

What I Expect of the White House Conference on Aging

Open Forum on the White House Conference on Aging
Coliseum - St. Petersburg, Florida
January 18, 1960

Mrs Hanus

*Ruth
Lana*

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Jarville*

Dr. Andrus, Miss Adkins, Mr. Whittier, distinguished guests and friends:

It is a real privilege to have this opportunity to participate in this Open Forum on the White House Conference on Aging. The National Retired Teachers Association and the American Association of Retired Persons deserve high praise for sponsoring this meeting to provide the occasion for older persons to share their rich experiences and to make suggestions and recommendations that will contribute to the success of the conference scheduled in Washington, D. C. January 9-12, 1961.

As you know, I have a deep personal and official interest in the results of this, the first White House Conference on Aging. I am personally interested to the extent that I introduced HR 9822 calling on the President to hold such a conference and my official interest is that of Chairman of the Appropriations Committee of the House of Representatives.

For the last ¹⁴~~12~~ of my ²⁰~~18~~ years in Congress, I have been active on the Health Subcommittee on Appropriations. During this time I have derived a great deal of satisfaction in having a part in establishing broad, forward-looking programs of research in the medical and biological sciences.

Throughout these years it has been a very exciting and humbling experience to witness the progress that has been made in the prevention and control of dreaded disease.

We know for example that:

- .. one cancer patient out of three can now be saved, as compared with one out of four in 1938, which means that there are now 800,000 persons living in the United States who have been saved from cancer.
- .. advances in research now permit significant reduction in disability and premature death among those who suffer from heart attacks and high blood pressure.
- .. thousands of individuals born with heart defects, once doomed to invalidism and early death, are leading useful and productive lives because of advances in heart surgery.
- .. progress in the infectious and communicable diseases has revolutionized medical and public health practices in these fields, as illustrated by recent advances against tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, and rheumatic fever.
- .. because of new medical and surgical treatment now available, approximately 80 percent of all people with epilepsy are capable of regular productive employment in a wide range of jobs.

- .. research has led to methods that can reduce tooth decay by 50 percent.
- .. a major cause of blindness among infants has been discovered and eliminated.
- .. with new drugs and methods of treatment and diagnosis, it is possible to prevent crippling in 70 percent of patients suffering from rheumatic disease.
- .. for the first time discharges from mental hospitals have outnumbered admissions, based on new methods of treatment resulting from research.

The progress in medical research has not only performed litteral miracles in the health field, but prevented the loss of goods and services to our economy that is measured in billions of dollars.

You must be impressed as I am with the fact that the examples I cited are not diseases of any one age group - but are threats to us all. It is true that some are more prevalent in the young and old but the research into the basic disease effects people of every age.

Sincerely concerned with the depth of the problems which are represented in the programs that come before my Committee for supporting funds, I have frequently encouraged the increase in appropriation requests for research, study, and demonstration to meet the challenges of a dynamic economy.

I firmly believe that the health of all our citizens must always rate one of the top priorities in our efforts to improve the state of our nation. There are, however, other areas that demand the attention of the most experienced and capable minds of our people.

There are many who say that the role of American education must be redefined and strengthened to maintain our position in the family of nations and achieve the intellectual and social challenges of our time. I do not have to stress the problems confronting us in the field of education to this audience. We are, however, just beginning to be effective in having life long education accepted as the pattern for our lives rather than the academic concentration for limited periods.

This new approach to education was one of the many fine results of the White House Conference on Education. We must continue in our efforts to place education in its proper perspective for all age groups, and I believe your associations can be expected to give leadership to such a national program.

Everywhere there is mounting concern for equal employment opportunities for those who are willing, able and desire employment. Perhaps in no other field is "aging" more flexible. Recently, I was told of a child of eight who was said to be "too old" for employment. As a child model - this was so. Realistically, we must recognize that employment as a problem associated with aging must not be regarded as a special handicap for those in their later years. True, it becomes more acute, but we must recognize that our definition of age or aging must be related to the situation and the person on an individual basis.

We must come to grips with the prevailing practice of mandatory retirement. There are real problems to be solved on the basis of seniority and insurance costs. But is it fair to ^{force a person to} ~~compulsorily~~ retire ~~a person~~ by reason of age alone?

Our statistics have proven the worth of older employees, life expectancy has been extended, medical care and research have practically insured a longer healthier life - and yet almost nothing has been done to eliminate or delay compulsory retirement beyond the age of 65 which was psychologically established by the passage of the 1935 Social Security Act.

