

# The Conference on Aging

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*As the result of President Truman's request for a report on "the problems incident to our increasingly older population," the Federal Security Administrator, Oscar R. Ewing, invited delegates from all over the country to attend a Conference on Aging, held in Washington in mid-August of this year. Because of the widespread interest in the subject, the Bulletin presents the following article, in which the Director of the Conference describes the Conference organization and summarizes the principal topics discussed by the delegates.*

THE first national Conference on Aging took place in Washington from August 13 to 15, 1950. At that time, 816 delegates from all parts of the country met to consider the total range of problems presented by the changing age distribution of the American population.

The Conference was organized around 11 broad subject-matter fields. Nongovernment planning committees did the preparatory work on content, conducted the Conference work sessions, and are now preparing reports of the work of the delegates in their sections. The final, comprehensive volume is expected to constitute a bench mark in the effort of American society to adjust to the changes being brought about by this redistribution of the population.

The Conference is seen as having three phases. The first consisted of the preliminary determination of subject matter to be covered, identification of individuals and groups concerned with aging problems, and selection and preparation of delegates for the Conference. The second phase was that in which the delegates met in Washington to get acquainted with one another, to share their experiences and knowledge in the field of aging, and to develop principles and lines of action for the guidance of the many individuals, groups, agencies, and organizations concerned. In the third phase of the Conference the findings of the delegates will be disseminated, through all available media, for the stimulus they may provide and for the direction they may

afford those throughout the United States who wish to initiate programs. It is anticipated that in this phase the work will be accomplished by numerous public and private agencies through the printed word, the radio, local conferences, small meetings, discussion groups, and formal courses and lectures.

## Origin of the Conference

The Conference on Aging had its origin in the felt need and requests for help from a varied and growing number of persons and groups who were confronting problems that were not being solved through ordinary techniques, programs, and services.

Medical practitioners and researchers were becoming aware of multiplying numbers of older people with chronic illness and infirmities of aging. Management, labor, and employment offices were becoming concerned over the problems of longer-lived workers who wished to remain in gainful employment. Welfare workers were receiving more and more requests for help in finding living arrangements for older people. Legislators were beset by appeals for financial assistance. Here and there communities were finding response to experimental activities in education, recreation, and counseling for older people. Homes for the aged and mental hospitals were taxed to capacity. Slowly, American society was becoming aware that there was a new development in our national life and that it required attention.

The problem of aging came to the fore during the twenties and thirties in the form of a large surplus of older, unemployed workers, which provided

the final impetus for the passage of the Social Security Act with the old-age and survivors insurance and old-age assistance programs. Attention shifted from the aging during World War II, but it was noted that older workers were making effective contributions in manufacturing and service occupations during that period of manpower shortage. The suspicion arose that there were errors in our notion of the unemployability of older workers and in our assumption that financial need represented the only problem of older people.

In the spring of 1948 the National Health Assembly pointed out that there was a complex of aging problems somewhat related to, but actually quite apart from, the problem of chronic illness. Following a recommendation of the Assembly, the Federal Security Agency set up a Working Committee on the Aging composed of representatives of the constituent units. After surveying the field through the literature and the aid of their colleagues and of competent outside persons, this committee issued a progress report, which was sent to several hundred informed people for comment.

In the meantime, various groups who had been developing trial programs in their own establishments and communities began to recognize that some aspects of the aging problem were national in scope and would have to be handled accordingly. These groups took the initiative also in asking the Agency for a facility through which they could become acquainted with other workers in the field and could check their programs against programs being conducted elsewhere.

Late in the spring, the President of the United States felt the time had come to make an assessment of the total situation and requested the Federal Security Administrator to do so.

The Conference on Aging, on a national scale, was called by the Agency in response to this evidence of mounting interest—the stimuli from outside

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sources, the immediate and provocative response to the Agency's Working Committee report, and the desire of the President.

