

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
“Aging with Community: Building Connections that Last a Lifetime”
May 17, 2017

Good morning. Thank you all for being here. As many of you are aware, originally this hearing was scheduled for last week. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the hearing had to be postponed, and I very much appreciate our witnesses coming again, or sending a representative when they could not do so, to help explore what is a very important issue.

Isolation and loneliness can have serious, even deadly, consequences for the health and well-being of our nation’s seniors. We examined this growing epidemic in a hearing that this committee held last month, and we learned that isolation is associated with a greater incidence of depression, diabetes, and heart disease. In fact, the health risks of prolonged isolation are comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. I must say that that fact astonished me.

Today, we are looking for solutions that will help to build a stronger sense of community, therefore leading to happier, healthier lives for older Americans.

When the Senate Aging Committee was first established in 1961, nine percent of Americans were over age 65. Today, those older than 65 represent 15 percent of our population. By the year 2060, nearly one out of four Americans will surpass their 65th birthday.

The fastest growing age group is what’s called the “oldest old” – those 85 years old and older. Today, we will explore ideas to connect seniors with communities to make home not only a better place to grow up, but also a better place to grow old.

Most seniors want to live at home as long as possible. This, however, can pose challenges. Maintaining a home is an arduous task at any age, and it can be especially so for older adults. Snow may need to be shoveled. Repairs may need to be made. Windows may need to be replaced. The list is endless.

As seniors age, and in some cases develop chronic diseases that present mobility and other impairments, homes may need more significant modifications such as wider hallways to accommodate a wheelchair, grab bars in the bathroom, and chair lifts for stairs.

Transportation is also a key feature of an age-friendly community. Seniors need a way to get to the grocery store and doctors’ appointments, and to visit with friends or enjoy community events, especially once driving is no longer a safe option. Age-friendly communities often provide bus routes for seniors, volunteer driver programs, and other initiatives to help seniors go where they need and want to go.

One key feature of age-friendly communities cannot be captured by infrastructure or policy, but is part of our culture. In a 2007 report, the World Health Organization declared the

development of age-friendly communities a global priority. One domain that stood out to me is the need for respect and inclusion for our seniors. In age-friendly communities, seniors are respected for their past and present accomplishments. They are included in community planning. They engage with younger adults and children. They are valuable and contributing members of society with a lifetime of experience to offer. Whether they are homebound or not, the community ensures that seniors are not left feeling isolated or left out.

Respect and inclusion are an essential part of the spirit of the American democracy. Towns from the most rural to the most urban are responding to the needs of seniors.

Initiatives to create age-friendly communities have grown organically across the country. The national organization that provides support and tools is the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities. In Maine, our state motto is *Dirigo*, "I lead," and I am very proud that Maine is leading the way.

Of the 163 communities in the nation that have joined this network, 35 are in the state of Maine. We have communities such as Bethel and Biddeford, Eastport and Milo, that are committed to becoming more welcoming to seniors. These 35 communities have each developed an action plan, each reflecting local needs. When the oldest and most rural state leads the way, it represents a success for the entire nation.

Our hearing today is especially fitting during Senior Corps Week. In Maine, 1,675 volunteers make significant contributions to communities through the state's nine Senior Corps programs. Senior Companions, RSVP volunteers, and RSVP Vet to Vet connect seniors with communities. Senior service presents a promising solution to combat isolation and promote a sense of community, and a sense of service and mattering.

Today we will hear from four program directors who will describe initiatives underway in their communities to address the needs of their aging population. You will notice that no two models are alike. That is the beauty of this approach – each is built from the ground up. Each is tailored and customized for seniors living in their communities.

The factor that ties these programs together is a strong sense of community that includes and values all of our seniors.

It's now my pleasure to turn to our Ranking Member, Senator Casey, for his opening statement.