

Old age (1952)

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AGING ...

a Community Problem:

How older people can be helped to live
happier, healthier and more active lives.

How their capacities can be used to
strengthen the community and the nation.

U.S.
Federal security agency.
Committee on aging and geriatrics.

INSTITUTE OF
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

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In the yellowed tomes of the Talmud is narrated the story of a traveler pausing to watch an old man plowing up the ground near the road.

"What are you doing, Grandpa?" asked the passer-by.

"I am planting a carob tree."

"At your age? It will take 70 years before it yields fruit. Do you expect to live to see that day?"

The old man laughed. "My grandfather," he said, "planted yonder tree on which I nourished. I am planting this tree for my grandchildren."

I like this story because it illustrates two ideas that the ancient sages apparently understood so well and which we are only beginning to grasp now:

- That the old want to be useful.
- That the old can be useful.

In this age of tension, when every hand must be enlisted to replenish our resources and regenerate our strength, let us take advantage of the desire of the aged to be useful. And let us provide them with the opportunities to be useful.


Federal Security Administrator

The Problem We Face

If your community is similar to most, 1 out of 12 of your townspeople is likely to be an "older person." Fifty or so years ago only perhaps 1 out of 25 could have been so described. Since 1900, the total population of the United States has doubled, but the number of men and women 65 years of age and over has almost quadrupled, and is still growing rapidly.

One reason for this great proportionate increase is the tremendous gains in medical science over the past half century. Fewer people die in infancy or childhood or during early maturity. Higher living standards, better sanitation and public health methods have also played a significant role. As a result, more men and women live to reach their sixties and seventies than ever before.

During the last dozen years alone, for instance, there has been a 50 percent increase in the number of men and women 75 years of age and over. The median age of our adult population is now around 42. In the not too distant future, it is possible that nearly half of these adults will be over 50.

Most of Us work for Wages

There is another important factor to reckon with. At the turn of the century more than half the population of the United States lived on farms. Today this is true of only around one-fifth. The tremendous growth of industry has turned us into a Nation of wage-earners with the result that we now have an essentially urban civilization, with 80 per cent of the population living in towns or cities.

This single fact has made an immense difference to our older people. The vast majority of men and women can no longer count on living out their lives in the comparatively safe haven of the family farm or the small town; they have, to a very large extent, become city dwellers dependent on a more or less impersonal industrial machine.

Generally speaking, the change has placed the older worker in an extremely precarious position. If he loses his job, he may find great difficulty in securing another. By the time he reaches his middle sixties he is all too likely slated for "retirement." Whereas, in 1900, 2 out of 3 of all men 65 years of age or over were gainfully employed, today the proportion is less than 1 out of 2. And of those who, because of age or disability, can no longer earn a living, by far the greatest number have only a pitifully small amount of personal savings to see them through their later years.

Social Security

For most workers, the outlook is by no means as grim as it formerly was. Today, social security insurance offers at least some degree of financial protection against the hazards of old age. Private pension plans in many industries give added protection to some. And Federal-State old-age assistance -- more popularly termed "relief" -- helps carry the burden for those who have no other resources. While none of these programs is wholly adequate to take care of the full needs of elderly persons, they represent a significant advance over conditions as they existed only half a generation ago.

Health Needs

But the question of comparative financial security is not the only factor which bulks large in this great problem. Health is a matter of primary concern, and research into the causes of aging assumes increasing importance. This is especially true of those chronic diseases which bear so heavily on older people.

By the same token, the adequacy of health services is of critical importance. Older people, as a whole, tend not only to need more medical care; they often need a highly specialized sort of medical care. The availability of competently managed nursing homes, home nursing and housekeeping services, and hospital accommodations for

long-term illness must be explored more thoroughly, as well as the whole problem of ordinary medical care for those unable to afford it.

Living Arrangements

Closely related to all this is the question of where these older people are to live -- what housing accommodations can be provided. Increasingly in our industrial civilization, the family unit (as on the old farm) has less and less meaning. The modern tendency towards small apartments and small houses makes it difficult for the grown children, raising their own families, to find room for the "old folks." Sons and daughters are likely to move to other communities, away from their parents. Left by themselves, these elderly people cannot maintain their former homes on a sharply diminished income. Only too often their sole recourse is a furnished room or admittance into an institution.

Even when these elderly people do go to live with their children, there still remains often a great diversity, and sometimes conflict, of interests. Emotional and psychological adjustments are not always easy to make, and when unsuccessful may lead to unhappiness and frustration.

Creative Interests

The question of recreational facilities and opportunities for social contacts through community centers also comes to the fore.