### *An Exploratory Forum*

The first decision made was that the Conference should be an exploratory forum, to be held as soon as it could be organized. It was recognized that, while many people were interested in various angles of the problem, there was little systematic knowledge on which to organize a definitive program. Likewise, there was, at the time, no adequate identification of persons qualified to talk authoritatively on the numerous aspects of the subject. Identification of such persons and of groups already working in the field became one of the objectives of the Conference.

The second decision was that the Conference should be broad in scope. The studies of the Agency committee had shown that the problems of individual and social adjustment to aging are as broad as life itself, that there are few, if any, aspects of life unaffected by the age changes in the population. The breadth of the subject matter covered is shown in the following 10-section outline around which the Conference was organized:

(1a) Our aging population; (1b) population changes and economic implications; (2) employment, employability, rehabilitation; (3) income maintenance; (4) health maintenance and rehabilitation; (5) education for an aging population; (6) family life, living arrangements, and housing; (7) creative and recreational activities; (8) religious programs and services; (9) community organization; (10) professional personnel. Section 1 became two sections as the plans developed, making a total of 11.

The next decision was that the Conference should involve large numbers of nongovernmental people—that it should be essentially a conference by, of, and for persons outside the Federal service. In the end, and at the request of the Planning Committees, about 40 Government employees were invited as full-fledged delegates representing themselves rather than the organizations in which they work.

The decision as to nongovernmental

responsibility and participation grew out of the two-fold recognition: (1) that, while Government workers have knowledge in some phases of the financial and health aspects of aging, the experience needed in a comprehensive conference could come only by involving persons of broad and varied experience in many different types of situations and interests; and (2) that, since most of the work with the aging will always be done by varied groups at local and State levels, persons at those levels should, from the start, work out the solutions and actions that are going to be employed.

The final major preconference determination was that the group process of discussion and decision-making should be employed throughout. This decision was consistent with the state of knowledge in the field and with the nature of the Conference that had been decided upon. This method has the further and compelling merit of making active participants of all who are involved and of giving every participant the knowledge that he has had a share in arriving at whatever conclusions are reached. Throughout the preconference and conference periods, the meetings of the central staff, the Planning Committees, and the sections of the Conference itself were conducted in this democratic manner. It is the hope of the Federal Security Agency that the process recommended itself to those who experienced it, and that they will adapt it to their own uses in exploring needs and actions in their own communities and organizations.

### *Objectives*

The specific objectives of the Conference were stated in terms of the total situation and in the light of the requests that led to it. They are:

1. *To provide* a forum for persons concerned with Aging.

2. *To reevaluate* the potentialities of older people toward ensuring their useful and satisfying participation in the life of the community.

3. *To stimulate* the exchange of ideas among persons of varied experience, with a view to solving problems of the Aging through voluntary and public organizations in each State, city, and community.

4. *To define* the nature and extent of these problems as they affect the individual, his family, his community.

5. *To promote* research on Aging in such fields as employment, health, education, recreation, rehabilitation, and social and psychological adjustment.

6. *To transmit* the findings of this Conference to interested groups, including the Federal Government, as guide lines for development policies with regard to our older people.

### *Conference Development*

The Conference began to move in May, when an Advisory Committee of outstanding persons and experts from many fields was appointed by the Federal Security Administrator. Although this committee never held a formal meeting, the members gave invaluable service in reviewing the plans for the Conference, nominating delegates, and affording guidance on several questions of policy. Later in the same month a small central office staff was set up, and a secretariat or committee of from five to a dozen Government staff members was created for each of the subject-matter areas or Conference sections. Most of these committee members were from the Federal Security Agency, but representatives of other Government agencies were drawn in at appropriate points. There was representation from the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Interior, and Labor, the Housing and Home Finance Agency, the Library of Congress, and the Veterans Administration.

