

10/24/60

Bill Fitcher

not used

Fourth Annual Meeting
New England Gerontological Association

I have attended so many of your annual meetings that I am beginning to feel like a member. I can think of few national issues I regard with greater concern than that of aging and I appreciate the opportunity to have a part in this, your Fourth Annual Conference.

When we last met, the emphasis was on the build-up of community and state activities preceding the White House Conference on Aging. At that time I expressed my anxiety over the stress on the Conference as the goal in itself rather than as the beginning of a national action program. I also felt a growing uneasiness that the bipartisan aspects of the meeting were not being retained.

I am told that both of these observations of preconference activities have improved. However, I am not convinced they have been overcome entirely.

All of the preliminary state and territorial conferences have been held. Reports of these meetings with their findings and recommendations have been or should have been submitted to Washington

where they will be consolidated and coordinated into a final document for use by the delegates. The period until the Conference has been described as a "haitus or let down period" in interest and activity. More bluntly, it appears to be stand-by time for complete instructions to be used following the White House Conference in January.

To some extent this is understandable, but it is not encouraging. It was my hope as well as others associated with the original planning of the Conference that this would be a most active time continuing those programs or initiating projects which are absolutely needed and which can and should be carried out at the state and local level.

The purpose of the \$15,000 Federal grant was not exclusively to assist the state in its efforts to discover needs and trends and to provide financial support for meetings. Equally important was the desire to "prime the pump" demonstrating the urgency to continue support for programs in aging properly financed on a permanent legislative basis. So far, the national picture is not encouraging. Our one legislation has not progressed too far.

There is still time for action. Every one of your reports must contain recommendations that require only local approval and could be implemented at once. Others may require further study, some will require authorizing legislation and others must be left for the thoughtful consideration at the national forum, but we should not waste this interim time. The needs of the elderly have been too long neglected and we must not default on the promise the White House Conference holds for them. I sometimes wonder at the patience of our aging and their optimism in the light of past experience.

At the Washington level the record of accomplishment of the last Congress in the field of aging is very impressive. The bills which were enacted have best been described as "sap to hoodwink the public and especially the elderly into thinking that action had been taken." The basic issues have yet to be faced and resolved.

The so-called medical assistance program for the aging that finally passed is completely inadequate and must be corrected when Congress reconvenes. It is a cruel hoax and violates the right of the aging to a program of health care that can be accepted in pride and with dignity.

Most of the nation's elderly do not seek or want charity. They prefer to pay their own way and remain independent. Whenever health care is based on a means test or paupers oath it is an insult to the integrity of the group and a disservice to the nation.

The complicated changes in the work test under the Social Security Administration adds little relief to those able to secure needed employment. I cannot agree with those who say that the "incentive to work has been added by this regulation."

One by one, we could examine the few bills or amendments that passed, only to find how little they face up to the realities of the situation or meet the known needs.

Just as I have encouraged you to take appropriate action now, I too have recognized a need for Congressional action that must not wait until after the Conference.

It has become increasingly apparent that an organization or group must exist at the federal level with sufficient interest and authority to act - with prestige and knowledge to command support and respect - with adequate funds and staff to operate efficiently and effectively.

I have been very critical of the Federal Council on Aging for its failure to initiate a single piece of legislation, issue any single policy statement and for a total lack of program or leadership. The extent of the Council's activity appears to have been the preparation of an annual inventory of federal programs in aging which are beginning to have a very familiar sound from year to year. This is not difficult to understand when we realize the infrequency of their meetings and the limited staff and meager budget under which they operate.

I might add that it has been very difficult to recognize any improvement in the reconstituted or revitalized Federal Council on Aging that reduced the membership to seven and raised the representation to Cabinet or equivalent status.

I have over the years given serious thought to the possibility of a bureau of aging. In fact Congressman Wier held hearings on the subject in the spring of 1958 at which time my bill calling for the White House Conference on Aging was the only one to receive favorable consideration. At that time, representatives from the Office of the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare were

strongly opposed to a bureau primarily because they believe the Special Staff on Aging with the cooperation of the rest of the Department and the Federal Council could do the job.

