

Developing a Diverse Labor Force to Care for Older Californians: Challenges and Opportunities

An Informational Hearing

of the

Senate Subcommittee on Aging and LTC and the Assembly Aging and LTC Committee

Tuesday, February 3, 2004

California's population is aging rapidly, representing a demographic imperative that cannot be ignored. By 2040, it is projected that the number of Californians aged 85 years and older will increase by 200 percent and the ratio of the elderly to adults under age 65 will have increased by 80 percent. Our older population is also growing increasingly diverse in gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as in education and income. This rapid aging and diversification of our older population carries significant policy implications. California will soon confront a larger elder population and smaller younger working-age population, making it difficult to sustain our current policy and programs.

The demographic shift also brings an increased demand for professionals with knowledge of and expertise in the human aging process. Ensuring the adequacy and availability of the paraprofessional and professional workforce is a critical component of planning for our aging population. At present, California faces a severe shortage of professionals and paraprofessionals needed to operate programs and provide services for older adults. For example, there are only approximately 890 geriatricians in California, or one geriatrician per 4,000 Californians 65 years of age or older. We also face a shortfall of approximately 30,000 certified nurses aids needed to provide care for frail seniors who reside in nursing homes. Nationwide, approximately 3 percent of social work students specialize in gerontology, and only 5 percent have taken a course in aging.

Information coming available through the Strategic Plan for an Aging California Population (Senate Bill 910, Ch. 948/99, Vasconcellos) presents a more accurate picture of the shortcomings in gerontological education as well as the opportunities for change.

Today's hearing will begin with an overview of the recently released Strategic Plan on Aging and its general findings, followed by a focused presentation on the provider workforce issues and recommendations outlined in the Plan, as well as current efforts to develop a representative workforce involving rural, minority, and low-income students. The second panel will speak to ethno-geriatric issues, career ladders for gerontological education, efforts to leverage federal funds, and rural outreach education projects. The following are questions posed to stimulate thought, discussion, and opportunities for action on the issues brought forward today:

- How is the State implementing the recommendations outlined in the Strategic Plan on Aging? What entity will be responsible for its implementation?

- What are the priorities that we must first address in the Strategic Plan on Aging to ensure we have an adequate supply of professionals and paraprofessionals trained to work with the aging population?
- How can we best promote jobs and careers in aging as a noble profession? Are there enough practical incentives for students to go this direction?
- If we have a shortage of individuals providing direct care assistance, how are we going to increase competencies in gerontology as well?