The first task of the secretariats was the development of a preliminary outline for each section, detailed enough to determine the interest fields that should be involved and to permit the nomination of appropriate persons from outside the Federal service to serve as members of the Planning Committees. The Planning Committees, in turn, were to assume responsibility for the subject-matter content of the sections. Subsequently, the secretariat members served as staff for the Planning Committees, and the secretariat chairmen functioned with the central office staff as the group responsible for the organization of the Conference.

Planning Committees consisted of from 9 to 13 persons invited to serve by the Federal Security Administrator. Each committee held a 1- or 2-day exploratory meeting in June. Most of them met again during July, and all held meetings on the day preceding the opening of the Conference.

At the opening of each initial Planning Committee meeting, a Conference official explained the objectives of the Conference and asked committee members to take over responsibility for planning the content of the section and for selecting the delegates. It is a tribute to these committees and to American democracy that in every instance the Planning Committees accepted the invitation extended to them, made a preliminary outline for the section, nominated persons to be invited as delegates, and developed plans for conducting the August work sessions. With the help of the secretariats, the Committees cast the outlines in the form of questions, which were mailed, together with a certain amount of background data, to the delegates so that they could be informed and start their thinking on the subject before their arrival in Washington.

The Planning Committees had decided to seek broad interest representation within each section in order to ensure expression of diverse points of view and to avoid narrow conclusions. Between Committee meetings, the secretariats worked on the delegate invitation lists, striving to achieve a balanced representation in each section.

All 816 delegates to the Conference were invited as individuals representative of a field of interest and because of reported activity in that field. The conclusion was reached early in the group planning meetings that this procedure would yield a more informed group of delegates than would organizational representation.

The final step of the preconference phase was an orientation meeting, held the day before the Conference opened, for secretariats, Planning Committees, discussion leaders and recorders, reporters, and all other persons with specific responsibility for some aspect of the conduct of the meetings. The staff made final explanations of arrangements and then

organized the group into small sections, which met independently, for discussion of Conference procedures.

### *The Conference*

The Conference on Aging convened at 11 A. M. on August 13. Federal Security Administrator Ewing addressed the entire body of delegates on the origin of the meeting and the significance of the subject. Dwight Cooke, of the Columbia Broadcasting System, who was Conference rapporteur, then conducted his weekly panel discussion program, "People's Platform," with three Conference delegates participating. John L. Thurston, Assistant Administrator for Program, in general charge of the Conference, explained the role of the Agency as convener of the meeting, charged the delegates with their responsibility, and turned the Conference over to them. Between the conclusion of Mr. Thurston's address and the first work sessions, the University of Chicago Round Table program, also with three delegates making up the discussion panel, was broadcast from the Conference rooms.

The creative work of the Conference went forward in work sessions held on Sunday afternoon, Monday morning and afternoon, and Tuesday morning, and in numerous unscheduled meetings of small groups whenever time was available. According to prearrangement, most of the sections were divided into subsections for the major portion of the work period, with the result that there were usually 33 group meetings in progress simultaneously.

Besides the opening meeting, there were two general meetings. A dinner meeting on Monday was addressed by Edmund V. Cowdry, by Alvin Johnson, and by Frances Perkins. Mr. Ewing took advantage of this occasion to award a citation to Ollie A. Randall of New York for her pioneering work with the aging. The final Conference session was held on Tuesday afternoon. The program consisted of a fast-moving summary of conclusions and unanswered questions presented by Dwight Cooke, with the assistance of the section chairmen.

It is worthy of note that the Agency's desire for a forum-type of

exploratory conference carried through to the very end; not one action was proposed or taken by the delegate body as a whole.

The preconference materials developed by the sections, the summaries of the work of each section, and the tentative statements developed on the last day of the Conference are the materials from which the Planning Committees will prepare the final section reports to be incorporated into a single volume. It is hoped that these chapters will be in final draft within 2 months from the date of the Washington meeting.

