

Statement by Senator Patty Murray
Women and Aging: Bearing the Burden of Long Term Care

February 6, 2002

Thank you Chairman Mikulski and Chairman Breaux for your leadership on this issue and for calling this unique hearing. When I look at issues like long term care, I think back to my own experiences in my family starting with my mother. My Mother was my hero. She was the best basketball player on her team where she grew up in Butte Montana. She went to college to become a pharmacist. She loved every Notre Dame team and could name all the players and could recite all the scores. She raised 7 kids on a shoestring budget.

When I was 15, my Dad was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and had to quit his job, so Mom worked. She got every one of us kids off to college, and she worked full time as my Dad's caregiver. When other mothers were taking trips to Hawaii after their kids were grown, my mom was lifting my dad out of bed and dressing him every single morning. When her friends learned to play bridge and golf, my mom learned how to get a motorized wheel chair in and out of the car. When other moms cared for grandchildren, my mom was making dinner and feeding my dad.

My mom never became a pharmacist. My mom only took one trip -- one that she treasured forever -- when she came to Washington DC to see her daughter become a U.S. Senator. My mom never got to go to the opera or see a movie with friends or go out to lunch with her neighbors. You know: she never complained even when it affected her own health. In my memory, she was one of the happiest people alive. She accepted her role as a caregiver. But I think for many families like my own, caregiving is cloaked in silence.

Caregivers like my mom can't speak out for one simple but important reason: they don't want the person they are caring for to ever feel they are a burden. So we must speak out for them.

Today both my parents are gone. But thousands of people are at home today silently taking care of someone they love. They need us to speak out. And I see two proposals that could help.

First, we should double funding for the family caregiver support program. Senator Mikulski has proposed this, and I fully support it. Second, I still think we need a respite care benefit under Medicare. You'll recall that in 1997, President Clinton proposed this idea. It would provide vital relief for family members who are caring for an aging relative in the home. Even if it only provides up to 72 hours a year of respite care, it would be a lifeline for thousands of families.

My mother was a hero because she worked in silence. But today, we can help break that silence and give families the support they need as they care for loved ones. I'm grateful to Senators Mikulski and Breaux for holding this hearing and allowing us to do the right thing for so many people who are caring for a family member in silence.

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"Women and Aging: Bearing the Burden of Long-Term Care"

**Joint Hearing of the
Senate Special Committee on Aging and the Subcommittee on Aging
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions**

**Opening Statement
Senator Jean Carnahan
February 6, 2002**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman

Missouri author Adele Starbird writes about a visit with her mother in a nursing home. The conversation went like this:

Mother says: "Well, things are going well for me ... I am on an entirely new track. I'm just trying to be pleasant all the time."

Adele: "Is it a great effort?"

Mother: "Did you ever try it?"

Adele: "No, I am going to wait until I'm your age before trying anything so drastic."

We both laughed and then she grew serious.

"It's the only thing that's left now that I can do for anybody.

"I can't read or write, but I can at least be pleasant and not add to the troubles of others.

"You know I think that every human being is already carrying about as much as he can bear, and I don't want to make it harder."

Adele concludes: Pleasant. She was more than pleasant – she was gallant.

I tell this story as a prelude, because today's hearing focuses on women as caregivers.

But, you cannot truly understand what it means to be that caregiver unless you look at the whole picture.

The whole picture includes a human being who is the recipient of that care.

Whether that person is your husband, mother, or father, chances are they do not want to be a burden.

Chances are they do not want their kids caring for them when it should be the other way around.

The first stage in the caregiving process occurs when the aging family member moves from independence to dependence.

For many seniors, this involves leaving their home of some 30, 40, or even 50 years.

The decision is usually precipitated by an event that forces a change to occur. The reason could be declining health or finances, a fall or an accident, or the death of a spouse.

While it may be clear to the family that their loved one can no longer live on their own, it is not always clear to the individual.

I speak about this from personal experience.

After my mother passed away, it was clear to me that my father would be better off in my home.

The problem was I lived in Missouri, and he lived in the Washington area all his life.

He was asthmatic and diabetic and subject to insulin reactions.

He needed reliable care to make sure he ate properly and exercised regularly.

Most of all, he needed the love and support of his family.

While I recognized that he should move in with me, this was not clear to him at all.

In fact, it was a real test of my powers of persuasion.

I gave him all the logical reasons why he should come home with me.

Although he listened, he was not convinced.

Finally, in one final desperate appeal, I took his hand and said this to my father: "Remember what you hear in church on Sunday morning? That sometimes you need to make a decision based on faith.

"This is one of those times. You need to believe that this is going to work."

There was a pause. He replied to me – "Where's my suitcase?"

I am happy to say that my father lived with me and my husband and our 4 children for the remaining 7 and 1/2 years of his life.

I cherish the memory of those days. I would not trade them for anything.

Thank you.