deciding whether to retire. SCSEP serves some of our most vulnerable citizens, those that often don't have the luxury of a choice when it comes to retirement. Therefore we need to ensure the program is functioning properly.

SCSEP is the sole remaining federal job training initiative specifically designed to meet the needs of our aging workforce. For forty years, the program has provided part-time community service employment to low-income adults age 55 and over. Program participants help staff community and faith-based organizations that without this help might not be able to provide their valuable services to the community.

Today we will hear from the Labor Department regarding their administration of SCSEP. I am particularly interested in learning why it took four years to implement the regulations mandated in the 2000 reauthorization, and I share the concern of many that the program may be restricting the participation of many seniors.

We also will hear from individuals who are grantees and sub-grantees of the Program. These witnesses will provide valuable information about the impact of the Labor Department's new eligibility criteria on grantees' ability to meet performance standards.

Congress must move forward in a timely fashion with reauthorization. To provide better oversight of the reauthorization process, this Committee will continue to work with GAO and SCSEP stakeholders to ensure the program best serves the needs of current participants, and also is equipped to handle what will be an unprecedented influx of potential participants from the burgeoning baby boomer population.

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses who have joined us here this morning. I am eager to hear your thoughts as we engage in a meaningful and productive dialogue that will shed light on the challenges and successes of the Senior Community Service Employment Program.

Before I turn to Senator Kohl for his remarks, I would like to share with the Committee excerpts from a letter that I received from Linda Rae Alvarado, a SCSEP participant who is raising her four grandchildren in Washington State.

"I have not felt this good about a program since I served as an Americorps/VISTA volunteer. I've helped other grandparents raising grandchildren get qualified and placed. And just like me, they cried when the placement was made. I've talked with Host Agency staff who are thrilled with the placements and the work they are doing. I've helped place social security recipients and others who fell through the cracks of our safety nets.

"I am only 57 but I've been looking for productive full time work for the past four years. It is as if there is a glowing sign over my head that blinks "OVER 50" whenever I interview. The SCSEP program has been a godsend. I am still able, willing, ready to work. My youngest grandson graduates from high school when I am 66, and college when I am 70! So I'll be working for awhile yet.

"This program provides positions - experience - skill building - references - that are current and positive for many of us who are between 50 and 65 when there aren't very many places to receive help. [As] we all know.... Work Knows No Age."

With that, I'll turn to my colleague Senator Kohl for his opening remarks.