

A First for Aging

by

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Opening Session

White House Conference on Aging

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Three years ago yesterday, on January 8, 1958, I introduced the legislation that prepared the way for today's meeting.

Because action was so urgently needed and so long overdue, my original bill called for the Conference to be held within the year. During the Congressional hearings, it became evident that more time would be needed to conduct studies, stimulate grass-root participation and initiate demonstration projects. For these reasons the Conference date was postponed. Whenever, and wherever possible, I have emphasized that the interim period was a doing time and not a wait-see lag until the conference recommendations could be approved.

This past year has been called the "gerontological year." Never before have so many meetings, studies and reports been devoted to the subject of aging. Some have said that these preconference activities justify all the effort and expense of the White House Conference.

I would like to agree with this thought but cannot. I have been critical of the preconference accomplishments. I have made the distinction

between activity and action. Activity we have had. Action to implement the findings in too many places is still waiting for the results of your deliberations here. This is true even where the action to be taken eventually will depend on state or community decisions and the residents who are the best qualified to evaluate and to proceed.

Many of the state reports and studies have come to my attention. As I review the material, I am struck with the similarity of the findings and recommendations. In spite of the fact that some states are more advanced than others, the basic needs, desires and goals are much the same.

Critics of the conference technique say that we have "wasted time and money, have discovered nothing, and have confirmed only what was already known."

Even if we accept this as an accurate statement, it overlooks one of the main purposes of the grant feature of the Act. The money was made available not to accumulate more statistics or identify more problems, but to arouse interest at every level and to develop a sense of personal

awareness, and responsibility. We are not prepared to measure the long range influence of the thousands who participated in the preconference activities. This will become evident in the action that follows the Conference.

This much we do know; individuals and communities as well as states and national organizations that were passively interested or not involved have become more responsive and have accepted greater responsibility for programs in aging. I have also been told that requests made for material or assistance "for the White House Conference on Aging" resulted in special effort that expressed a renewed hope and faith "that this time maybe we can get action." I hope this confidence has been well placed.

It would be unfair to give the impression that no action has preceded the Conference. Rather than offend by oversight, I would like to compliment those states and communities that:

1. Did not accept the limitations of the Federal grant but added

sufficient money to do a quality job in their research, conferences and reports.

2. Created permanent commissions, committees or councils that include the best qualified individuals in all the related fields of aging and who stand ready to implement the conference recommendations.
3. Initiated legislation and procedures to correct and eliminate some of the problems of age barriers to employment, broadened retirement practices and took advantage of existing housing for the elderly legislation; and
4. Selected delegates to this meeting on the basis of their demonstrated interest in aging, their ability to make a contribution to the meeting, those who will be able to translate the proceedings into action, and who were not selected on the basis of political affiliation or special interest or pressure group.

I am pleased that this conference is responsible for the model home for the elderly that has been constructed here in Washington for your

critical evaluation and comments. This is like bringing the mountain to Mohammed. I hope you will take advantage of the opportunity as I did on Friday to see how private industry and public cooperation can work together to achieve something that would be difficult or impossible to create alone.

I would be very naive if I were not aware of the many problems that confronted you in your preparations for this meeting. To be blunt, some of the same difficulties are with us this morning as you prepare for the sections and work groups to which you were assigned.

It has been charged by some of you and others who refused to come that "this meeting is stacked or loaded." The same allegation was made about some of your meetings. Special interest groups are said to be operating through delegates that occupy key positions where they can influence discussion and "edit" the reports.

More disturbing is the feeling others have expressed that special interest groups are "ganging up" in several sections to block possible

action or insure a majority vote on issues that might be recommended.

The charges of the Conference being "stacked", "loaded" or that the delegates are "ganging up" are serious and insulting to the trust the nation's citizens of all ages have placed in your hands to consider solutions to the problems that have or will confront every one of us in due time.

I have no patience and very little respect for any who would place
I am certain it was not the intention of the "accusers"

or these ill-advised critics, but I believe they have
politics, personal or professional prejudice, self-interests
challenged the integrity of every one of us. We now have an
ahead of positive action for our nation's citizens.
additional assignment to prove the falsehood of their statements.

~~At the time of introducing my bill, I insisted that in all of its~~

phases, the Conference should remain nonpartisan. The problems with which the aging are confronted are not respectors of race, color, creed or political party. We are assembled to consider the recommendations made in your state, local and organization meetings. We must be influenced only by what we regard as the highest standard that our economy can support, what we are willing to finance, and always what is in the

best national interest.

Because I too am interested in Congressional action that will also be in the nation's best interest, I have introduced a bill to establish a Federal Commission on Aging.

Those of you familiar with my concern for a dynamic program in aging at the Federal level, know how critical I have been of the feeble, ineffective efforts of the Government to give leadership in a well-balanced program for the aging.

I do not mean to discredit the efforts of those individuals who were on the staffs of the Committee on Aging, the Special Staff on Aging, or the Federal Council on Aging. They did a remarkably good job within the limitations of their budgets and the impossible organizational structures to which they were assigned.

It should be evident to those closely associated with the field of aging and the ways of Government, that unless an organization has an adequate budget, sufficient staff and independence to operate, it becomes

a token gesture in the field and cannot measure up to the needs for which it was established.

The Federal Commission on Aging will have independent status and will report directly to the President and Congress, it will have funds to grant to States, communities and organizations needing assistance to advance programs with national significance. It will draw on the knowledge, ability represented in the Federal departments and agencies and will serve as the focal point for inter-departmental activity in the over-all field of aging.

It will also make regular reports of progress to the President and to the public.

I feel so strongly that further research is needed at all levels of our knowledge of problems of the later years, that I would have a special research section in the Commission to encourage, stimulate and disseminate information that will prevent or correct many of the threats of illness, disability and other difficulties that plague the later years.

Perhaps it should be stated for the record that the Federal Commission on Aging will not in any way duplicate or compete with programs that are well established and functioning in the national interest. The Commission will instead encourage and assist where necessary, initiate and complement where appropriate, but always acting to advance knowledge, and positive action in the field of aging.

The first major project for the Commission will be the implementation of the recommendations of this Conference. It is my firm conviction that this meeting must result in action immediately. I would suggest that not later than six months following the Conference that a report of progress from each of your States would be a good beginning toward measuring the impact of this meeting and your effectiveness as a delegate and representative.

In conclusion, I believe that you will have fulfilled your assigned responsibilities and my goals for the Conference if specific recommendations are made to:

- (1) Eliminate age discrimination in employment, making it possible for individuals who are willing and able to obtain employment in capacities which are not menial or insulting to their abilities.
- (2) Provide adequate retirement income with safeguards to protect the dollar value against inflation. "Subsistence living" is not enough to maintain or restore the independence of the elderly.
- (3) Furnish health and medical care in such a way that personal pride and dignity will not be offended; making it possible for individuals to pay to the extent they are able within fixed incomes.
- (4) Make suitable housing and living accommodations available at prices they can afford.
- (5) Accelerate research into every one of the threats of illness, or disablement that plague the later years.
- (6) Make the gift of added years meaningful by creating opportunities for service and useful activity.

Perhaps our efforts can be spurred on through the message contained in a recent letter I received.

"Of course it is splendid to smooth our path. We must have a crust of bread and a shelter for our bodies. But what is necessary also is the element of reasonable hope for a better tomorrow as regards the handicaps of body and mind which have accumulated in the aging process. As you so well know, tremendous efforts of many scientists are being put forth to find out what these handicaps are and how they can be lessened if not removed. Please consider it within the scope of your total function to tell us a bit about these efforts and prospects. Thus you will help us pass through another night and face tomorrow."