



**Testimony of William T. Smith, Ph.D.
Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs
S.705 Meeting the Housing and Service Needs of Seniors Act**

Thursday, June 16, 2005

Chairman Shelby, Ranking Member Sarbanes, members of the committee, I would like to thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss S. 705, Meeting the Housing and Services Needs of Seniors Act. I would like to talk to you about the real world experience of providers and the seniors we serve, as well as the opportunities that this bill presents for making service delivery and program administration less cumbersome and more responsive.

My name is William Smith. I am Chair of the Board of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (AAHSA). The members of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging serve two million people every day, in 5,600 facilities across the country, through mission-driven, not-for-profit organizations dedicated to providing the services people need, when they need them, in the place they call home.

AAHSA members offer the continuum of aging services: assisted living residences, continuing care retirement communities, nursing homes, home and community-based service programs, and senior housing. AAHSA's commitment is to create the future of aging services through quality that people can trust. It is this commitment that underlies our support of this legislation, its goals and increasing the effectiveness and collaboration among federal programs that serve our seniors.

In addition to my work with AAHSA, I serve as the President and CEO of Aging in America, a community-based organization that originated in 1852 with a mission of providing housing for aged women, and has evolved into a full service organization employing over 550 staff that serves over 5,000 seniors annually throughout the Bronx, New York. I know first hand how complicated and difficult it can be to work with a patchwork of programs to create the range of housing and services necessary to care for seniors with varying degrees of frailty and need.



In 1972 Aging in America developed a skilled nursing facility for 386 residents. Later we established a continuum of community-based services to undertake educational, research and advocacy efforts designed to further enhance the lives of seniors in our community. In 1978 Aging in America converted a 90,000 square-foot high school into our social service agency, including a number of community-based activities, intergenerational programs, an Alzheimer's day care center, case management, victim assistance and elder abuse counseling.

When we opened our first senior center in 1979 we served 45 hot lunches and provided recreational programming. Since then we have added two off-site senior centers and four satellite programs providing recreation, education, information and referral, wellness programming and nutritional services to over 1,500 older New Yorkers weekly. We deliver hundreds of meals daily through congregate lunches at our senior centers and satellite locations. Furthermore, in order to help clients navigate the maze of federal, state and local programs we have developed a comprehensive case management program that provides services for over 700 elderly New Yorkers, conducting in-home assessments, case management and authorization for the delivery of in-home personal care, housekeeping services and home-delivered meals.

Aging in America also offers transportation services and last year we provided nearly 300 seniors with 3,465 trips to medical and social service providers through our program. Our telephone reassurance program assisted 450 seniors over the last year. Our 17 bed temporary housing program provides respite, emergency housing and permanent living accommodations for people over 60 in need of a semi-protective environment. We are also opening a 120 unit rental community named Hertlin House on Long Island, NY. This housing program is for independent seniors who may require services over time. This property will be targeted to seniors with incomes \$25,000 to \$30,000 annually.

The congressionally established Commission on Affordable Housing and Health Faculty Needs for Seniors in the 21st Century, comprised of an expert panel of 13 of aging service professionals, looked carefully at the demographics, existing programs, the current system of



service delivery and prepared recommendations for a Congress on a necessary and thoughtful federal aging policy. Senate Bill 705 is integral to that policy.

The demographics compiled by the Commission are staggering and highlight the importance of leadership at the federal level to coordinate programs and identify opportunities for improving programs and service. Today seniors comprise 12.4% of our population. That is 35 million people. By 2030 that number will have doubled. Seventy million seniors – 20% of our population – may be accessing federal programs to help meet their housing and service needs. The demand will be unprecedented. We are faced with a monumental task and a remarkable opportunity. To delay working towards a solution will leave us all – governments, providers and families – in a state of crisis, unprepared to meet the needs of our seniors. Such a scenario will inevitably require extra resources, while leaving more and more of our elderly citizens to fall through the cracks due to overwhelmed, dated, financially strapped, divergent programs.

One of the Commission’s primary recommendations was a call for the coordination of housing and health care among departments. Frequently it is during a time of crisis that seniors or their families are faced with, not one, but a maze of programs in order to get the necessary services and appropriate housing. Eighteen percent of seniors, 65 and older, almost 6 million people, who are not living in nursing homes have difficulty performing at least one activity of daily living (ADLs) - such as mobility, bathing, dressing, walking, eating, going to the bathroom or one instrumental activity of daily living (IADLS) – such as preparing meals, assistance with financial management and taking medications.

Stable, affordable housing settings are the cornerstone of service delivery. Home and community-based providers, such as Aging in America, serve seniors where they are. I cannot overstate the importance of bringing services to all housing settings, among all income levels. In 2020, among those seniors that will need assistance with at least one ADL or IADL will be 5.8 million homeowners, 1.5 million unsubsidized renters and 595, 000 with some form of rental assistance. Of those seniors that own their homes, 44% have incomes of less than \$25,000 per year and a significant portion are facing excessive housing costs and have homes that are not



accessible and that require capital repairs. In addition to family and informal support networks, these seniors rely heavily on federal programs. They face a multitude of needs, with varying resources, and will be significantly helped by federal agencies that work together.

While the federal and state governments did not set out to create a complicated, contradictory, sometimes duplicative system of programs and funding mechanisms for serving those that are the most in need, that is, unfortunately, what we have. Over several decades Congress has enacted various laws, establishing several programs, each with their own eligibility criteria, funding mechanism and regulations. All of these programs were created with the best intentions, to meet a real, critical need. They addressed insular problems, with little awareness or regard of other agencies and departments working with the same population.

Today over half of our senior population is over 75 years old. We – the housing + service providers and Congress - have some experience with how older, frail seniors utilize housing and services programs. We know that the elderly do not experience their different needs in isolation - rather they experience them in what is all too often an overwhelming crisis that leaves them with unmet or underserved housing, health or service needs. Too often the result is premature, publicly-funded, costly institutionalization. With a comprehensive, coordinated system of federal programs these seniors could be served in the most efficient manner, with programs based on need and not driven by outdated delivery mechanisms.

The members of Congress are essentially problem solvers and so you must be thinking what we in the field are thinking – knowing what we know about existing programs, current problems, growing need, and diminishing resources - there has to be a better way to make sure that seniors can get the housing and services that they need. Senate Bill 705 is a significant step in that direction. This landmark legislation is the necessary next step to the Commission recommendation of coordinating programs by starting with a “common vocabulary, common age for eligibility, common definition of eligible populations, and standards for programs.” Most importantly it will make coordination a federal priority and give agencies an opportunity to identify barriers and weaknesses and refine programs to make sure that housing and service



programs work together. Senate Bill 705 establishes the perfect mechanism by which federal programs can be streamlined with federal policy objectives in mind.

Across the country there have been state efforts to coordinate programs with some success. However, it is clear that the federal dictates that govern the programs still need work. Successes at the state level are limited because the authority to change, modify, update regulations exists here in D.C. at the headquarters for HUD, CMS, VA, Labor, Transportation and others. Senate bill 705 will guarantee that the Secretaries, or their designees, address and examine their programs in a new light, with common goals of coordination, efficiency and service.

Chairman Shelby, members of the committee, I want to thank you for your time this morning. I would like to thank Senator Sarbanes for introducing legislation to take this first step in preparing for the dramatic increase in the number of seniors that we will see win the next two to three decades. As the head of an organization providing a multitude of services for the elderly, I can assure you this legislation is sorely needed to help our seniors, their families, caregivers and providers in making sure that departments work collaboratively and purposefully towards a federally integrated system of housing and services.