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IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES
FOR OLDER WORKERS

an address by
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I propose today to give you a report on the progress that has been made in improving employment opportunities for older men and women. It is most encouraging progress. It is progress which, in the employment field, reflects the joint activities of the United States Department of Labor and the State employment security agencies affiliated with it, through the offices of the Employment Service. Many of the individuals responsible for the leadership of these programs in the Midwest are in this audience today, and will participate in the discussion groups this afternoon.

In discussing jobs for older workers, we begin with a cardinal principle of sound and equitable employment policy. That principle is to hire on the basis of individual ability to do the job, regardless of age, or sex, or race. Our concern at this conference is with age as a factor in employment. It is our objective, as the President has said:

"To help make it possible for older persons who desire and are able to work to continue their productive lives through suitable gainful employment."

The Federal-State Conference on Aging held last year in Washington laid down some of the ground rules for reaching this objective, and suggested a number of action programs to be undertaken by the Federal and State Governments and by employers, unions, and individuals.

The first observation of this conference was that "Public policy should continue to be directed toward a dynamic, expanded economy * * * ", so that there would be "full employment opportunity at useful work for all qualified and desirous to work." With today's high level of economic activity and prosperity, a vast majority of men between 25 and 65 years of age are employed. Even in the group from 65 to 70 years of age, 68 percent were working at some time during the year 1955. For women, of course, a much smaller proportion normally work. However, it may surprise you to learn that at some time during 1955 almost one out of every two women between 45 and 65 years of age were at work. They may not all be employed as fully as they would wish, or as effectively, but the record of employment, much of it year-round, is impressive.

Moreover, in the past five years, between 1951 and 1956, there has been a substantial increase in the rate of employment of people over 45 years of age; who now make up a larger proportion of the working population than they did five years ago. In part this means that more people are staying longer on the job, with more widespread seniority agreements, and a policy on the part of many employers of shifting employees to more suitable jobs as they grow older.

These facts bear out the conclusion of the conference last year that in an economic climate such as this, when demand is at a very high level, the opportunity for employment of individuals, regardless of age, is improved.

Looking ahead, we are all aware that an increasing proportion of the population in the next 10 years will be over 45. This will at once be evident if you will look at the Department of Labor's new booklet, "Our Manpower Future - 1955-65", copies of which are being made available to you here. It shows that of the estimated 10 million additional workers needed to man our expanding economy by 1965, half will be people over 45 years of age. The other half will be young people 14 to 24. There will actually be fewer young men 25 to 34 years of age available for work in 1965 than there were in 1955. This is because of the low birth rate of the 1930's. Although the age distribution varies by States and by localities, this is the substance of the national picture. Thus, at the very time when the economy is expanding and demand is rising, there are too few young workers to meet that demand. Accordingly, there is a necessity, and will be for some years, to make greater and more effective use of men and women over 45. Often necessity is the best educator.

The real problem of employment as it relates to age lies in the difficulty an older person has in finding a job once he becomes unemployed, or leaves his job for any reason, or seeks to come back into the labor market after an extended absence. It is this group of workers which too often encounters severe hardships. Each of us knows individual cases of

the long, heartbreaking search for a job, of discouragement, of the loss of income and position, of privation suffered by competent middle-aged and older men and women in all walks of life--from unskilled to professional workers--who, through no fault of their own, have found themselves unable to find new work. This is the business of the Department of Labor, and it is here that we have concentrated our research and educational efforts and our action programs.

The findings of the extensive studies which were undertaken by the Department of Labor, in collaboration with State employment security agencies two years ago, have been made available since our last conference, and are summarized in Volume IV of the Studies of the Aged and Aging made by a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. Some of these findings are summarized in a special chart book entitled "Employment and Age", which we have prepared especially for this conference. They underline the observation that the rate of unemployment is greater for persons above 45 years of age; that, once they are out of a job, they are unemployed for longer periods of time; and they are also subject to more frequent spells of unemployment. Thus, the severity of unemployment increases with age. This is our most pressing problem.

To determine the nature of these barriers to employment and to find out how to deal most effectively with them, the Department of Labor's Bureau of Employment Security and the affiliated State employment security agencies studied employment opportunities and hiring practices, by age, in seven cities--including Minneapolis-St. Paul and Detroit, in the Midwest.