Arrangements for news coverage at the Conference itself were designed to facilitate the task of the press and to conserve the time of the conferees. An information specialist recruited from the Agency staff was assigned to each section early in August, and by Conference time they had become familiar with the background material for their sections. At the end of each work session, the reporter prepared a story giving the session's high lights, which was turned over to the press office for duplication and distribution after approval by the section chairman.

### *Discussion Areas*

It is too early, at the time of this writing, to state the conclusions of the Conference sections. The several section committees are now at work preparing their final statements from the large volume of tentative materials produced by the delegates. The best that can be done here is to report, on the basis of these materials, the principal topics raised for consideration.

Older persons have shown a remarkable growth in terms of both their numbers and their proportion in the total population. The numerical increase is a result of the natural increase in the population, of immigration, and of greater life expectancy. The proportionate increase stems mainly from the declining birth rate of the preceding century; the slowing down of immigration and advances in medical science were also factors. There will be continued increases, numerically and proportionately, over the next two generations,

in rather large measure because of the phenomenal improvements in health care that have occurred since 1900. Aging becomes a problem, however, not only because of the number of older persons and the proportion of the population that they make up but also because of major changes in the way of living.

All the discussion sections appeared to start with certain fundamental premises, which, briefly stated, are: (1) older people exhibit all the fundamental needs or desires found among people at any age; (2) satisfaction of needs continues, as in all adult life, to be primarily a matter of individual effort; (3) older people can find satisfaction only in a favorable environment; and (4) the situation is already so critical as to require the immediate attention of all appropriate groups and interests in society.

The sections recognized, further, that aging affects not only the individual but also his family, the community in which he lives, and our total society and its economy. It is thus a matter not only of first importance to the individual but also of national concern. There was repeated urging that the international situation should not be allowed to distract attention from the problem of aging—first, because older people represent a huge resource through which needed production of goods and services can be obtained; and, second, because provision of satisfying life for all people is a principal objective of the national effort.

The primary economic implication drawn from the study of aging is that older people must have the financial support that will enable them to live at levels of decency and satisfaction. For many older people this means more income than they have at the present time. It was suggested that older persons would derive a higher proportion of income through tax-supported services than would other populations groups.

For direct income maintenance, the old-age and survivors insurance program, supplemented by old-age assistance, was expected to continue to provide the core of income for many of those not gainfully employed and for their dependents, but it was suggested that the breadth and amount

of coverage need further consideration. The role of private pension systems was discussed pro and con, but any statement of conclusions will have to await the final report.

The conferees took note of the fact that, as life expectancy increases, the period of retirement or old age, as currently defined, is extended, with resulting aggravation of the problems of individual occupation of time and of financial support.

Continuing gainful employment was spoken of as desirable for a larger proportion of older people than now find it. Employment satisfies the need for being useful, constitutes an important source of income, and provides an effective means of obtaining the high productivity needed now and in peace time.

The conferees noted that older workers are in competition with women workers and that their job opportunities are affected by the development of new machines and continually improving techniques. For many years the trend in employment of older workers has been downward, a most significant fact in view of the interests of both older people and the economy. The employment section discussed the need for dispelling the notion that older workers are unemployable. Studies were proposed to determine the types of jobs for which older people are best suited, how placement and counseling services may be used most effectively for them, and how private pension systems affect their ability to find jobs. There was a widespread feeling in several sections that arbitrary, fixed retirement ages are inimical to the interests of both the individual and society.

The section on research considered the status of research on the aging process and on the diseases characteristic of old age. This section discussed the need for more support for such research and for the establishment of an institute on gerontology. It was pointed out that research will have implications for improvement of health and prolongation of life and also for questions of employability, living arrangements, and continued participation in general. The section indicated the further position that health and satisfaction in the later

years are conditioned by mental attitudes and by the social environment, and it included these topics in its research recommendations.

