



SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

Chairman Bob Casey

Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement
“Eyes, Ears and Teeth: Expanding Medicare to Cover Whole Person Care”
August 30, 2021

Good morning everyone. We're gathered this morning in Wilkes-Barre to convene a hearing of the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging. I'm grateful to be with you this morning.

We have gathered in Luzerne County to discuss a pressing need for our seniors: the need to strengthen and expand the Medicare program. This field hearing has been a long time coming, and it is a pleasure to be with our witnesses, in person, several of whom I've known for a long time. This gathering is after a long and terrible 18 months for the country, because of the ravages of COVID-19. This has been without a doubt, the greatest public health crisis of our lifetime. I believe we must increase substantially the number of Americans who are vaccinated, to help us get past this dark chapter in our nation's history. The pandemic brought into sharp focus the long-standing challenges that American families face and confront each and every day of their lives.

The American Rescue Plan, which was passed back in March, with only Democratic votes by the way. Just a little side note, Luzerne County got 196 million dollars from that American Rescue Plan, when you add up the dollars that went to the county itself and dollars to the municipalities. That Rescue Plan did provide a measure of relief to families,

sometimes directly and indirectly. That's true throughout not just Luzerne County, but counties throughout northeastern Pennsylvania and throughout our Commonwealth. So many families got checks in their pockets, shots in their arms and we got the opportunity, because of funding, to begin to reopen more schools safely. I hope we can get greater cooperation in this next round of legislating as we go back in the fall. But overall, what we're trying to do, in addition to responding to a pandemic and responding in real time, that's why we call it the Rescue Plan. But next, we're trying to continue some of those investments into American families. Basically, what we're trying to do in the upcoming reconciliation bill is about one basic idea: lowering cost for families. We did that in the Rescue Plan, but we've got more to do in the reconciliation bill. How do we lower costs? Obviously, one of the ways is to lower the cost of prescription drugs. That's true here in northeastern Pennsylvania, but around the country as well. Second, we lower costs for families by making health care premiums more affordable. Third, and not exclusively, we need to invest in children. And you do that by helping families raise their children. That's why Child Independent Care Tax Credit is so important. In addition to investing in our children, we also need to invest in our caregivers. Those heroic, essential Americans who too often are left out of policy making in Washington. So we have a long way to go to get that legislation passed.

Today, we're going to focus more intensively on the opportunities to strengthen and expand Medicare. That's another way to get costs down for families that are enrolled in Medicare. Affording care, but still have trouble accessing care. Medicare is not required, unfortunately to cover needed dental, hearing or vision services. That's an outrage. There is no reason that should be the case going forward.

Poor access to this basic care poses a serious health risk to older Americans. That's why I introduced a bill to cover dental, vision and hearing. We know that 15 percent of older adults have lost all of their teeth due to untreated dental disease. Now 15 percent may not seem like a high number until you apply that to the number of seniors. We've got roughly 54 million seniors in America. You can do the math. Millions and millions and millions of seniors are in that category of having lost all their teeth due to an untreated disease. There is no excuse for that in the most powerful county in the world. Vision loss as well is associated with an increased risk of falls and mobility limitations, and hearing loss can lead to both social isolation and cognitive decline. We know that. That's what the science and studies tell us. I have received numerous letters in my office about this issue.

Letters like those from Dr. Nancy King from Monongahela, Pennsylvania. Her letter urges support for Medicare coverage of hearing aids and related services. Having hearing aids allow Dr. King to work, talk on the phone, dance, grocery shop, watch television and even go fly-fishing. But, most importantly Dr. King notes that her hearing aids keep her safe. Here's what she says as she concludes her letter to me and I'm quoting: "Without hearing aids, I cannot even hear my water spigot running and it has overflowed. Also, without hearing aids, I cannot hear my phone ring, I cannot hear the cashier, I cannot hear my home burglar alarm." End quote. That's what one Pennsylvanian, Dr. Nancy King, tells us. But I think it's emblematic of what we have heard all across the state. It is for this reason that I introduced a bill, the Medicare and Medicaid Dental, Vision and Hearing Benefits Act, that's bill S. 2618. And it's why Congress must act to make sure seniors and people with disabilities can access and afford these basic needs. And when I say act, I'm not talking about acting a few years from now. I'm talking about right now.

We go back in September and October to legislate on a larger bill that goes by that bizarre name reconciliation, which doesn't mean much to many people. But it is the legislation, the vehicle that will allow us to move forward as a nation. Maybe the most important domestic legislation in the history of the nation. And one of those component parts should be benefits for Medicare and Medicaid recipients. We know we can find story after story about the need for dental, vision and hearing care among our seniors. Just as we hear story after story about families who cannot afford the prescription drugs benefits as well. No person should have to choose between buying groceries and taking a needed medication. But today, too many seniors face this impossible choice. That's why I support allowing Medicare to use its purchasing power to negotiate and bring down the cost of prescription drugs. And it's why I introduced separate legislation to allow for the safe, FDA inspected importation of medications, from countries such as Canada. This hearing is timely as we discuss these important issues. Democrats are working on a bill to enact these historic changes to Medicare and Medicaid. These bills, all under the broad heading of reconciliation, will help seniors and will lower costs for families.

I look forward to this hearing today and learning more about these important issues from our great panel of witnesses. Before we begin I want to remind the witnesses to please keep their remarks and questions to five minutes. In keeping with CDC guidance, I ask that all witnesses keep their masks on and remove them only when speaking. With these final logistical notes, I will turn to the introduction of witnesses.