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United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

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October 4, 2005

The Honorable Elaine L. Chao
Secretary of Labor
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20210

Dear Secretary Chao:

As Chairman and Ranking Member of the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging, we have elevated the issue of expanding opportunities for older workers to the forefront of the Committee's agenda. As part of this initiative, we are requesting that the Department of Labor (DOL) immediately convene an inter-agency task force to develop legislative and regulatory proposals addressing the issues raised by the aging of our workforce. Such a task force is of critical importance in developing a comprehensive and coordinated national response to this critical challenge.

In the 21st century, older Americans will represent a growing share of our population. By 2030, the share of our population over age 65 will increase from about 12 percent to almost 20 percent. As a result of this and other demographic trends, businesses could face significant labor force shortages in the coming years that will have a significant impact on our nation's economy. Furthermore, a "brain drain" may occur with American businesses losing their most experienced workers – many of whom have skills that simply are not replaceable. However, the effects of these trends can be mitigated if older Americans remain in the workforce longer. Therefore, we must develop policies that encourage extended work lives and remove barriers that hinder working longer.

We commend DOL for convening an *intra-departmental* older workers task force in November 2004. The goal of this task force, which is composed of relevant DOL agencies, is to assist businesses in meeting their workforce needs and help older workers obtain the necessary skills and access opportunities to enable them to continue working. This panel is an important first step toward a broader government-wide effort to address this issue.

We now call upon DOL to convene an *inter-agency* task force on older workers. The federal agencies that have regulatory jurisdiction over or a clear policy interest in issues relating to older workers are scattered throughout the federal bureaucracy. Therefore, because of the breadth of the challenge of an aging work force, it is critical that the efforts of these federal agencies be coordinated.

Accordingly, DOL should assume a leadership role in developing and facilitating an inter-agency older workers task force. This task force should be comprised of all of the federal agencies that deal with issues facing older workers, including, but not limited to the Department of the Treasury, the Internal Revenue Service, the Social Security Administration, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Administration on Aging. The task force also should obtain input from nongovernmental stakeholders, including senior, business and labor organizations. The participation of the relevant federal agencies, and consultation with nongovernmental stakeholders, is essential to the formation of a comprehensive and balanced national policy.

This panel should identify statutory and regulatory provisions in current law that tend to limit opportunities for older workers and develop legislative and regulatory proposals that address the issues raised by the aging of our workforce. Other information, such as best practices in the private sector and a review of federal programs for hiring and retaining older workers (such as the EPA's Senior Environmental Employment Program), also should be gathered. The task force's findings and proposals should then be summarized in a report to be provided to Members of Congress and the heads of all federal agencies to serve as a blueprint for reform. The task force also should publicly highlight its research and recommendations by organizing a Conference on the Aging Workforce. Finally, the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging will call on DOL to testify before the Committee on its findings and recommendations.

Thank you for your leadership in developing and facilitating the inter-agency older workers task force. Please do not hesitate to call on us or our staff if we can be of any assistance as the Department proceeds with this important initiative.

Sincerely,



Gordon H. Smith
Chairman



Herb Kohl
Ranking Member

cc: Ms. Emily Stover DeRocco
Assistant Secretary for Employment & Training

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