

**Volunteers of America  
Statement on  
S. 705**

*Meeting the Housing and Service Needs of Seniors Act*

to the

**United States Senate  
Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs**

**June 16, 2005**

Statement on behalf of Volunteers of America  
Presented by Dana Olson, Executive Director of Volunteers of America's Laurel  
Manor Senior Residence in Colorado Springs, Colorado

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, I am Dana Olson, executive director of Volunteers of America's Laurel Manor Senior Residence in Colorado Springs, Colorado and regional healthcare manager for eleven Volunteers of America senior residences in Colorado, Nevada, and California. In that capacity I also supervised the opening and initial operations of our senior residence in Senator Allard's hometown of Ft. Collins, Colorado. I have worked for 34 years in Long Term Care—about 15 of those years as a director of nursing and the rest as a nursing home administrator. Ten years of my experience in Colorado was working in a facility with a high population of mentally ill people.

Volunteers of America is one of the nation's largest and most comprehensive charitable, nonprofit, spiritually based human service organizations. We provide services that are designed locally to address specific community needs. Our common areas of focus include caring for the elderly and people with disabilities by fostering their independence, promoting self-sufficiency for the homeless and for others overcoming personal crisis, and supporting troubled and at-risk children and youth. In 2004 Volunteers of America services across the country sought to empower over 135,000 seniors to maintain a healthy, engaged quality of life through senior centers and day programs, home repair and homemaker services, informational and referral services, Meals-on-Wheels and group meal programs, transportation, companion services, elder abuse protection, case management, and coordination of other community services.

Also, Volunteers of America is one of the nation's leading nonprofit providers of quality affordable housing for individuals and families in need, people with disabilities, and the elderly in over 225 communities across the country, and is a growing provider of assisted

living, skilled nursing and Alzheimer facilities for seniors with limited resources. As a leading provider of housing and services for the elderly, Volunteers of America is an active member of the Leadership Council of Aging Organizations, the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, the National Council on the Aging, the Interfaith Coalition for Long Term Care, and the Elderly Housing Coalition.

As a spiritually based organization we draw on more than a century of experience and the reach of a nationwide movement that is:

- Bonded by a commitment to faith, human dignity, and social justice
- Dedicated to actively engaging volunteers in the community
- Committed to the highest quality of service

On behalf of our organization, I want to express our sincere appreciation for your interest in S. 705, the *Meeting the Housing and Service Needs of Seniors Act*, and concern for the needed coordinated between housing, healthcare, and supportive services for the growing population of seniors in the United States.

The problems we face as a nonprofit human service organization and as a nation in attempting to provide more and better facilities to house and serve America's seniors, especially the frail elderly, will be severely compounded by the expected rapid growth in the nation's aging population in the coming decades and the lack of adequate public policy and resources to meet that growth.

In a recent study, "The State of the Nation's Housing 2001," the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University reported that heads of households over the age of 75 "are expected to increase by roughly 1.3 million over the decade." They go on to say, "This growth implies rising demand for housing that allows seniors to age safely in place and for specialized facilities such as assisted living and continuing care communities."

The Harvard report further indicates that, of the nearly 5 million one-person households to be added over the next decade, “almost one-third will be over the age of 65.” This growth is not going to take place in the distant future, it is going to be taking place between now and 2010, when the baby boomer generation begins to retire in ever increasing numbers.

In their 2004 report, the Joint Center said the nation’s 35.6 million seniors face a “quadruple threat.” First, many have inadequate incomes to pay for housing; second, increased healthcare needs compete with other basic needs; third, most live in single-family homes that require maintenance and are difficult for caregivers to reach because of their geographic dispersion; and fourth, “many have physical limitations or cognitive impairments that must be addressed by in-home care or structural modifications. In the 2000 Census, for example, 9.5 million seniors reported a physical disability and 3.6 million reported a mental disability.”

All of this is corroborated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development anticipating that today’s senior population will double in size by 2030, expanding at a rate of almost 3 percent a year to almost 70 million people by that time, with the fastest growing segment of that cohort being persons aged 85 and older. Commensurately, the Census Bureau estimates that 20 percent of the population in the United States will be beyond retirement age by 2030 compared with only about 13 percent today.

Clearly, as a nation we have a problem of extraordinary scale and urgency as the housing and social services programs and funding we have in place today will not keep pace with this situation. Therefore, it is so important that the programs we have in place—like the excellent Section 202 Elderly Housing Program—operate in an efficient and expeditious

manner. But its effectiveness for the future can only be made complete by assuring the availability of coordinated healthcare and supportive services.