They found widespread age specifications on job orders of all kinds, from many industries. Many of these specified ages were over 45, but the majority were under 45, and there was a significant percentage under 35. (Gentlemen still insist on having secretaries under 25.) Often these specifications were not associated with any clear-cut physical requirements of the job--they were simply customary or traditional. It is against this traditional set of age barriers, among other factors, that our educational campaign needs to be directed. To this end we can all make use of the facts on work performance, on stability on the job, and on the low rates of absenteeism of older workers found in the companion studies by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics. They indicate, in fact, that individual differences in production within age groups are greater than those between age groups, until a quite advanced age is reached.

It is important to remember that there are two parties involved in employment: the worker and the employer. Our studies show that older job-seekers themselves sometimes create their own barriers, partly through a defeatist attitude, through fear of change, through unrealistic demands, and, importantly, through lack of real knowledge on how to go about looking for a job. This is why special facilities for sympathetic counseling and for practical training or retraining need to be provided for them by the community. Given these facilities, there is ample evidence that older workers are flexible; that they do consider new kinds of work better suited to their capabilities; that they are willing and able to learn a new job.

Our next step was to do something concrete to find jobs for more older workers, and to fit more individuals to jobs. You will recall that the conference last year recommended specifically that the Department of Labor provide additional funds to State employment security agencies for this purpose.

I am happy to report to you that this has been done. In July, 1956, additional funds were made available for the following program:

First, to hire older worker specialists for each State headquarters office. Every State represented here today has appointed its specialist.

Second, to provide for older worker specialists in local employment offices. Currently there are 115 full-time specialists at work in our larger cities. We anticipate a further increase of 30 or 40 appointments in the current fiscal year. These specialists are now receiving training in improved techniques for job finding, counseling, and job placement for older workers. Even in the smaller cities, where no full-time specialists are being added, at least one staff member has been designated to serve older workers, using these same techniques. A number of people here today are making this program effective, and are providing leadership for it in the Midwest, both in the development of techniques and in the actual administration of the program. These services, added to the extensive regular services of the Nationwide network of public employment offices, are beginning to give a lift to the program.

We must remember that this is a long, slow, continuing job. It cannot be done over night. It is costly, and it involves many individuals and many agencies.

Looking ahead, there are two problems which need our attention: We need, first, to strengthen the direct services for individuals relating to employment; second, we need to undertake a broad program of education to get across to the public the facts about employment and age, and to eradicate some of the untenable notions about unemployability that linger from an earlier era.

First, what can be done to improve employment services? It is clear from our experience that when intensive counseling, placement, and job development services are given on an individualized basis, many more middle-aged and older workers find suitable employment than when only routine services are provided. This takes considerably more staff time and effort than could ordinarily be provided. In the work groups which follow this session, you may wish to consider how more staff time can be made available for this purpose. Some States have supplemented the special Federal funds for the older worker program by State-appropriated funds; others are considering the possible use of employment security funds returned to the States under the Reed Act.

Second, we need to mount a concentrated educational and promotional campaign. At the Federal level, we in the Department of Labor are providing the facts on age distribution of the population and the work force, and on employment by age. They need to be placed before people in your communities, together with a picture of the State and local situation. The public needs to forget the old stereotype of a bent, physically declining person with ingrown, unchangeable habits,

and to replace it by the new look in aging--which is that of a mature, competent person who can adapt to new situations. We need a positive approach--of presenting success stories.

Now, how do we do it? Eight out of 12 of the States represented here have State Commissions on the Aging. Perhaps each of these groups can serve as a focal point in its State for carrying out an aggressive community campaign of education and publicity. Even where such commissions do not yet exist, it should be possible to form an interagency group to perform this function, bringing in interested civic-minded persons to help. For our part, we will try to provide you with materials for these promotional activities. Some new publications are now in preparation by the Department of Labor.

There is a wider community problem as well. Many of the unemployed are handicapped in finding jobs by the lack of certain basic skills, and they need refresher courses or retraining. This is a job for educational agencies, and particularly vocational education; and for employers who train on the job. Other community agencies--especially the rehabilitation and welfare agencies--all need to be drawn into this program. It will profit all of us in this field, for employment at useful work is the solution to many of the problems of the aging.

Above all, we need to convince the public that each prospective employee should be considered on the basis of his or her individual qualifications for the real requirements of the job; that, in reality, it is ability that counts; and that there is no fixed age at which a person becomes too old to work.