

Statement of Senator Kohl

“Employment and Community Service for Low Income Seniors: Are We Getting The Job Done?”

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As older Americans live longer and remain healthy and active, many are choosing to work longer. Even more would like to continue contributing to our communities, businesses, and economy. Yet many find it difficult to do so.

That is why I introduced the Older Worker Opportunity Act, which expands opportunities for older Americans to work longer if they so choose. Chairman Smith and I also requested that the Department of Labor convene an Older Worker Task Force to identify barriers to working longer and find solutions. We are pleased that Labor is moving forward with this task force.

Today’s hearing focuses on another effort to help seniors find work in their communities. For over forty years, the Senior Community Service Employment Program has served as the only federal workforce program targeted to low-income older adults – providing community service and job opportunities to those over age 55. As millions of baby boomers approach retirement age and look for ways to keep working or give back to their communities, we must strengthen this vital program.

Of course, the most important way to strengthen SCSEP is to make sure eligible seniors are enrolled. Yet today the GAO will report that, because the Department of Labor has restricted eligibility, grantees find it difficult to meet enrollment goals, leaving too many seniors without services.

In addition, current funding is only sufficient to serve less than one percent of the eligible population. SCSEP funding has declined since 1998, and the Administration is proposing another cut of \$44 million this year. This makes no sense; the Census Bureau estimates that, by 2008, there will be 6.7 million low-income Americans over age 55 – many of whom will be eligible for SCSEP. Clearly, we need to boost funding, not cut it.

We must also remember that SCSEP is designed to promote both community service and self-sufficient employment. One goal should not be sacrificed for the other – yet the Administration’s proposal for reauthorizing SCSEP would significantly reduce community service opportunities. Some seniors may prefer community service to the private sector, while others

may face barriers that make it difficult to obtain paying jobs. We need to give seniors the flexibility to choose.

Finally, we need to know what's broken before we fix it. After Congress made changes to the program in 2000, the Department of Labor did not issue final regulations until 2004, and as a result of this delay, we only have one year of performance data to evaluate the program. In addition, 2005 will be the first year that grantees will be held accountable for performance since the 2000 changes were implemented.

Before we consider a major restructuring of the program, as the Administration proposes, we should carefully study what has worked and what hasn't worked, and wait until the results are in. To that end, this hearing is a step in the right direction, and we look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.