Because of that need, Volunteers of America believes we are at a time in our history that calls for serious debate that leads to the creation of a national long term care policy that is inclusive of the continuum of services issues of affordable senior housing, adult day care, homecare, assisted living, and skilled nursing facilities. This is vitally important to persons who are frail and elderly, especially those who participate in federally assisted or subsidized housing, who are among the most vulnerable. As they grow older in residences designed for independent living, they are at high risk of being forced into institutional nursing home care, or alternatively having their needs unmet.

Much of this problem is due to the fact that the delivery of services to many persons is fragmented because of multiple policy-making authorities and funding streams; conflicting regulations; and poorly coordinated, overlapping state and federal government agencies. This fragmentation is not only costly, it often times leads to serious gaps in providing what is needed. For instance: Providers of long-term housing finance typically do not understand the terminology or analytic framework of the health care community. Health care regulators are unaware of the requirements of housing finance. The need to get participation and approvals for transportation, social service, and other regulatory bodies further complicates the discussion. Housing sponsors often must spend inordinate amounts of time and energy as a go-between because different disciplines give different meanings to important words. Often terms like “assisted living” acquire precise regulatory meanings that differ from state to state.

It is because of this existing fragmentation that passage of S. 705, the *Meeting the Housing and Service Needs of Seniors Act*, is so important as a step in the right direction to better

coordination of housing programs and related services so seniors can age in place and have access to needed services.

Let me tell you a little about my experiences in Colorado. As an Administrator of a skilled, long-term care center, I am seeing older, more frail, acutely ill seniors coming to us for care and rehabilitation to allow them to return home or to a lesser level of care in the continuum. As the people we care for come to us much more acutely ill, and the regulations under which we operate become more and more stringent, the fragmented system is more difficult to work with. We never want to be in a position that limits the services we need to provide to give our residents the highest quality of service possible, but we need your help to do so

As the Regional Housing Manager of five 202 Senior Housing Complexes in Colorado, we have a waiting list of over 200 seniors. That means 200 seniors are out there in need of our services and we are unable to meet those needs at this time. This only reinforces the need for more available housing with services for our seniors. The best way to meet this need is to have adequate funding to build additional senior residences with a service coordinator in each facility. The coordinator would have the capability of assisting our seniors access the system to fill the need for food, medical care, and other supportive services. But even good service coordinators have difficulty unraveling the myriad rules, regulations, agency sources, and funding streams that are intended to serve senior citizens. Passing this legislation and establishing a federal Interagency Council on Meeting the Housing and Service Needs of Seniors would provide a structure for federal agencies to jointly review housing and service programs, more effectively coordinate federal programs and services, and work with states to coordinate programs and services at the state and local level.

Adult children of middle and lower incomes, whose parents face these housing and health care needs, are ill equipped both in terms of care management skills and financial capacity to meet all of the needs their parents face. Our nation has evolved to a point where these elders cannot look entirely to their adult children for financial and care support, since most of our households have the adults working full time to meet their own financial obligations and the needs of their young children. Where once upon a time in our nation, long term care meant providing for aging adults in their adult children's homes, we now by necessity have our adult children working long days at jobs that leave little time for adult care. Somehow and in some way the solution to this senior housing and long-term care crisis must come from a comprehensive policy that cost-effectively integrates housing, healthcare, and supportive services for seniors into a reasonable approach that meets the needs and affordability of the individual and his/her family in partnership with state and national governments.

Some individuals might think that committed and competent providers like Volunteers of America have access to sufficient resources to meet the growing national need for elderly housing, healthcare, and supportive services. Unfortunately, that is not the case, especially with respect to the growing needs of frail seniors who are not affluent. There has been a trend toward reduced funding for the development of new federally-assisted housing for seniors, the devolution of federal housing programs to state and local governments, short-term renewals and funding for Section 8 contracts, the potential loss of affordable housing units to market-rate housing through Mark To Market, and, more recently, cutbacks in Medicaid funding and barely level funding for the important Service Coordinator program.

For the sake of our nation and its deserving senior citizens we must find an efficient, well coordinated means of providing long-term care through integrated healthcare with supportive services and housing, and that process has to begin at the top. That is why Volunteers of America believes that the *Meeting the Housing and Service Needs of Seniors Act* must be passed as a bipartisan testimony to the worth of our older generations.

We appreciate the opportunity to bring you our ideas and perspectives and want to assure all the members of the Committee that Volunteers of America is strongly committed to helping resolve these issues before the growing demand for elderly housing and supportive services spirals out of control. We are confident that sound solutions can be found and implemented in a way that is fiscally responsible and fair to all parties.

Thank you.