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**REMARKS OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY ON COMMUNITY SERVICES AND SUPPORTS**

*Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Hearing*

*(As prepared for delivery)*

Thank you all for being here today for this hearing on one of the most pressing and personal issues our nation will face over the next decade --- the crisis of meeting the needs of seniors and persons with disabilities in ways that promote independence and choice, and help families.

A fair and civilized society is judged on how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. Today in America, millions of senior citizens and persons with disabilities still struggle to obtain the support they need to live fulfilling and productive lives in their communities.

Many of them are members of the Greatest Generation, and it's shameful that we are failing to provide them with a solution for long-term care worthy of their immense contributions to our history.

Many are citizens who worked hard for themselves, their families and their communities, and became disabled as a result of an illness or injury that was not anticipated.

Many are young adults who have spent over 20 years in our educational system to become participating members of their community, but they still need support to make that transition successful.

The issue is about all of us, and those of you here today are the proof that "disabled does not mean unable."

We made progress in past decades through Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

But countless senior citizens and persons with disabilities still live in poverty with few choices on how they live their lives. That was never the intent of the public assistance programs.

Ten million adults in America currently need long-term services and support. Many are capable, and are eager to live full lives in their communities, but they are forced to give up their independence and self-sufficiency in order to qualify for Medicaid -- the only program that can support them because they are too young for Medicare and the barriers to private insurance are too high and too costly.

Our current system forces people into institutions prematurely. It requires them to become impoverished before becoming eligible for the help they need. It fails to provide realistic opportunities for personal life planning, and fails to give families the flexibility to help their family members in need.

Senator Harkin and I have two pieces of legislation that TOGETHER can both improve the current Medicaid system by allowing more individual choice AND create a new voluntary national insurance program that will promote independence, choice, personal responsibility, and quality services for those who need it.

It will empower consumers to decide themselves how this assistance will be spent -- for transportation so they can stay employed, for a ramp to make their home more accessible,

or for a personal care attendant or a family caregiver.

It will help keep families together – instead of being torn apart by obstacles that discourage them from staying at home.

It will save on the mushrooming costs of Medicaid, the nation's primary insurer of long-term care services, by offering an alternative for those who can work while preserving Medicaid for those who really need it.

We need a new approach to restore independence and choice for millions of our citizens, and enable them to take greater control of their lives.

Your testimony here today will give us a deeper understanding of the challenge, and inform us about what steps we must take as a nation to meet it.

It's time to respect the rights and dignity of all Americans, and I thank you all for being here today to continue that fight.

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