The amount of income needed to maintain a decent standard of living has never been fully defined or broadly accepted. The best studies do document that too many retired individuals are living on incomes that are inadequate to provide for minimum health care and the necessities to maintain a self-respecting independent role in the community. The threat of inflation to those on fixed incomes is very real and must be given more understanding consideration in our tax programs, Social Security Benefits, limitation on earnings and provisions for hospital and medical care.

One cannot review the problems facing the nation without including the place and importance of housing and its influence on the family and its members of all ages. There have been demonstration projects, but the balance in providing living accommodations for all of the age groups has not been maintained. The needs of the older members of our society have been overlooked, neglected or ignored until recently - and today plans to meet the backlog of suitable housing at prices they can afford have not been forthcoming.

Perhaps this appears to have been a devious approach to "What I expect from the White House Conference on Aging."

Rather, it is an attempt to show the needs that became apparent to me as Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

I was convinced that in the public interest, legislation was needed immediately to improve and develop programs "to permit the country to take advantage of the experience and skills of older persons; and to create conditions which will better enable them to meet their needs."

It is not necessary for me to develop the statistics of the aging for this audience. Within the age limits that qualify individuals for membership in your associations, there are more than 30 million persons 55 years of age and over in our country representing approximately one-sixth of our total population.

I have been very critical of the lack of breadth and scope in the Federal programs in the field of aging, and have encouraged the expansion of staff and facilities to meet the challenge. It became evident during hearings on appropriations and during the hearings conducted by Congressman Wier on bills relating to the aging, that Congress would have to take the initiative if it were to be done - before it was too late.

The bi-partisan support given my bill in both Houses of the Congress is almost without parallel in the history of major legislation. It is a tribute to their interest and desire to accept their full responsibility as the representatives of the people to act in their best interest and for the good of our nation.

I would like to add also that the appropriations for the White House Conference on Aging have been made available in the amounts requested. I have even asked if additional funds were needed to make this conference the most effective to date. I have been determined from the beginning that everything that we could do at the Congressional level to assist and support this important meeting would be done. It has the potential of being one of the most significant national conferences ever held.

To earn this distinction certain very specific things must take place - before - during - and following the meeting.

Before the meeting, each State must survey its needs, involve its ablest leaders at every level within the State, to determine what are the resources and the potential of its people. This must also include the direct expressions from older persons themselves,

as we are seeking him - not others speaking and thinking in their behalf.

Responsible national organizations must identify their role and educate their members to the important contribution they can make as an informed group at the local, state and regional meetings.

Those responsible for the over all planning at the Federal level must provide the leadership needed to assist the States and organizations in their task and structure a conference in 1961 that can truly be the crescendo of all the effort and results that will have developed from the "grass roots"; been strengthened at the State conferences and culminating in a meeting that will in every sense be a "Citizens Forum."

During the Conference every effort must be made to take full advantage of informed delegates. The broad representation of interests must result in conclusions that are improved by the strength of cooperative judgment and not decisions of any special interest or partisan group or over zealous individuals.

Positive action programs must be proposed and adopted to keep this conference from the fate of too many others held in the name of aging. I said at the time of introducing my bill that the greatest accomplishment in the field of aging to date had been the production of words. I would not want to have been a contributing factor to furthering this claim. The words that result from this White House Conference must be symbols for action.

Following the conference, I would like every delegate to consider that he has a mandate to interpret the conference to those he represents and to initiate the steps necessary to implement the recommendation within the State or at whichever level the program is directed.

I think it is important to emphasize that the primary responsibility for meeting the challenge of aging is that of the State and communities.

I do admit to a great deal of optimism over the results of the conference, but I must also share some of the thoughts that trouble me in the planning and activities to date.

There are indications that the bi-partisan support given in the Congress is not being maintained in some of the appointments and designation of persons responsible for conference leadership.

Some of the developments at the State and local levels seem slightly superficial and have not carried out the "grass roots" approach that was hoped for in our goals.

It is natural for organizations of divergent points of view to want to be well represented, but I would question the results of any conference that were influenced by delegates committed to a narrow point of view rather than the best interests of the age group for whom the conference was called.

It is also disturbing to hear of planning that appears to be directed toward the Conference as the goal in itself. The Conference will be the beginning of a national, balanced program in which government at all levels, organizations public and private, and individuals will know their important role and be prepared to undertake the challenge and opportunity that our increasing number of older persons presents to each of us.

In summary - The White House Conference on Aging must not be another "hand-wringing" demonstration of pity for the problems of the aging. It must be a forum dedicated to positive action that will be carried out wherever older people are working and living and want to remain independent, respected members of the family, community, and nation.

These are not the demands of a special interest group - but rather the aim for Americans of all ages.

I am convinced that "when blueprints have been forged out in the communities and states, they can be brought together and shaped into a comprehensive program for the guidance of the whole nation" and an example to the world.