

Senate Special Committee on Aging Forum

Aging in America: Future Challenges, Promise and Potential

December 14, 2011

G-50 Dirksen Senate Office Building

A POLICY AGENDA FOR ADAPTING TO THE AGING OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

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Policymakers and pundits are increasingly preoccupied with the negative economic impacts of Population aging and longer lives on health and pension entitlements. There is a broad, and critically important, policy agenda beyond these entitlements. Neglected are other critically important issues, such as intergenerational relations, socioeconomic disparities and inequalities, racial tensions, family members' evolving roles, the impact of technology, and the critical importance of adaptation of core societal institutions—including education, work and retirement, housing, transportation, and even city design. More important, almost no acknowledgment of the substantial positive aspects and potential of an aging society are occurring. The MacArthur Foundation Network on an Aging Society has deliberated on these issues over the past several years and identified the following areas as especially important for the attention of policy makers.

High-Priority Domains for Policy Analysis

Societal cohesion and community.

'Cohesion' is an apt descriptor of the issues related to intergenerational relations (or tensions) because it focuses on age integration rather than age segregation and addresses intergenerational transfers, attitudes, and multigenerational strategies, and changes in family structure. Alternatively, this concept can be viewed as the debate regarding the traditional social compact between the generations. Substantial empirical evidence shows strong support by middle-aged and younger Americans for older Americans and highlights its benefits, but as many observers have noted, the future may hold substantial stress on social cohesion as entitlement costs increase.

Included in this domain are issues related to socioeconomic class, as well as those stemming from race or ethnicity and gender. U.S. society shows a widening gap between the haves and the have nots—a gap often mediated by differences in educational attainment—and concern is growing that this gap will tear at the cohesive fabric of the United States. Also included in this area is the concept of a caring community, which requires substantial intergenerational support.

Family (evolution, supports, changing roles).

While closely related to social cohesion, this issue deserves special attention. Families are on the front line in adapting to an aging society because they directly experience changes in their structure and function resulting from increased longevity. Moreover, these changes are amplified by the growing diversity that results from increased stratification (social class differences) and diversity (ethnic differences due to immigration). The transition to adulthood has become five or more years later than it used to be placing parents of young adults in the challenging circumstance of helping their parents and even grandparents while they are launching their own children into independence.

Families with resources can manage this balancing act relatively well, but a growing number of families will be overly burdened trying to contend with these competing demands without proven ways of managing the demands of more complex, intergenerational family systems. Issues such as intrafamilial supports, housing, financial transfers, caregiving, and new roles are also important and provide a plethora of critical policy decisions that will have an important impact on changing U.S. families going forward.

Productivity (work and retirement, functional status and disability, technology, roles of older individuals in society).

The future roles of older individuals in society will have a dramatic impact on the likelihood that the United States will be productive, cohesive, and equitable. This set of issues can be conveniently divided between the work and retirement matters and the civic engagement matters, although they are closely interrelated as the likelihood of a retiree volunteering is very much influenced by whether that person volunteered while still in the workforce.

Approaches to encouraging people to volunteer while they are still in the workforce—via modifications in time and place of work, provision of opportunities for engaging in what individuals consider meaningful activities, and development of paid volunteerism strategies—may have a substantial positive effect on postretirement engagement. Such engagement can be beneficial not only for the community in general but also for retirees

Substantial opportunity exists for policy changes, as well as technological and other worksite modifications and educational interventions, which will not only make retention of older workers more attractive to employers but also will take advantage of the many strengths older workers offer. In this regard, it is important for policymakers to be aware of the lump of labor fallacy and the growing body of empirical evidence indicating that older individuals need not be moved out of the workforce to make room for younger workers.

In addition, policy should be informed by the most recent findings regarding trends in disability in populations of elders and near-elders. Much of the most recent work suggests that the severe disability rates (as measured by activities of daily living and instrumental activities of daily living scales) are now stable in older individuals, having halted their decades-long decline and that functional mobility impairments may be rising, for unknown reasons, in 50- to 65-year-olds. It will be important for policymakers to understand the impact of these trends on the likely adequacy of the future workforce as well as on the probable future demand for personal care services.

Health and health care.

Although it might seem that the continuing vociferous national debate regarding health care reform—including insurance reform and a variety of approaches to controlling costs and correcting the misalignment of provider and patient incentives—may have exhausted this topic, there are some important and often neglected areas of focus that are directly related to the demographic transformation. These include the development of a more geriatrically sophisticated health care system in which most providers (physicians, nurses, dentists, social workers, psychologists, pharmacists, and others) are competent in diagnosing and treating medical diseases and syndromes that are common in old age, as well as a strong reliance on new interdisciplinary models of care that are more effective in managing the health care problems of frail older individuals with multiple impairments.

In addition, a reorientation to a life-course preventive health model is needed to strengthen education regarding healthy lifestyles and to implement interventions in at-risk groups so that future older individuals will enter the Medicare program healthier and higher functioning than their predecessors. Finally, this country needs sustainable policies that deal humanely with care at the end of life.

Human capital development (lifelong education, skills training).

Although this area is very closely related to the aforementioned issues of productivity and engagement, it is important to highlight the issue of lifelong education and skills training. Some of the same societal forces that led to longer lives have also shortened the half-life of knowledge in science and technology. How can human capital be expanded at different points along the life course? Can the misalignment between education and work that is aggravated by increasing longevity be improved through a closer relationship between educational institutions and the workplace?

This is a broad, deep and critically important agenda. But if all we do as a nation is “fix” the financial aspects of entitlements and we neglect these other agenda issues, we will fail in our effort to yield a productive and equitable aging U.S. society.