With all due credit to the work of this small unit, it could not and cannot within the framework of the Department reflect the broader needs of a total government program. Nor do I believe that any staff or organization can function within the framework of any one department or agency without being dominated or unduly influenced by the scope of that Department's program responsibility.

Because of my sincere belief in the need for a strong effective organization on aging at the federal level, I plan to introduce a bill requesting the establishment of a permanent bipartisan commission to be known as the Advisory Commission on Aging. This I shall introduce as soon as Congress convenes and prior to the White House Conference on Aging. I shall urge prompt passage in order to carry out the mandates of the Conference and to implement its recommendations.

Without going into the organizational and administrative details at this time, I would say only that this Advisory Commission

on Aging would report directly to the President, the Congress or any committee of the Congress and to any department of the Government or organization as the Commission deemed appropriate.

As a permanent commission, it would have continuity throughout changing administrations and as a bipartisan group would be concerned with initiating and stimulating the most effective programs in aging consistent with our knowledge of the programs and abilities to find satisfactory solutions. They would not be dictated by political expediency.

I feel strongly that this commission should define and implement the appropriate responsibility of the Federal government for the aging. Will you have at the state and local level an organization that can assume this same responsibility?

It has been agreed generally that the great accomplishment of the White House Conference on Aging Act to date has been the creation of community attitudes and demands for programs and facilities commensurate with their needs and financial limitations.

This is also reassuring because we must not allow those who have accepted local and state leadership to lose interest and thereby

forfeit the valuable experience and knowledge they have acquired through preconference studies and activities.

Because I believe the New England States represented in this conference constitute an area of special importance to the field of gerontology, I am recommending to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare the establishment of a Regional Center on Aging to be located at the University of Rhode Island with a program similar to the one at Duke University which is doing such fine work.

Well known to you is the fact that the percentage of older persons in several of our New England States is the highest in the nation. We also have an unusual economic pattern and a changing social structure that should be carefully studied under the best research techniques that are known in the field.

The New England Gerontological Association would have an even more vital role to play as an advisory group and individually as consultants in your areas of special competence and experience.

In addition to the original research and training aspects of the Center, I would also see it as a coordinating body for

programs and information of special significance to our region as well as a resource to assist organizations that have state and local affiliates in the area.

Never again should we permit ourselves to be confronted with such a lag in our culture that found us so totally unprepared to cope with the increase in the aging in our population. With the medical profession predicting life expectancy of 100 to 150 years there is much to be done and no time to spare if we are to enjoy it as an achievement instead of a curse.

Let me briefly outline the steps ahead as I see them, if we are to make good our promises to today's elderly and prepare the way for the elderly of tomorrow which if we are lucky will include us all.

1. Begin now to utilize the knowledge derived from your local studies and conferences, to initiate projects or programs, or expand existing ones.
2. Prepare your official state delegates to the White House Conference on Aging, Advisory Committee Members and organizational delegates from the region for ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ their section assignments. It is not only important for them to

be well informed as participants in the meeting but so they will be able to translate their experience into constructive action when they return.

3. Retain your councils, committees, commissions and advisory groups to utilize their skill and experience in the implementation of the White House Conference recommendations.
4. Recognize that any worthwhile long range program must be adequately staffed and financed. Make suitable provision in your legislative requests and budget preparations, and
5. Include the aging in every step of your planning.

To assist you in your work, I shall make every reasonable effort to have an Advisory Commission on Aging created to stimulate and carry out those functions appropriate at the federal level. Further, I shall initiate action which will result in an Aging Center for New England.

The degree of success we achieve in our assignments together, with similar effort on the part of responsible citizens throughout the nation, may well determine the direction of our government and our society.

This is not intended as a warning but an opportunity to make the most of our mature years. Together with our neighbors we can look confidently to added years of better health, more adequate retirement income, reasonable housing, meaningful activity - all to be enjoyed in dignity and confidence throughout all our years.

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