

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
Aging and Disability in the 21st Century: How Technology Can Help Maintain Health and
Quality of Life
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Good morning. Today we will explore how 21st century technology is improving the quality of life for older Americans and those with disabilities. We have on display an array of devices that are available today. I want to show you a few of them.

This pen, for example, the Pen Friend 2, allows one to put stickers on various items, and then record voice labels in order to identify them later. This is particularly helpful for people with limited vision. For example, let's say that there are a number of cans in your kitchen cabinet. One might be pears, one might be corn. One might be peaches. They're all about the same size and it can be difficult for someone with limited vision to be able to discern which is which. When the cans of corn, peaches, and pears are bought, each would have one of these yellow stickers put on them and then using this device, you would record what the item is. Later on, when the person with limited vision is trying to select the right can, he or she can simply touch the pen to the yellow sticky and it will tell him or her what it is. That's just one of the many examples. Another, are spoons that make it easier for people who have Parkinson's for example, to continue to feed themselves. Or one of their other mobility issues, this intriguing spoon, will bend to come to the right level of your mouth. So, there is so much that is exciting out there.

These days, most of us carry in our pocket at least one device, such as my iPhone. This phone, while still used for making calls, today offers so much more potential. A typical smart phone can track health measures like daily steps or blood sugar, and can pair with other devices to predict the risk of falls or diabetic episodes.

From the everyday technologies that we all use to assistive technologies that help seniors and those with disabilities improve function, these devices are poised to change the future of aging. Survey after survey indicates that seniors envision themselves living independently at home in their own community for as long as possible and living their lives to the fullest. Technology can help make that possible.

With 10,000 Americans turning 65 every day, and one out of five Americans set to join this group by 2035, we are in the midst of a major demographic shift. The fastest growing segment of our population are Americans age 85 and older. While aging brings opportunity, it also comes with the increased risk of multiple and interacting health conditions that can lead to disability, at times requiring long-term care, and making it more difficult to age at home.

As the population is aging, the need for care and support is increasing. In 2010, there were approximately seven potential caregivers for each person over age 80. By 2030, there will be four, and by 2050, the number drops to fewer than three. So more people will have to rely on fewer caregivers – opening the door for technology to help fill that gap.

Advances in technology are working to bridge the “care gap,” improving function in activities of daily living, helping to manage multiple chronic conditions, reducing the risk of hazards, and making homes safer for seniors. Not only has technology allowed seniors to age in place, but it is also making it possible for individuals to move out of nursing homes or other institutionalized settings back into the privacy, security, and comfort of their very own home.

Through tools and technologies, Maine’s Homeward Bound program, for example, has helped to transition seniors, as well as others with disabilities back into their communities, and we’ll hear more about that this morning.

One particularly promising avenue for new technologies is in the prevention of falls. Falls are a leading cause of both fatal and nonfatal injuries among seniors, and are projected to cost our nation \$67 billion in the coming year alone. Falls-related injuries can have a devastating impact, requiring round-the-clock institutional care. But new technologies can reduce the risk of falls, as well as contact emergency services for help as soon as a fall happens. I’m excited about an innovative approach now being developed by the University of Maine, which is a pair of smart glasses that can detect edges, such as stairs or curbs to help prevent falls, particularly for seniors who have limited mobility and eyesight.

Another area where technology holds great potential is in reducing social isolation. Social media and video chat on tablets and smartphones help to reduce isolation and loneliness, and enrich seniors’ lives by keeping them connected to their loved ones. We have had previous hearings on the health impacts of prolonged isolation, and they are substantial. On physical, emotional, and mental health and well-being. In fact, according to researchers, prolonged isolation is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day – that’s how profound the impact on health is. While not a substitute for interacting directly with people, technology can help to bring people together.

It’s important that older Americans have a key role in developing these technologies. That will increase utilization, reduce stigma, and ultimately makes for a better product.

Older Americans also have helped companies realize that they want technology devices that look just like those that are used by younger generations. For example, many of us are familiar, from hearing on television, that old phrase of, “I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up.” That was an advertisement for a medical alert system that, for many years, was considered among the most advanced technology to help seniors age in place. While many seniors still successfully rely on this device, breakthroughs in modern technology have brought new options that are far more versatile.

Technology is opening doors for older Americans and those with disabilities to live the way they prefer, and that really is what this is all about – accommodating the individual preferences as we grow older. From better managing health and mobility to increasing connectivity and community involvement, technologies on the market today and those on the horizon for tomorrow promise to usher in a new are of aging.

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