

Wanted - Responsible National Leadership in Aging

by

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Area I Conference

National Retired Teachers Association
American Association of Retired Persons

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It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to share in your New England Area Conference. The last time I met with members of your Association was almost three years ago and 1400 miles from here in St. Petersburg, Florida, during your Pre-White House Conference on Aging.

During that meeting over 1200 older persons participated in developing a 10 point action program that received wide publicity and became a part of the resource material for the national forum held in Washington, January 1961.

At that point in our preparation, we held high hopes for the action that would follow the White House Conference on Aging. Many of your officers and members served as delegates and consultants to the Conference and made valuable contributions to the 600 recommendations that resulted from the deliberations of the more than 2500 official participants.

As the sponsor of the bill that resulted in the White House Conference, I had a deep personal interest as well as an official responsibility in seeing that practical action would implement the recommendations.

It is difficult to measure accurately the results of any meeting. However, it seems to me that we have an obligation to the American people to evaluate the over-all effectiveness of any tax financed conference and take whatever action is necessary to protect the investment of the time, talent and money that were expended in the planning, the meeting and the report.

On the positive side, I am convinced that no previous White House Conference involved so many people at the grass roots level, or created more widespread interest.

The fact-finding and survey reports on aging compiled by each state constitute one of the finest collections of information and statistics compiled nationally in a given subject area.

The background papers for the Conference, the study materials prepared by the staff and the report of the Conference are a credit to the many people who were responsible for their preparation.

With all of these plus factors, the success of the Conference seemed assured. But was it?

In my capacity as Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Appropriations for the Departments of Labor and Health, Education and Welfare for 12 years, I have been keenly aware of the emerging national situation in the field of aging. The Congressional Record, reports of committee hearings and budget summaries document my deep concern and criticism for the failure of responsible governmental agencies and officials to accept their leadership role in taking action to meet the needs and to exercise their stewardship as Federal officials acting in the best interest of those served by their departments.

It became clearly evident through the budget requests of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and hearings with its representatives, that if a comprehensive program were to be enacted at the Federal level, it must go beyond the interest of any single department or agency. Also, it must have an independent status that is not possible if it is just one of the myriad of programs in a

department that has been publicly charged as being too large. In such a setting the program on aging has not even rated a line item in the budget but has been submerged as part of the appropriation for the Office of the Secretary.

Further, the problems of the aging and our goals for the nation's older adults must transcend selfish personal or political interests.

With these convictions in mind, I introduced, on the opening day of the White House Conference, a Bill to establish an independent Federal Commission on Aging on a bipartisan basis. It was my intention that such a commission would play a major role in implementing the recommendations that would result from the Conference.

Most of you know through the pages of your magazines and news letters, that Senator Pat McNamara also became firmly convinced of this need for an independent agency to give national focus to the broad field of aging, outside of any one department. Together, we sponsored identical bills in the Senate and House of Representatives to establish a U. S. Commission on Aging.

Until these bills were introduced the Department of Health, Education and Welfare procrastinated in submitting any legislation though it had been promised for months. It was not until the hearings on the Commission Bill had been concluded with strong support and endorsement by national authorities and organizations, including your own, that the Department finally introduced its innocuous "Senior Citizens Act of 1962." Senator McNamara agreed to introduce it "by request" in the Senate, saying at the time, he was doing so with "little enthusiasm for the Bill."

Without attempting to compare the bills, there were at least two very basic differences. The Commission Bill recognized the

rights of States to determine their own program needs in aging and authorized planning grants to establish or expand proper state organizations to administer the funds.

The second difference was the establishment of an independent U. S. Commission on Aging on a bipartisan basis with representation from all of the Federal departments and agencies with program interest in aging. The Commission would be independent of the control of any one department and would report directly to the President and the Congress.

I have been amazed to learn of the extent to which the Department of Health, Education and Welfare has tried to exert influence on individuals and agencies responsible to or dependent on it to react against the independent commission.

