

Remarks by Clayton Fong April 5, 2007

Four years ago, I attended an International Symposium on aging between the United States and Japan in Nagoya City, Japan in April 2004. Today, I am truly honored to be a part of the today's symposium as we include Australia and Canada and would like to thank Dr. Mokuno for inviting me to such an auspicious occasion.

Population aging is a global phenomenon. Increases in the proportions of older persons (age 60 and above) is being accompanied by declines in the proportions of young people (under age 15). The fastest growing age group in the world is age 80 and above. By 2050, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in the history of mankind.

In the United States, we are experiencing a similar demographic shift. Population aging is already having major consequences and implications in all areas of our lives and it will continue to do so. In the economic aspect, population aging will affect economic growth, savings, investment and consumption, labor markets, pensions, taxation and the transfers of wealth. It will also affect healthcare, family composition and housing as well as voting patterns and political representations.

Our government's entitlement programs; Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid, are already 40% of the total federal budget and by 2030 they will equal about 75% of the federal budget. Clearly, the entitlement programs, as they are currently structured, are unsustainable in the long run. The ability of these important programs to be a viable safety net for aging baby boomers and beyond will require swift action by our congress. The United States faces a looming fiscal crisis, the solution to which will require extraordinary courage from our political leaders.

Long-term care is an integral part of entitlement reform. At the 2005 White House Conference on Aging half of the top ten resolutions were about long term care. The Honorable Josefina Carbonell, Assistant Secretary for Aging has taken a leading role in pushing for alternative solutions including support for the integration, expansion and improvement of community based long-term care programs which provide better care and are far more cost effective compared with traditional institutionalized approaches to long-term care. Her Choices for Independence initiative is both innovative and challenging and has been widely embraced by the aging services network.

The purpose of the White House Conference on Aging is “to make recommendations to the President and Congress to help guide national aging policies for the next ten years and beyond.” In the past, these conferences have led to the enactment of programs such as Social Security, the Supplemental Security Income Program, Medicare and Medicaid, the Older Americans Act, as well as the establishment of the National Institute on Aging.

Other than long-term care the one resolution that was by far the most important to the delegates and received the most votes at the conference called for the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. Up for reauthorization last year, the Older Americans Act is the foundation for the aging network, meal program for seniors, senior centers, community based organizations, and many other programs that help seniors stay in their own homes longer.

Congress responded by reauthorizing the OAA at the end of this last year which was the earliest that the OAA reauthorization had ever occurred.

The conference was also an opportunity to focus attention on issues that are not getting significant play. For example, everyone talks about the aging of the baby boomers

and how fast the 65 and older population will grow. Few discuss the changing face of tomorrow's elders; the fact that at the same time the 65 and older population will double or grow 100 percent, the Asian and Latino community will grow seven times faster.

Despite the fact that Asian and Pacific Islanders (APIs) are the fastest growing racial groups over the age of 60 in the U.S., they remain the most underserved senior group in the nation. The diversity among APIs raises many unique issues and barriers for this older population. Over 70% of API elders are foreign born and over half do not speak English well. Limited English-speaking ability forces many Asian and Pacific Islanders to work low paying jobs without retirement plans while cultural and language insensitivity in the existing social service systems hinders them from receiving services.

One of NAPCA's major roles is to break down the barriers to API elders receiving services. We bring to the attention of policy makers the unique issues of our elders and we form and work with community coalitions to create a linguistically and culturally competent infrastructure so API seniors can gain better access to programs, services and information.

In the end, whether significant accomplishments go forward are dependent on us as advocates, policy makers and elected officials to try to focus the debate on that common ground and put partisan differences aside. That is what it will take to meet the challenges of the aging of the baby boom generation.

Partnership is very important to our work and this holds true both locally and internationally. Four years ago last April, I participated in the United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing as part of the 24-member U.S. delegation led by The Honorable Josefina Carbonell and named by President George W. Bush. The assembly provided a common ground for delegations from the 163 participating countries to

exchange views on issues concerning aging of the global population. Most countries face not only the aging of their populations but also the challenge of serving emerging communities of minority elders.

It was extremely enlightening to see the broad perspective and the tremendous consensus on aging issues shared by experts on aging from around the world. The assembly resulted in the agreement on a Plan of Action calling for changes in attitudes, in national and international policies, and in community, corporate and organizational practices, so that the enormous potential of aging is fulfilled. It also sought to ensure that people everywhere will be able to age with security and dignity and continue to participate in their societies as citizens with full rights.

One thing we can do is share and exchange information on how our respective countries have met the challenges in dealing with issues of our aging population. Japan is meeting the challenge of an aging population by implementing mandatory long term care insurance. I believe the U.S. can benefit from exploring similar policies to cope with the rapid change in the worker/retiree ratio. Meanwhile Japan may find of particular interest U.S. programs to encourage and enhance community based long term care that allows seniors to stay at home longer through programs such as congregate meals, home delivered meals, adult day health care and respite services.

Even though our systems are different, we are bound by the common challenge of an aging society and our common desire to provide seniors with a secure and dignified quality of life.

Thank you.