The health maintenance and rehabilitation group identified as its principal objectives the promotion of health and the preservation of individual capacities. It was the opinion of the delegates that, with proper care and environment, many older people can work and care for themselves much longer than they often do. Health promotion services, home care with the aid of community services, and medical facilities received detailed consideration. It was observed, too, that preservation of mental health is a growing function of public health agencies.

The section on family life and living arrangements dealt with the quasi-tangibles of the role of the family in meeting the educational, protective, and affectional needs of the individual throughout life. Members of this section expressed the belief that the family constitutes the basic frame of reference for successful adjustment in aging. They pointed out, however, that family life has undergone many changes and that both families and aging persons have great need for counseling facilities that will help them find solutions to the problems of living in the later years and with older people.

This section also discussed the principle that families of older persons be allowed to maintain their own homes whenever possible and that appropriate community services be afforded to extend the period of independence. In this topic the section was joined by the health maintenance group, and both sections urged that attention be given to the development of housing suited to older people's needs.

The family section recognized that the interests of some older people and of their families are best served through provision of congregate living facilities into which older persons may move if family adjustment is not possible. The conferees gave a good deal of attention to specifications for such facilities, all of which look toward the fullest and freest possible life for the residents.

The sections on education, creative

activities and recreation, and religion proceeded from the point of view that older people wish to participate as fully as they can in life's activities, that adjustment in old age is merely a continuation of the lifelong adjustment process, and that these tenets must be understood by all groups in our society.

The education section discussed four functions for educational agencies: research into the aging process and into the means of satisfying older people's needs; training professional personnel for work with older people; conducting experimental and demonstration projects with older persons; and introducing subject matter on aging into undergraduate curricula. Carrying forward one phase of this topic, the section on professional personnel discussed the changes in attitudes toward aging that are needed before individuals can be attracted to the field, as well as the job security that will have to be provided for those who go into it. The fact that more information about aging is needed before training programs can be satisfactory was stressed throughout the discussion.

As in the family life and education sections, delegates concerned with recreation and creative activities emphasized that preparation for aging should begin early, well in advance of retirement. It was suggested that training in creative activities become a part of preretirement programs, but that participation should be an en-

tirely voluntary process. With reference to the types of activity in which older people may engage, the section, recognizing individual differences, argued that there should be no absolute prohibitions but that the kind and extent of activity should be determined by individual interests and characteristics.

The section on religion noted that spiritual needs persist throughout life and that they may even grow stronger with aging. Religious agencies, they said, have clear responsibilities for meeting the spiritual needs of older people wherever they may be found, and such agencies must join with other community groups to make certain that older people are able to satisfy their total needs. The strengthening of religious programs in institutions for older people and the improvement of retirement programs for the clergy and other religious workers were proposed.

The data available from all the sections make it clear that no single discipline regards the aging field as its own special prerogative or, indeed, that no one is primary to others. In fact, it was pointed out in each section that the situation calls for action on the part of all scientific disciplines and all types of community services working in concert.

The section on community organization concerned itself with methods of discovering the needs of the aged, with the necessity for local agencies to change their attitudes toward the

aging, and with techniques of bringing total community facilities to bear on the problems of aging. It was argued that too little is known at the present time to write a formula for community work with older people; hence, any program set up should be subject to change as needs are defined. While it was recognized that any local interest group or agency might take the initiative in getting a program under way, members of the sections felt that older people must be involved in the planning.

Delegates in this section pointed out, also, that some programs for the aging might well transcend the local level and require action on a State or national basis. In this and in other sections the need was expressed for information clearing facilities to expedite a continuing exchange of ideas and experiences.

### *The Third Phase*

Since the close of the Washington meeting there have been many letters expressing appreciation of the Conference and the impetus it may have given to the aging movement. Some of the delegates have indicated that they expect to see things move ahead in their home communities, while others state that they already have projects under way. To the extent that such interest is maintained and local activities are developed, the Conference on Aging will have been successful.