

THE CONFERENCE PROGRAM*

by John L. Thurston
Assistant Administrator for Program
Federal Security Agency

U.S. Federal security agency, National conference on aging

Members of the Conference:

Mr. Ewing has told you something about the ideas and questions which have motivated the calling of this Conference on Aging. I should like to take a few minutes to tell you about the background of the Conference and about the way it will proceed.

The discussions of the National Health Assembly of 1948 brought into relief many problems related to our aging population. As a result, Mr. Ewing asked me to establish an Agency committee to review the situation and to report to him on how adequately existing programs were meeting the needs of older people.

I have had the privilege of working very closely with that Committee and I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the members on the good job they did--while carrying on their usual full-time duties. The Committee drew on the varied experience of its members, who individually explored the literature, discussed problems with their colleagues, and talked with many non-governmental experts throughout the country. The Committee's work was one of the major factors leading to this Conference, so I am especially glad to welcome today the Chairman of this Working Committee--Miss Jane Hoey, Director of the Bureau of Public Assistance, who is sitting here beside me.

*Before the Conference on Aging, Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C., Sunday, August 13, 1950, 12:00 Noon EDT.

The tangible product of the labors of this Committee is the progress report to the Administrator which is known to all of you under the title, "Programs for an Aging Population."

During the months before this, we in the Federal Security Agency had felt the impact of the growing interest throughout the country in the problems of aging. Besides the interest of the many individuals interviewed by the Committee, there were a great many letters asking for information, expressing concern, or commenting on some aspect of the problem.

Accordingly I sent the Committee's Report to 350 leading men and women and asked for their comments and suggestions. Almost without exception, the response was immediate and enthusiastic. Many of the replies called for a Conference, national in scope and representative of the numerous interests.

At the same time, President Truman--knowing of the work of the Agency Committee--asked Mr. Ewing to explore the whole field in greater detail. In light of the President's request, and in response to the growing interest, we accepted the responsibility of organizing this Conference as the first national forum for the exchange of facts, experiences, and ideas in this field.

The first step was to decide what kind of Conference it would be. Our experience with the Report had made it clear that very many people and very many areas of interest are involved, and that there are several aspects of aging about which little is known. The situation seemed to call for an exploratory forum of and by the people who are doing the work--out in the States and communities and in the many organizations, private and public.

We came to the conclusion--concurred in by the Advisory Committee--that the substantive planning of the Conference should be done by men and women selected on the basis of their broad experience, their leadership, and their knowledge of specific areas, regardless of their affiliations with particular organizations. To facilitate the planning, ten broad areas of interest were defined. These represent the ten sections of the Conference. We then set up for each Section, a Secretariat composed of government workers, from the Federal Security Agency and other agencies and Departments. The Secretariat, with advice from many sources, sought out the leaders who are here today as your Planning Committees.

We all owe a great deal to the chairmen and members of the Planning Committees. They took over their assignments seriously, and here in the middle of the vacation season have met two or three times to work conscientiously on planning the details of each Section's activity. They also have developed the membership of their Sections; almost all of the delegates were nominated by one or more members of the Planning Committees. So, although many of you may feel that you are meeting your co-workers for the first time, you can be assured that you and your work is well known to the group.

The Content of the Conference

We have been deeply impressed by the unanimity of viewpoint among the Planning Committees and by the fact that their philosophy coincides with that which we in the Federal Security Agency had developed in our own work and discussions. Thus, although each Section will bring out a great deal of detailed fact and many--not always consistent--opinions, the content of the Conference as a whole will relate to a few basic assumptions on which most of us are agreed at the outset.

Our first assumption is that older people are assets to our society and to its economy. They are not "problem children" to be shunted into the backwaters of life. The Conference will explore ways of releasing the capacities of older people for productive work, for creative living, and for leadership. The full participation of older people in the life of the family, the community, and the Nation is especially needed not only in this time of emergency--but at all times.

Second, adjustment to aging is primarily a responsibility of the individual. I am sure no one here--and I am doubly sure I speak for those of us in the Agency--has any thought of setting up a paternalistic system to provide services to older people which they could provide for themselves. In fact, I am sure that some of you will be thinking of ways to release many of them from "over-protection" by families, agencies, and institutions. The thought of everyone seems to be focused on the goal of creating a social and physical environment in which older people can make a happy adjustment to aging; in which they can carry on for themselves.

Several of the Sections, therefore, will be concerned with identifying the needs of older people. What does society need to do to assure them of opportunities for recreation and continuing education in the art of living? What is needed to assure opportunities for suitable living arrangements; for physical and emotional health; for religious experience? Planning to meet these needs depends heavily on how thoroughly these areas are explored.

Our third assumption is that the creation of an environment in which older people may adjust to aging will call for changing attitudes on the part of many individuals and many social groups. It may also call for reorganization of community agencies and services. Several Sections will be concerned with these critical problems of group psychology and community organization.

