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IDOP 2008: Global Perspectives on Family Caregiving
on the occasion of the UN International Day of Older Persons
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WELCOME REMARKS

Thank you for your kind introduction, Susan, and thanks as well to the United Nations Programme on Ageing and the National Alliance for Caregiving for joining AARP in hosting this important and timely event. On behalf of AARP, I am pleased to welcome all of you to what is certain to be an insightful and provocative discussion. We are very fortunate to have with us today an international panel of experts on caregiving, who will flavor this discussion with perspectives from every region of the world.

I should note that it is gratifying to see so many dignitaries on hand, among them, the UN Ambassadors from Finland, Haiti, and Ukraine as well as representatives from the UN Missions of Brazil, Uruguay, Guatemala, Spain, and the United Kingdom, along with Government representatives from Australia, Argentina, and New Zealand. Special thanks to each of you for taking time away from your official duties.

Before we get started, I'd like to first acknowledge the occasion that has brought us here today. Eighteen years ago, a prescient UN General Assembly resolution framed the need to ensure that the aging in all societies would always remain visible and valued. The resolution called for a "common basis...for the protection and promotion of the rights of the elderly, including the contribution that the elderly can and should make to society."

On that December day in 1990, with the rapid aging of the world's population well underway, the UN boldly advised all of us that the contexts in which we care for older persons would soon change in ways that we could not predict. Provision for an annual reminder of our responsibilities to the aging was inserted in the resolution text.

And so today, as we have every 1st of October since 1991, we observe the UN International Day of Older Persons, in a year that also marks the 60th Anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. It is, to be sure, a day to celebrate as much as it is a day to revisit our commitment to safeguarding the dignity of the aging.

Indeed, we are here to talk about one of the ways we go about doing just that: family caregiving. As societies around the world grapple with aging populations, the importance of and challenges to family caregiving have garnered considerable attention. Already an under-supported group in so many countries, today's family caregivers face an array of new pressures that strain the vital services they provide to older people and the disabled, among them, smaller, more geographically dispersed families, competing childrearing duties, and longer life expectancy.

At the same time, family caregiving remains a universal, time-honored, and frequently cherished obligation across nearly all cultures. However it is constructed – as a sacred duty, a labor of love, a rite of passage, or a basic responsibility – family caregiving is a crucial piece of the long-term care puzzle. Around the world, unsung heroes assume family care roles without question, without hesitation, and without recognition. It is often said that family caregiving is the backbone of our global long-term care system.

The essential question to all of us here is what does/will the international family caregiving architecture of the future look like? Surely, many countries are already pioneering innovative approaches and developing best practices in support of family caregivers. And I suspect we will be hearing about some of them later on in today's program. In any case, these are challenging times for family caregivers and creative, compassionate thinking will be necessary to address their needs.

For its part, AARP – which holds consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council – continues to make home and community based care a policy priority. Specifically, AARP research has cast light on the economic costs of informal caregiving as well as the toll it can take on families with regard to financial security, job security and overall health security. Among the findings is that family caregivers provide \$350 billion worth of care to America's long-term care system – while remaining largely invisible.

I will close with an observation from my long experience in community based care. Years ago, I worked with a client whose 81-year-old father was placed in the care of a community based care organization I ran, rather than a nursing home. He told us that his father needed “a community, a village” to attend to all of his needs in a way that would preserve his dignity during his final years. Our dedication to transforming this beautiful notion into a synergistic, common sense approach to care of the elderly – with compassion at its core – exemplified the kind of value-driven approaches that the international community must develop in planning for an aging world.

The lesson learned from this experience and from so many others just like it is a simple one: as people invested in the care of the aging, we are duty-bound to look at the world through the eyes of those we serve and imagine having lived 70-plus years a certain way. Why should the things that had such meaning for them all those years not be a part of the last phase of their lives?

Thank you for your gracious attention. Now I would invite everyone to enjoy this wonderful lunch!