

Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing – May 15, 2012
Missed by the Recovery: Solving the Long-term Unemployment Crisis for Older Workers

Good Afternoon. I would like to thank our witnesses and welcome everyone attending today's hearing.

While Americans were hit hard by this recession, the ramifications for older workers were particularly severe. Once older workers lost their jobs, they struggled far more than other groups to find work again. In 2007, less than one in four unemployed older workers was out of work for more than half a year. But only four years later, more than half of unemployed workers over 55 are confronting long-term unemployment. And as a bipartisan opinion piece in the New York Times over the weekend stated, this problem "nothing short of a national emergency."

One solution that shows real potential was developed in Connecticut by one of our witnesses, Joe Carbone. He has created an innovative program called Platform to Employment that works individually with those out of work to ensure they have updated skills to thrive in today's economy. The program partners with local businesses to place these workers into internships. So far, 70 percent of those internships have turned into jobs. This program shows real promise to get people back to work and needs to spread across the country.

However, it is also important that we look at some of the other reasons why older workers have been kept out of work for so long and address what we can do about it. We asked the GAO to look into the issue and it found that employers are wary of hiring older workers – sometimes because they are concerned about health care costs – but other times because they assume that if you are over 55 or have been out of work your skills are not up to date.

The GAO surveyed experts who highlighted a number of approaches the government could take to help address this problem. One suggested approach, addressed in my Older Worker Opportunity Act, would provide tax credits for businesses employing older workers with flexible work programs. Another area the experts mentioned is discrimination. Today, I am announcing my support of the Protecting Older Workers Against Discrimination Act, a bill authored by Senators Harkin and Grassley that is aimed at restoring the rights of older workers to pursue claims of age discrimination.

One common theme we have heard is that older workers want to keep working not only because they need the money but because they want to remain relevant and productive members of society. We need to encourage this. Left unchecked, long-term unemployment among older workers is a problem that will continue to grow as our workforce grays. In only four years from now, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that nearly one in four workers will be over the age of 55. We hope this hearing raises awareness about this growing problem and provides some solutions to consider.

I thank you all again for being here today. And now I turn to our Ranking Member, Senator Corker, for his opening remarks.