



*U.S. Delegation to the
Regional Intergovernmental Conference on Ageing
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**Remarks by
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Mister Chairman, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be here with you today, and honored to represent the United States of America at this important meeting.

I would like to extend my great appreciation to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Interagency Group on Aging for convening this ministerial conference. And I would like to extend my very special thanks to the government of Chile, which took the initiative to develop this important gathering. You have worked very hard to ensure its success. And I would like to take this opportunity to pay special tribute to Ambassador Julia Alvarez of the Dominican Republic, whose vision, commitment, and determination placed aging issues on the international agenda.

As my boss, Tommy Thompson, the Secretary for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently said at the opening ceremony of this year's Health in the Americas Week, "...the region of the Americas — North, Central, South, and the Caribbean — is our mutual neighborhood. What affects one of us is a concern to us all. As good neighbors, we must regularly renew relationships and friendships — and share our perspectives on issues of common interest and need." So I am delighted to be here to strengthen our relationships and to help ensure that our hemisphere is prepared for the aging of our societies.

Mister Chairman, our region is a very diverse region, containing a variety of social, economic and political experiences. In spite of our differences, we also share many common challenges and concerns, especially pertaining to the aging of our populations. Among us, we have some 91 million people over the age of 60. This number is expected to grow annually by 3.5 percent over the next two decades to 194 million.

We are all concerned about how we will prepare for a "Society for All Ages", and how we will address the major issues agreed upon in Madrid, and echoed in this Region's Implementation Plan.

Today, I will speak briefly about how we in the United States are meeting the challenges of an aging population by creating healthy and caring communities across our country.

We are in the midst of one of the most profound changes in the history of the United States. Our population is growing older at an increasingly rapid pace. Eight years from now the first of the baby boomers will begin turning 65, and the number of Americans age 65 and older will more than double to over 70 million by 2030.

When we plan for our future -- and the type of system we would like to see in the United States -- we envision a system that provides people of all ages with more choices and opportunities for receiving support in their own homes and communities. President Bush and Secretary Thompson are strongly committed to creating such a system of care. When asked, the vast majority of individuals say they would prefer to age in place -- to stay in their own homes even while they experience limitations.

For the United States, the continued improvement in the lives of older people and their families is a priority. We are committed to strengthening and modernizing our health insurance program for the elderly, improving access to health care, expanding prescription drug benefits and preventing disease. We are reshaping our current system of long-term care so people may stay in their own homes and communities as long as possible.

We are also committed to supporting high quality research to address all aspects of aging -- health and disability trends, conditions and diseases that primarily affect older people, and physical, and behavioral characteristics of the aging process. Support of international aging research is integral to our research agenda.

Our vision is to create a "Community of Care" that supports individual choice, provides easy access to a full range of health, social and environmental supports, ensures the quality of care, and encourages people to plan ahead for their long-term care needs.

To create this vision, we are working at the national, state, and local levels to better coordinate, integrate, redirect and modernize our health and social systems. The outcome we're striving for is a world in which individuals of any age who have disabilities can live fulfilling lives - in the ways they want - a world in which individuals genuinely see themselves as being members of a community that not only cares about them, but treats them with the dignity and respect that should be afforded to any individual. Each of us has a role to play in creating caring communities.

Over the last three years, our Department has invested over one half billion dollars in new funding to support new community options, streamline access and improve the quality of care to make it easier for states and communities to provide more flexible, and more integrated models of care. The goal is to minimize confusion, enhance individual choice, and support informed decision-making regarding long-term care services.

President Bush is helping people in the United States of all generations to live longer, better, and healthier lives. The President's *HealthierUS* initiative encourages all Americans to take steps to improve personal health and fitness through exercise, nutritious diet, preventative screenings, and healthy choices. At the heart of this initiative lies both personal responsibility for the choices that we make and social responsibility to ensure that policy makers support programs fostering healthy behaviors and disease prevention.

In the Department of Health and Human Services, we are taking many steps to put in place the President's initiative. We are working toward a healthy, strong U.S. population supported by a health care system in which diseases are prevented when possible, controlled when necessary, and treated when appropriate.

