

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON AGING AND LONG-TERM
CARE, MARIKO YAMADA, CHAIR

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Abstract:

As a bellwether for the nation, California is embarking on another demographic transformation, one unlike that of previous centuries. We are aging as we are becoming a majority-minority state. While the United States is slated to be majority-minority by 2042 and to double the size of its older population by 2029, California will have achieved this milestone much sooner. What lessons about this phenomenon can we impart to the nation? How can California demonstrate best practices to other states? And what planning and proactive measures must our state pursue as it responds to its aging and diversity? The politics of aging will be crucial: For at least the next twenty years, the elderly and retirees will have inordinate electoral influence, while California's younger population becomes majority-minority. How might we mitigate potential intergenerational and interethnic tensions? How might we facilitate intergenerational and interethnic coalitions? This presentation will provide a context by which to explore the demographic transformation and to plan for a state and a nation where ethnic and minority elders and diverse populations become the New America.

Testimony

It gives me great pleasure to speak before the California Assembly on Aging and Long-Term Care. I commend Chair Yamada for her leadership and prescient vision as you begin your 2014 information hearings on the convergence of California's rapidly aging population and its increasing diversity. I am impressed with the larger number of assembly members at this hearing today and, in particular, at the bipartisan nature of your committee. If I may say at the outset, the Assembly Committee on Aging and Long-term Care has a storied legacy in providing intellectual, policy and programmatic leadership to the California Legislature and to all Californians. Many important legislative and public services have emanated through the work of

this committee, including enhanced public benefits and agency services for older persons and persons with disabilities. You are continuing that leadership by holding the first of your planned hearings on the impact of aging and diversity on California's multiethnic populations. I am pleased that you will examine the needs of African Americans, women, Latinos, the API community and the LGBT community. I am especially pleased that you are adding hearings on men who become caregivers, as well as issues of Alzheimer's disease. Clearly, our response to aging and diversity will require a multifaceted approach.

I would like to provide a broad perspective and a context within which each of these hearings and target populations can be better understood. You will receive much data and many facts about the demographic transformation facing the United States and California. I will leave to other scholars and researchers, as well as to your skilled staff, the retrieval of that information. Allow me to paint the bigger picture and one that will overlay all that will be addressed in these hearings.

We are aging; more specifically, we continue to experience increased life expectancy and overall longevity. This is not new; it has been occurring since the middle of the last century. What is profound is that all groups are enjoying the benefit of added years, but certain groups will be impacted differently than others. The good news in all this: We are all living longer. The not-so-good news: There are differentials. Women continue to outlive men, and whites continue to outlive blacks and Native Americans. What is especially intriguing is that Latinos, in general, now have a life expectancy that surpasses whites and blacks, although, as you will hear in later

hearings, they also will have greater incidences of chronic conditions. The big news in all this is what we refer to as the “total fertility rate”, or replacement rate. It is this variable that complicates how we as a nation and as a state will respond to aging and diversity.

In general, we know that, demographically, a society requires that women of child-bearing age have an average of 2.1 children. More than that adds to a population, and fewer lessens a population. For the first time in this state’s history, we find that the replacement rate has fallen for all but one group. The Pew Research Center in 2010 showed that, for the first time, while whites (with 1.8 children per woman of child-bearing age), blacks (2.1) and Asians (1.8) were at or below the replacement rate, Latinos were well above that rate at 2.4. What does this mean for your efforts to respond to aging and diversity in California?

Firstly, as we in California know, diversity and multi-culturalism is strength and gives the state a cultural vitality and economic dynamism that other parts of the nation, which remain homogenous, lack. We should celebrate diversity and remind the nation that we have always been, and will continue to be, a nation of immigrants. Ironically, other parts of the country are only now experiencing those changes. Places like the Dakotas, the South and the Midwest, which heretofore have remained largely white, are now facing an influx of immigrants and undocumented persons. And, not surprisingly, these changes create discomfort and tensions in these locales. California has much to teach these parts of the nation about responding to the inevitable transformation that will impact them. We have learned through trial and error that

ultimately accepting each individual as an integral and equal member of society is to the benefit of all.

Secondly, we must face the new realities that we cannot be all things to all people. For example, the Older Americans Act has for many years had a “targeting” requirement that each subgroup of minorities (e.g., blacks, Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics) and special populations (e.g., LGBT) receive culturally compatible services and programs targeted to them. Yet, a national aging network with just about 2.5 billion dollars to serve 35 million and more older persons will, in time, cut that pie into very small pieces. Thus, I believe we should refocus our efforts to those basic needs that all persons who are growing older, regardless of race, gender and sexual orientation, need to grow old with a measure of dignity and well-being. And what might those basics be? My personal favorites: enhanced long-term care and care giving support services, the absolute protection and solvency of Social Security and Medicare, age-friendly communities, adequate housing and transportation, a basic retirement income support and, where needed, English-language translation services. If we pursue these priorities, I believe they will help all older Californians achieve a measure of a “good old-age,” regardless of diversity or difference.

