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Concurrent panel session 2: Challenges facing our youth and aged populations

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Presenters

Michele Clark, Claudia Collins, Chris Kearney, Ed Jost, Larry Mason, Carla Sloan, and William Sullivan

***Shaping the Future of Southern Nevada:
Economic, Environmental, and Social Sustainability***

**Challenges Facing Our Youth and Aged Populations
October 24, 2007**

Moderator: Ann McDonough, UNLV Gerontology Program

Panelists:

Michele Clark, UNLV School of Nursing

Claudia Collins, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

Chris Kearney, UNLV Department of Psychology

Ed Jost, City of Las Vegas Department of Leisure Services

Larry Mason, College of Southern Nevada

Carla Sloan, AARP Nevada

William Sullivan, UNLV Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach

Scribe: Lisa Gioia-Acres, UNLV Department of History

The session began with an introduction of the work and accomplishments of each panelist by moderator Ann McDonough. Each member had up to two minutes to express their views on the issue of challenges faced by the young and aged populations of the fast-growing city of Las Vegas, Nevada. Based on their expertise, each member addressed the issues they felt needed most attention. The panel began with a discussion on the youth of today.

According to Dr. William Sullivan (UNLV Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach), the young people of today, be it in Las Vegas or elsewhere in the country, experience a feeling of not belonging. Schools across the country have cut programs designed to provide students a sense of team and membership involvement. Extra-curricular activities such as P.E. and band are disbanded due to budget restraints. It is no wonder, then, that young people seek out and identify with gangs where a sense of “belonging” prevails. Just why our youth are in such a state of crisis is blamed on the “other;” no one wants to take responsibility for the end product of neglect youth today are experiencing. The solution is to put those programs back into our schools that will keep youth from straying toward the wrong influences. He concluded with a warning, “As you

age, it our young people who as adults will care for your needs, so it would behoove us to take heed.”

Dr. Chris Kearney (UNLV Department of Psychology) addressed both the Clark County School District's chronic absentee and dropout rate among school age children, and the psychological variables that may cause this epidemic. His first suggestion is that institutions around the valley that deal with the issues of children and youth must partner and coordinate their efforts to optimize results. The barriers between organizations must be removed in order for our young people to access the full range of resources our city offers.

Larry Mason (College of Southern Nevada) followed Kearney's remarks by saying that in his role as a school board member, he is well aware of the detrimental consequences affecting our youth due to the rapid growth of both our city and our schools. He pointed to the challenges facing our youth as they prepare for the examinations they take in high school that will enable them to continue their educational pursuits. Many youth aged 14-24 years are unable or unwilling to rise to the challenge of extending their education beyond what is required of them. He read from a study that discussed the issue of the lack of social support systems and the likelihood of prison time, early parenthood, single parenting, and unemployment as the options open to uneducated, unskilled youth. He believes our youth suffer from a compromised and/or non-existent work ethic, and that without a strong work ethic, our youth are bound for failure. In order for youth to grow to become our future decision-making population, leaders and community members must act today to steer our children in the right direction.

The panel turned next to topics of the aged in Las Vegas. Carla Sloan (AARP Nevada) informed the audience as to what the AARP offers to Americans aged 50 years and older. She stressed that the Baby Boomers, today's aging population, are a group

that desires, first of all, to be in control of their lives. She went on to define “livable communities” as places where all residents can live and participate fully, no matter what their age or ability might be. Local AARP offices work within the community to help aging residents prepare for change and face the challenges their new status brings them. She provided four action steps that AARP promotes: Ten Best Practices for Communities to Consider; Maturing of America; Your Home and Your Community: are they ready for you?; and Harnessing the Power of the Internet. By working together as a community and a nation, we can address the challenges that the conference brought up. The most important factor is that the leaders and other committed community members must work together to offer options allowing the aged population to live and participate fully in what their city has to offer.

Ed Jost (City of Las Vegas Department of Leisure Services) discussed the influx of the Baby Boomer generation and the challenges that will arise as this generation ages. Baby Boomers differ greatly from previous generations. For example, some words used in the past to describe elderly such as “seniors” is a taboo word to describe today’s aging group of people. Baby Boomers do not consider themselves old and their choice of activities is evidence of this. Rather than play bingo or sit in residential housing, today’s aging population is rock climbing and other such activities. Baby Boomers are healthier than their parents or grandparents were at the same age, they dislike long-term commitments of any kind, and desire flexibility in their lives and schedules. Here in Las Vegas, businesses and facilities also need to be flexible in their operating hours in order to accommodate people with variable schedules. Jost emphasized that flexibility is the key in providing quality of life services to the Baby Boomer generation.

Claudia Collins (University of Nevada Cooperative Extension) stated in her opening that if we are to look at sustainability, we need to look at the population. Based

on her work and observations, “old” folks today are neither poor nor doddering; they are busy, not fools, and are living the lives they want. Based on studies, the demographics of the elderly in Las Vegas show that these individuals live here because they choose to. She does contend, however, that any slight change could change an older person’s status from stable to unstable and they can experience a quick downhill slide. Cooperative Extension programs promote choice, control and independence. Today’s aged population is one made up of survivors. Cooperative Extension works with the older population to show them how to do for themselves; how to do research on topics for their own benefit. The aged population is a wonderful, talented resource for any community, but any program must they become involved in must be worth their time, for they cherish their free time. Nearly 3,000 Nevada seniors were surveyed to provide a portrait of the Nevada senior. In order to attain sustainability, we must define the population in order to maximize the resources available.

The last panelist, Michele Clark (UNLV School of Nursing) shared her research studying caregivers and the propensity for depression and other related health issues. Caregivers today can be either a grandparent caring for their grandchildren or adult children caring for their aged parent. She explained that a viable resource, healthy elderly people, are lost to us as they are housed in institutions or they choose to be uninvolved in community affairs. Caregivers are at risk for diseases brought on by the stress of their lives and burden of their responsibilities. Sustainability issues infiltrate the nursing field: how does sustainability affect health, how do healthy individuals help sustain a community? In her work, Clark says it is important to address health issues as a byproduct to our changing roles in society in order to answer the question, how will the elderly be able to function in their later years if they experience such health problems related to their roles as caregivers?

The session concluded with comments from audience members.