August 17, 2011

Dear Participants:

First, I’d like to thank you for inviting me to participate in this important Vermont Associates’ Senior Employment and Economic Security Summit. I am sorry that I am unable to make it there in person however, I am happy to provide you with an update of the critical work happening in Washington, DC and elsewhere to help older Americans live better lives.

There has never been a more important time to focus on protecting programs that help the poor, the sick, the disabled and the elderly. At a time when the richest people and the largest corporations are doing phenomenally well, and in many cases, have never had it so good, the middle class is disappearing, unemployment is horrendously high, and poverty is at record levels. Americans need decent jobs to support themselves and their families. In the midst of the most significant economic decline since the 1930s, we must not ignore what this recession is doing to the economic security of senior citizens.

At the beginning of this Congress, I took on a leadership position within the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committee as chairman of the Subcommittee on Primary Health and Aging. Among other things, in this role, I am primarily responsible for the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act. As you well know, the Older Americans Act provides essential supports and services to millions of older adults, allowing them to remain in their homes and communities much longer than they otherwise could.

Right now in this nation, long-term unemployment is occurring across all age groups, but the recession has been particularly hard on workers 55 and older. Once they lose their jobs, it is much more difficult for older workers to find new employment, and workers over 55 are the most likely group to remain out of work for more than a year. Millions of seniors across the country have strong workplace skills and want to return to work.
As you are well aware in this audience, the Older Americans Act created the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SEE-SEP). This program provides many low-income older Americans with job-training and part-time work in a community service setting. Since its inception in 1968, SCSEP has served a population not served by any other federal workforce development program, and has enjoyed strong bipartisan support due to its low administrative costs and demonstrated effectiveness.

In Vermont alone, the program has over 500 participants in 56 cities and towns contributing to their communities by working in elementary schools, health clinics, senior centers, and Meals On Wheels programs. I want to personally thank Vermont Associates and the program participants for working hard to support others in our great State.

As we look toward reauthorization of the Older Americans Act I hope that SCSEP can be made even stronger and more effective. In a discussion I had with Assistant Secretary of the Administration on Aging, Kathy Greenlee, we both agreed that as the Baby Boom Generation moves toward retirement, the Act should include an emphasis on seniors helping other seniors.

It is my hope that we can work together to make this reauthorization the best yet. The bottom line is that in the midst of this economic recession, Older Americans Act programs are more important for seniors now than ever, and I want to hear from each one of you about how these services and supports impact your life.

In the meantime, thank you again for inviting me today. As always, I truly appreciate the work you do for Vermont’s seniors.

Sincerely,

Bernie Sanders
US Senator