January 28, 1958

Honorable Roy W. Wier
Member of Congress
House Office Building
Washington 25, D. C.

Dear Roy:

My bill H.R. 9822 has been referred to your committee for study and consideration. I am taking the liberty of writing to urge that you take it up as soon as you conveniently can. I firmly believe that the situation of our older people and of the country calls for early and deliberate action. H.R. 9822 calls, as you know, for a White House Conference on Aging to be preceded by conferences within each of the States.

The plight of many of our older people is a serious one. Large numbers of them are living in poor health, at less than subsistence levels of income, and socially isolated in housing in some of our worst slums. The increasing number of people living into old age represents an achievement of the medical research and improvements in medical care which we have been supporting for more than two decades. I am sure you will agree that our efforts have been largely in vain unless the later years of life can be made a period of dignity, good health, and living in decent surroundings.

I am glad to be able to report to you that many, - perhaps half of the States, have set up special bodies to deal with the complex matters of aging. A few of these States are making real progress and pointing the way to what can be done. More of them, however, are looking for guidance and not making much progress. Experience has shown that when the States are able to call together their professional people who are working on the problems of aging together with representatives of the older population itself, they are often able to come to conclusions as to the action needed and to put it in motion. This is why I have made provision in H.R. 9822 for holding State conferences prior to the proposed White House Conference on Aging.

I am hopeful, too, that the Bill will stimulate other States to gear themselves for action on behalf of their older people. The Federal Government has some responsibility to help and I think we have demonstrated that we in the Congress recognize this responsibility. Our programs of Social Security, help to employment offices in counseling older workers, support of medical reserach and construction of health facilities, vocational rehabilitation, and even the little we have done in housing bear witness to our interest. Yet, it is my firm opinion that the primary responsibility for helping older people to meet their needs must always lie with the States and the local communities with their broad range of public and voluntary agencies and programs. My second purpose in providing for State conferences is, therefore, to assist and encourage all of the States to see and assume their rightful share of responsibility. I believe these proposed conferences will help to serve this purpose.

A White House Conference on Aging would provide the much-needed capstone. It would bring together several hundred specialists and lay people many of whom have had useful experience they are ready to share with others. The net result should certainly be closer agreement on what should be done and how to proceed. The First National Conference on Aging, held in 1950 at President Truman's suggestion, had precisely this effect. It stimulated a great deal of interest andaction and much of what has transpired may be traced to that Conference. Now, with the 8 years of experience we have had since that time, I feel certain we should anticipate still greater results.

Now I should like to call a few special matters to your attention. We are, as we all know too well, in another period in which we must direct every effort and as many of our resources as we can to strengthening our defense and helping to preserve the freedom of the world. This is going to be a long and bitter battle and we cannot afford to waste our time and resources. One of the clear implications of this is that we cannot continue to follow the cavalier attitude which has been so widely adopted regardingiuse of our older workers. I stated in my remarks to our colleagues that there are perhaps 1,500,000 unemployed men between 40 and 65 years of age and from 500,000 to 1,000,000 men 65 years of age and over who would return to full time employment if they were given the opportunity. In addition there may be 2 or 3 million middle-aged women who would go to work if training and jobs were opened to them. It seems absurd to me that we do not take advantage of the skills, the energies, and the desire to work which most of these people have. I believe that a White House Conference on Aging would do much to focus attention on this particular problem and to find ways of attacking it.

I should hope, also, that such a Conference would help to break down the vicious practice of retiring qualified workers at an arbitrarily fixed retirement age. Right now we have serious shortages of scientists, mathematicians, technicians, teachers, clerical workers, and persons in other critical occupations, particularly in the field of health. As I said in my speech to the House, I cannot see how anyone can justify the practice of forcing qualified scientists, teachers, and college and university professors to retire at a time when we are frantically searching for ways in which to train more people for these same occupations.

There are other compelling reasons, too, for my request that you give early consideration to H.R. 9822. There is considerable evidence that many of our older people are becoming prematurely and unnecessarily senile and causing a strain on both our general and mental hospital facilities because they have no meaningful and useful activities, because they have insufficient income to permit them to take part in community programs, and because they are quite literally filed away in social isolation in slum dwellingsiand elsewhere. Beyond the indignity and the human misery which is engendered, the physical and mental breakdowns which result have serious implications for the use of our health manpower and for the construction of custodial facilities. In times like the present, I firmly believe that we must put forth our greatest effort to enable all people, including our old people, to be as healthy and as fit as we can possibly make them.

Some progress is being made in various parts of the country in providing good housing for older people, in developing educational and recreational programs, and iniutilizing their energies in voluntary community services and giving them interests which enable them to be healthy and happy members of society. This experience needs to be shared widely so that it may become the pattern for all of our communities throughout the country.

These, Roy, are some of the reasons I wish to advance for asking you to give whatever priority you can to the study of my Bill proposing a White House Conference on Aging to be preceded by conferences in all of the States. I am positive that the small cost will be repaid many times in the hearts of our older citizens and in their continuing contributions to the economy and community life.

Sincerely yours,

John E. Fogarty
Member of Congress