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Press Briefing: Budget Cut Puts Elders' Health at Risk

As our nation offers a prescription drug benefit for elderly Americans and 78 million Baby Boomers are approaching retirement, the U.S. Congress is preparing to eliminate funding for geriatric education programs for health care professionals. Last year our legislators funded these programs at \$31.5 million. This year the U.S. House of Representatives (HR 3010) proposed absolutely no money for these programs, while the U.S. Senate proposed \$29.5 million.

The Gerontological Society of America (GSA), currently holding its 58th Annual Scientific Meeting in Orlando Florida, has assembled a team of its most prominent members to hold a press briefing on the implications of this budget cut. GSA President Terry Fulmer of New York University will be joined by physicians Patricia Blanchette of the University of Hawaii, Marie Bernard of the University of Oklahoma, and Harvey Cohen of the Duke University Medical Center.

Having a well-trained healthcare workforce is essential for all Americans. Elderly individuals need help and support to guide them through the complexities of the prescription drug benefit, to manage their chronic diseases and to help them maintain their independence.

Within the next 2 weeks, our legislators will have the opportunity to restore funding for geriatric education to the \$29.5 million recommended by the Senate. Funding for geriatrics is critical if our nation is indeed committed to serving elderly Americans and training the healthcare professionals who care for them.

The current bill must go forward with funding for geriatric education. Without a workforce properly trained in geriatrics, more elders will be taking unnecessary drugs, be hospitalized and put in nursing homes. Health care expenses will skyrocket and the costs of the Medicare drug benefit will increase dramatically.

While we cannot ignore the costs of the war in Iraq and recovery from the hurricanes, sacrificing geriatric education programs to save money now will only lead to much more expensive health care in the future.

This briefing will take place at 1 p.m. on Monday, November 21st in the Chicago/Denver Suite of the Orlando Marriott World Center (www.marriottworldcenter.com).

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The Gerontological Society of America is the oldest and largest national multidisciplinary scientific organization devoted to the advancement of gerontological research. Founded in 1945, its membership includes some 5,000+ researchers, educators, practitioners, and other professionals in the field of aging. The Society's principal missions are to promote research and education in aging and to encourage the dissemination of research results to other scientists, decision makers, and practitioners.