Failing to gain support for its original bill, the Department continued to adopt all of the features of the Commission Bill, with one major difference. They ignored the basic principle - the need for an independent agency with broad national interests. Instead they have continued to insist on the narrow, personal operating status.

The reluctance of H.E.W. to surrender the monopoly of the controls has resulted in a legislative stalemate.

I had been told that representatives of H.E.W. favored no action if they could not administer it. There is some indication that they are congratulating themselves for having delayed and defeated action during this session of Congress.

Indeed, this is a perverted deed to celebrate. I believe this is one of the greatest disservices that has been leveled against the nation's deserving elderly.

Moreover, I believe the Department has betrayed the trust and confidence of state leaders in aging who looked to it for leadership. Instead, without financial support or assistance to salvage programs and projects under way or projected, they must be abandoned or delayed until action can be taken on an independent commission in the next session of Congress.

Let there be no misunderstanding. The Department of H.E.W. did not include planning grants for the States in its original proposal. It circulated an impression that the Bureau of the Budget would not support such a bill. Later in a compromise proposal they contradicted such a conclusion by recommending such grants, under the administrative authority of the Department.

There are other disturbing overtones of vindictive action by the Department. Individuals who supported the Bill for a Commission now feel threatened by the Department which can deny financial support for projects, overlook them in program and conference planning and ignore them in areas where they were previously regarded and consulted as experts in the field.

There are also interesting indications that part of the opposition has been neutralized by the bate of recognition or other favors the Department can bestow on faithful, or "converted" followers.

I give you this rather lengthy and detailed account of this legislative dilemma because I believe that every responsible citizen is entitled to know the facts and exercise his prerogative to protest such action to his Congressional representative as well as to his state and local leaders in aging.

Your Associations have a deep interest in this situation. Your officers appeared before the platform committees of both the Democratic

and Republican parties advocating an independent commission to give meaning and leadership to a program on aging at the Federal level.

Your testimony on hearings on the Commission before the Congressional Committee was convincing and well documented. You support legislation on a bipartisan or nonpartisan basis and in the Blue Print for Action on Aging adopted at your national convention in May recommendation number one supports the establishment of a U. S. Commission on Aging as the most promising, comprehensive legislation before the Congress. I agree with you.

I believe I have an obligation to organizations like yours and others working in the best interests of older persons to continue to work for legislation that recognizes the broad program needs of the elderly, the rights of States to make their own decisions and the desirability of having a responsible agency that operates above departmental priority or personal interest.

It is interesting to note that in the recommendation of the Section on Federal Organizations and Programs of the White House Conference on Aging Report that it is "recommended that the Federal coordinating agency in the field of aging should be given:

- (a) A statutory basis and more independent leadership
- (b) Adequate funds for coordination and other assigned functions through a "line item" appropriation
- (c) Responsibility for formulation of legislative proposals for submittal to Congress.
- (d) Responsibility for periodic reviews of and reports in the various Federal programs, departments and agencies working in behalf of older people to achieve their effective coordination and operation."

As recently as March of this year a panel of consultants to the Secretary of H.E.W. recommended that a special agency be established within the Government having primary responsibility in all fields of the problems of the aging.

It must be obvious that those who should have been giving leadership have downgraded the rights and needs of older persons, have ignored the considered recommendations of the nation's leaders in aging and have substituted narrow jurisdictional limitations and individual judgments and personal, self-interest.

Quite frankly, the date is too late, and the Congressional calendar too full to give the Commission on Aging the statesman like consideration it deserves.

I would hope that when Congress reconvenes in Washington in January, prompt action will be initiated on the Commission and that full force and effect of informed citizens and organizations will result in completing the action that was cruelly stymied in this session.

I assure you of my sincere desire to see this constructive legislation adopted and shall be grateful for your continued support.

In our society and in a nation that prides itself on the independence and dignity of its citizens, every person should not only be guaranteed the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness but also the right to depth as well as length to his years and the assurance that dynamic maturity is also one of his inalienable rights.

Until we have achieved these goals for our older adults, we will not have earned our place as a mature nation, or as responsible leaders in world affairs.