Together with our state and local partners – the Administration on Aging is helping older people in the United States to remain healthy, independent, actively engaged, and productive at home and in the community. We are designing nutrition and physical activity programs to encourage and inspire older consumers to make healthier lifestyle choices. We have also just invested in public-private partnerships with the federal, state, local and philanthropic communities to increase access for older people to evidence-based models that reduce the risk of disease, injury, and disability. We are applying the best science and research in our programs to promote better health and improve the quality of life for older persons.

Each of us must implement practical programs and approaches, form partnerships, and educate our citizens to understand that preparing for an aging population is not limited merely to matters pertaining to health, transportation, or housing – nor are these preparations the responsibility of governments alone. Rather, aging must be seen as a process that encompasses many issues and sectors. Healthy aging is a product of wise, long-term decisions made by individuals and societies.

We have established an ongoing collaborative relationship with the Mexican Ministry of Health, and we look forward to our collaborations with other countries in the region through the exchange of ideas and experiences.

Our ongoing collaboration with the Pan American Health Organization continues to be stronger than ever. We were pleased to work with the Pan American Health Organization in developing *ProMover: Un Estilo de Vida para Mayores.* This regional guide for promotion of physical activities has been distributed widely throughout the Americas, including to hundreds of agencies across the United States. We were also pleased that the Administration on Aging's National Nutritionist could participate in the Health Promotion Forum in the Americas last October here in Santiago.

Immunizations are one of the great public health success stories of the 20th century. They have made once-common diseases, diseases of the past. Vaccines are now available to protect children and adults against 15 life-threatening or debilitating diseases. This has reduced cases of all vaccine-preventable diseases by more than 97% from peak levels

before vaccines were available, saving lives and saving treatment and hospitalization costs.

We are developing and implementing community-based plans by partnering with public health professionals, healthcare providers and community organizations. In addition, we work closely with public health agencies and private partners to improve and sustain immunization coverage and to monitor the safety of vaccines so that this public health success story can be maintained and expanded throughout the 21st century.

We were glad to see the attention given at the Second World Assembly on Ageing to the growing numbers of elder abuse cases reported around the world. The United States is committed to protecting elders from abuse, neglect and exploitation, and we urge other countries to join us in this resolve. This includes the promotion of awareness and knowledge of the problems and the development of systems to respond to the needs of the abused. To enhance knowledge of the issues, we promote broad-based partnerships between the public and private sectors, including with the media, to develop protection strategies for the vulnerable.

In the United States, we have been blessed with a long tradition and honorable commitment to assisting individuals, families, and communities. Church and faith-based organizations from all denominations have been at the core of public social, community and neighborhood services across our country. In recognition of the faith community's ability to transform lives with compassion and acts of kindness, President Bush is promoting their value, contributions and capacity through the White House Office of Faith and Community-Based Initiatives. We are investing resources in faith and community-based organizations to further support local social service needs.

We also are supporting the efforts of families to care for their loved ones, and improve their quality of care. In the United States, more than 22 million households provide unpaid care for loved ones. One of every 4 persons is a caregiver for a family member or friend. The average caregiver is a 46-year old married female who is also employed outside the home.

We have heard from caregivers across our country who say that with a little bit of help they could continue to take care of their loved ones at home. To support them, and to support the vital role these caregivers play, we have instituted the National Family Caregiver Support Program.

This program is rapidly becoming a lifeline in many communities by providing information and assistance to caregivers about available resources, by providing counseling and training, and by establishing local respite care programs that enable persons to get temporary relief from their caregiving responsibilities. Last year, this program assisted almost 4 million caregivers across the United States. We are committed to supporting the network of family members, friends and neighbors who represent the largest, and the most important, part of our long-term care workforce.

In closing, I would say that in the United States, we are building a good community support system for older persons and their families. Like all of you, the United States values the contributions that older persons have made and continue to make to society. Today, we reaffirm our commitment to them and to identify steps we can take to further improve their lives and the lives of their families and caregivers. What binds all of us together is the desire to improve the lives of the elderly while strengthening and supporting families. President Bush indicates that it is the role of governments to stimulate the larger environment to pursue an improved society.

I am very pleased to be part of this dialogue here in Santiago, and I look forward to working with you in implementing the regional plan of action on ageing to create healthy and caring communities for older persons and their families. Together, we can find ways to improve societies and ensure that the twenty-first century will be a good time to grow old in the Americas.

The United States is honored to stand with you in this vital effort.

Thank you Mister Chairman.