Thirdly, in the words uttered by many in the 1960s, “the whole world is watching.” The United States in general, and California in particular, continue to be a beacon for the world, but not always for the best of reasons. Many parts of the world — Europe, East Asia, Mexico, South America — are now facing the same demographic trends as we are: Their populations are living longer, and they have declining replacement levels. Countries in the European Union, China, Japan, Korea and Mexico now have replacement levels of 2.1 or below. And they face an urgency to either encourage women through pro-natal policies to have more children and/or to

import foreign workers. The former does not work and has yet to measurably alter the fertility rate (it's hard to bribe women to have children). Yet, foreign immigration has produced complex difficulties for France, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Japan and Korea. Korea is a case study of this dilemma. Its replacement rate is 1.1, and its population is aging faster and living longer than most of those of other nations. In addition, Korean women have not been persuaded to have more children. The country imports foreign workers to do the "3Ds": dirty, demanding and dangerous jobs. Yet, Korea resists integrating and acculturating foreign workers and frowns on intermarriages. Thus, Korea is facing what Europe is facing: an alienated and restless population of foreign workers outside the mainstream of their countries social and civic institutions. And in this area, the United States and California excel. Despite discrimination and racism, all groups eventually are able to overcome; and, thanks to our 300-year heritage of democratic and constitutional government with the ideals of e pluribus unum, we find that intermarriage and upward mobility continues to benefit all.

Fourthly, as we hold these important hearings about aging and diversity, I implore the Chairwoman and members of this hearing to tell our story and to draw upon the media to lay out a narrative of optimism and possibilities. I say this because others are painting a narrative and telling a story that can work against progressive legislation and policy efforts to respond to aging and diversity in a positive manner. There are those, for example, who would say that these demographic trends will create conflicts and competition for scarce resources. Ron Brownstein, a noted columnist and close colleague, was prescient in a seminal article on "The Brown vs. the Gray," when he issued a clarion call: Beware of the politics of aging and the segmentation of the electorate by age, race and ethnicity. He explained what we know in California: While California

is now a majority-minority state (it reached that milestone in 2012), the electorate of people who are 50 years of age and older remains largely white and English-speaking. Minorities and immigrants are relatively young, with a large proportion undocumented, and thus this diverse population is a smaller segment of the general electorate. Political scientists point out that the elderly consistently register and vote more often than younger persons. What this means is that we will have, for some time, a largely white, elderly, retiree population making electoral decisions for a growing young, non-English-speaking immigrant population. The priorities of these two groups differ. Older whites focus on low taxes, reduced government and public safety, while younger minority and immigrant groups want what all Americans have historically sought: jobs, education, a social safety net and economic opportunities, even it means higher taxes. Some pundits and columnists are portraying these differences as intergenerational and interracial tensions and conflicts, and we must guard against these pessimistic scenarios. The world is watching to see how all of this plays out, and California has a golden opportunity to lead the way and to promote intergenerational and interethnic coalitions.

So, what might this mean, as you embark upon the important process of multi-hearings that examine the needs of various subgroups as California becomes older and more diverse? In my opinion, it means that the California State Legislature and the Assembly Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care can play an enlightened leadership role with the following actions:

- 1) Address the needs and unmet gaps facing minority elders as they age and the particular vulnerabilities that older persons of all diversities must overcome.

- 2) Highlight programs and best practices that work and instruct California state agencies to be partners in replicating what works and changing what does not.
- 3) Educate all Californians about longevity and that we must all prepare for longer life spans.
- 4) Be pragmatic and use “truth to power” to avoid “ PC” (politically correct) solutions that are ideologically based. Promote policies, laws and programs that serve the greatest number of older Californians and that provide a basic level of services and a safety net, rather than trying to be all things to all people.
- 5) Focus on the most vulnerable people and those most at-risk with programs such as in-home supportive services, which keep the poorest and most disabled elders out of expensive nursing homes and give care workers meaningful and fulfilling work.
- 6) Work toward alliances that bring together diverse communities,—all of which need Social Security, Medicare and Medi-Cal, as well as benefits such as SSI, DI and in-home supportive services.
- 7) Keep in mind through these hearings that we must tell our story in a manner that gives comfort to all Californians, regardless of political party, income and race and that we will all eventually be old. Utilize our prime geographic position as the hub of the Pacific Basin to reach out to the many groups who, in this state, represent the largest of their ethnic groups outside of their host countries, including Korea, Armenia, Iran, Mexico, Japan, China, Samoa, Philippines, and Central America. These groups give us direct connections with their host countries, and we

should use these bilateral ties to promote programs between the countries of origin and their ethnic groups in California.

Lastly, let's always remind ourselves and others that we need one another. Whether you are a white, retiree who takes a conservative stance on the role of government or a young, undocumented person hoping for a Dream Act, California will continue to be great despite its challenges; because this is a gorgeous state to live in. But we must find ways to benefit from one another. And the concept elaborated by Alexis De Tocqueville during his seminal journey to the United States in the 1840s resonates today. He talked about "self-interest rightly understood" and how Americans in the early 1800s had a peculiar penchant to support the public good, even when it was not in their personal interest. This self-interest recognized that, if the common good dictated what was best for all persons, then eventually, every individual would benefit. The older, white, conservative retirees that we sometimes disparage for the discomfort some show toward diversity are actually the best example of this ideal. These individuals, whether they are found in Orange County, the Inland Empire, the Central Valley, Marin County, the Central Coast or the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, represent that Greatest Generation upon whose largess and legacy we continue to benefit. Today's elders, even Tea Party members, came of age when they truly believed in such things as raising their taxes to pay for the GI Bill, public infrastructure (e.g., the interstate highway system, the state water project), and public education (e.g., the creation of the finest public university system in the world and the California Master Plan). They served in our nation's military in numbers far greater than today's young generation. Today's elders gave us much and believed in "self-interest rightly understood."

Thus, I believe we have the basis of common cause: We will all need a social safety net as we age; we will all experience care-giving and the need for long-term care; we will all worry about insufficient retirement income in old-age; and we will all want to leave a lasting legacy to the young people who will succeed us. This, then, is the basis of where I believe these hearings can take us: recognizing the needs of all Californians as they age in a multicultural state and ensuring that we encourage them to enjoy their golden years in this amazing place. Thank you for the opportunity to present before you.