

OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON AGEING

U.S. Statement, delivered by HHS DAS Edwin L. Walker, HHS/AoA April 18, 2011

Thank you Mr. Chairman. We thank you for chairing this first meeting of the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing. I am pleased to share with you the strong history of U.S. policies, legislation, and programs that have focused on establishing and protecting the rights and dignity, while promoting the independence of older people.

The framework for these protections is comprised by four cornerstones - the Social Security Act passed in 1935; and the passage in 1965 of Medicare, Medicaid and the Older Americans Act - that have served as the foundation for economic, health and social supports for millions of seniors, individuals with disabilities and their families and enabled them to lead more secure, healthier and meaningful lives.

This framework, with its cornerstones, has been complemented by additional protections such as the Age Discrimination Act and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and most recently the Elder Justice Act. Specifically, these provide protections against discrimination based on age and disabilities in Federal programs and in employment, and provide protections against abuse, neglect and exploitation. They are focused on affording equal access to participate fully in society free from discrimination as well as to removing barriers to remaining productive members of society's mainstream. Most recently, President Obama implemented a Community Living Initiative that charged Federal agencies to remove barriers and to enhance the ability of individuals of all ages to live independently in their communities.

A significant component of this U.S. framework is the Older Americans Act. It embraces a vision for older adults which transcends the ability for any one agency or organization to fulfill. The Administration on Aging, which the Act created, has been given these principles as a mission to advocate, encourage and coordinate with government and non-government organizations.

The vision for older individuals includes: 1) an adequate income; 2) the best possible physical and mental health; 3) suitable, affordable housing; 4) appropriate community-based services to keep them in their homes; 5) an opportunity for employment without discrimination; 6) retirement with dignity and honor; 7) participation and contribution to civic, cultural, educational and recreational activities; 8) freedom, independence, and the free exercise of individual planning and management of their own lives.

Over the course of our 46 years of existence, the Administration on Aging has promoted the continuous enhancement of the Older Americans Act to keep pace with the evolving needs of older people. We have developed the country's infrastructure of low-cost home and community-based services which each year, supports nearly 11 million older Americans and 800,000 of their family caregivers.

We provide programs, services and supports for indigenous populations, in a manner consistent and respectful of their cultures and traditions. We focus on the distinct needs of minority

populations, limited English speaking populations, and older people who reside in rural and remote areas of the country and who face unique challenges.

We provide support and protections for those who are particularly vulnerable and Ombudsman services for residents of long-term care facilities while focusing on resolving their complaints and improving the quality of their care.

Yet, despite having this comprehensive framework of legislative and policy protections, we are constantly focused on learning the best approaches to addressing better the needs of an ever-increasingly diverse population. As an example, earlier this year, we established the first national resource center to assist communities in providing services and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender older individuals.

Our approach in the U.S. is consistent with the longstanding UN Principles for Older Persons which clearly state:

- Older persons should have access to health
- access to social and legal services to enhance their autonomy, protection and care.
- that they should be able to utilize appropriate levels of institutional care in a humane and secure environment.
- and they should be able to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their care and the quality of their lives.

Yet, older people around the world continue to experience discrimination and violation of their rights and are subsequently marginalized and excluded from society. We should continue to discuss how to better protect their rights and treat them with respect on an equal basis. We should work to help them lead dignified, secure lives, as equal members of society. We need to focus on the conditions which enable them to live more independently and to participate in and contribute to their own development.

I, and the rest of the U.S. delegation, welcome hearing from member states and NGOs on their efforts on behalf of older persons. The U.S. is ready to consider the advisability of further actions to uphold the human rights of older persons, and I wish you successful discussions over the next few days.

Thank you.