Fourth, research on the problems of aging and the training of professional personnel to work in the field are essential. Not only must we continue expanding the body of knowledge and the supply of skilled personnel in the biological sciences, but also in the social sciences and in the technological fields. I am sure that each Section will throw light on these needs in its area. One Section will focus particularly on the needs for personnel.

None of the Sections will be able to give final, definitive consideration to all problems. As we all know, some of the broad problems of aging have been very little explored. A good deal of research will have to be done before they are fully understood. Also, the total problem of aging is so vast that not even ten sections can give it adequate consideration within a three-day period. I think it is very important, however, that each Section should bring up all of the problems that come to mind, even though all cannot be discussed in detail. Only through the fullest possible expression by every delegate will it be possible to stimulate thinking and action across the United States.

There will be overlapping of subject-matter among the sections. The problems are not mutually exclusive. One phase of life is contingent upon another. This overlapping is inevitable, and it is most desirable. The Planning Committees have tried to avoid narrow specialization by assigning some delegates with special competence in a certain field to a Section dealing primarily with another area. Thus, there are physicians and labor representatives in the Sections on Education and Living Arrangements; clergymen in the Section on Health Maintenance; teachers in the Section on Religious Services; and so on. Problems which can receive only passing attention in some sections will receive detailed consideration in another.

The Forum Idea

This is a discussion Conference. Although the pattern will vary from Section to Section, the basic procedure in all will be essentially that of a work meeting. We expect that the sections will arrive at general agreements on most points with reference to the nature of the problems and the lines of action that could and should be taken. We anticipate little, if any, formal voting.

We want this to be as much like a town-meeting as the diversity of interests and personalities in the Sections will permit. The Federal Security Agency is merely providing the facilities and staff. The Secretariats are your staff, working at the direction of your Planning Committees. Final determination of the subject-matter to be considered in the Conference rests with you. To be sure, the Planning Committees have sent materials to you, but these are only springboards for the development of your own agenda. It is for you to decide priorities.

Neither your Committees nor the Federal Security Agency has tried to define "old age". We all realize that any chronological cut-off--say, 95 or 105 years--would be an arbitrary and perhaps fallacious basis on which to discuss the problems of aging. Perhaps the definition of "old age" will vary with the problem under consideration. I would remind you, however, that our Conference is on Aging--a rather lengthy process. It is this long process, incidentally, which I believe gives me full right to participate here.

There is another sound reason for those of us who are relatively young in years to participate. That is this fact--that our solutions of many of the problems of "old age" depend to marked degree upon how we approach and adjust to the aging process. That adjustment, I believe, should start early.

In keeping with the public forum idea, we have restricted the number of Federal employees participating in the Conference sections. This is not to say that Federal employees are not citizens in good standing. Notwithstanding our status, however, we have limited the ratio of Federal employees to the total body of delegates to about 1 in 20. These men and women have been selected as individuals representing fields in which they are experts. They do not represent the agencies or departments in which they are employed.

The Conference Report

The plan is to have each Section come up with a report at the conclusion of the Conference. In general, we hope that these reports will define the problems identified by the delegates, suggest the lines of action agreed upon, and where appropriate, make recommendations for action by both voluntary and official agencies. Of course, the reports will require some revision and editing before publication, but we want the several working groups to participate in this and to take responsibility for the final report.

We plan to publish a report of the Conference that will be useful throughout the country to the numerous and varied groups who are interested in the problems of aging. We don't know yet what type of report will best serve that purpose and we want your help in deciding. This we know--whatever form the publication taken, it will not be a report of a government Agency. It will be your report: the report of the Conference on Aging.

We know that there will be a good deal of variation in the conclusions reached by the Sections: Some problem-areas, such as chronic disease, gerontology, and financial security, have been studied for a number of years. A good deal is known and the methods of further study are fairly well-established. Other problems of aging--such as living arrangements and family relations--are just coming into public consciousness. In such little developed areas, you may not be able to accomplish more than a preliminary exploration.

Whatever you do, the deliberations and findings of this Conference will mark an advance over our present knowledge of these vast and complex problems related to an aging population. So little has been done that we can surely predict that your work in the next two days will bring new hope to millions of older people now, and a brighter prospect of the oncoming generations who will be "aging" as the years go by.

I want to remind you that Section meetings and general sessions of the Conference are open to the press. Special facilities have been provided for members of the press to get the information they need from the subsections without disturbing the discussions of your working groups. In a very few minutes, the University of Chicago Roundtable, devoted this week to this Conference, will be broadcast from the next room. All of you are invited to attend. At two o'clock, the Sections will have their first meetings. The locations of these meetings are shown in your programs .

The Conference is now yours.