But even more important is the need for some sort of creative activity to fill the gap left by retirement or other withdrawal from the familiar routine of living. Sometimes this can be channeled through church interests or volunteer work with community organizations. Sometimes it can take the form of developing some latent talent in the arts and crafts, in taking part in community affairs or engaging in some pursuit that does not necessarily bring in a cash return.

Employment

But perhaps the most crying need for these older persons is the opportunity to work and earn their own living so long as they are physically and mentally capable of holding down a job. Forced retirement at a certain age (even with a small pension in addition to his old-age and survivors insurance benefit) often imposes severe hardships on the individual. Not only is his income seriously reduced but, psychologically, in a great many cases, he must deal with the desolate realization that he is "all through." For the vast majority, the chance to work -- to have useful and gainful employment so long as health and strength permit -- is the key to a happy and unfrustrated old age. It is the factor around which most other factors in this problem of the aging tend to revolve.

For the "Aging" as well as the "Aged"

Nor are all these needs confined to those who have already reached their later years.

Aging is a process that sets in usually during our late 40's or early 50's -- when the children are grown and have left the fold, and when the pressures, financial and otherwise, involved in keeping the family going tend to ease off. With more leisure at their command these men and women can begin to plan ahead for their later years -- start doing some of "the things they've always wanted to do" -- and, in general, smooth the transition into old age by creating for themselves a new approach to the whole business of living.

This is an aspect of the problem the importance of which is all too little understood. For far from being a process of deterioration or regression, aging can, provided proper care of one's health is taken, be literally a period of further development. It has been demonstrated that the mental and productive capacities of the individual remain virtually intact over an astonishingly long number of years. By determinedly "staying young and active," the period of old age, as we ordinarily think of the term, can be postponed.

Manpower and the Older Worker

All this presents not only a great human problem, in terms of individual men and women who have reached, or are reaching, the later years of their life; it also has major social and economic implications. For an indefinite number of years, under our defense program, it is probable that we shall have to maintain a high level of pro-

duction to provide for our military as well as our normal civilian needs. This is essential to our security and well-being as a Nation. Under the circumstances, the older worker must today be counted among the important manpower resources of the Nation; the skills and work habits of these older persons are assets we cannot afford to thrust aside.

Furthermore, our population is steadily increasing, and that means increased consumption -- the more so as we strive progressively to raise our standards of living. But with more children and young people at one end of the age-scale, and more older people at the other -- as present population trends indicate -- we cannot look to our present age-limited labor force to supply the necessary productive capacity.

In order to provide needed manpower, much of our thinking will have to undergo drastic revision. The all too generally accepted idea, in industrial and commercial circles, that even a faithful employee is "too old" after the age of 65 for further usefulness will have to go. The barriers against hiring men and women for new jobs who are still in their 40's and 50's also will have to go. The more who remain idle against their will, the greater the burden resting on the remainder of the labor force to support them. Under present circumstances, an important margin of the Nation's productive effort goes to provide consumer goods for the use of the involuntarily idle. Instead,

we should be utilizing the capacities of everyone, willing and able to work, in order to produce more goods and to increase the standard of living for the whole Nation. Only in this way can maximum production be achieved.

The Conference on Aging

All these and other aspects of the total problem were thoroughly explored at the Nation-wide Conference on Aging held in Washington in August 1950. This conference, the first of its kind ever held, was sponsored by the Federal Security Agency, and attended by over 800 delegates from every part of the country. Included among the participants were doctors, educators, economists, clergymen, representatives of labor unions and some of our largest industries, together with men and women engaged in various phases of medical and social research. Many of them had achieved national and even international reputations in their fields. Nearly all were engaged in professional and business activities which brought them in close touch with this problem of aging and were able thus to contribute from their own immediate experience.

The report of this Conference, published under the title "Man and His Years" (see inside back cover), summarizes the thinking of these delegates on the problem and points out the path towards its effective solution. It emphasizes its concern not merely with the aged but with the whole process of

aging -- from early maturity to the last years of a man's life. In addition to the matters discussed above, it underscores the importance of adult education, as a means of helping men and women to meet more confidently the challenge of old age -- in better health and with greater mental and educational resources within themselves. It also emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between age that is determined by the calendar (chronological age) and age that is determined by physical and mental capabilities.

This last is of fundamental importance. For there are millions of men and women who are still young at 60, 65, or 70, with no opportunity to live useful or active lives. And it is to help them remain young and useful and active that much of the effort in this field must be focused.

What the Community Can Do

One thing that nearly all the Conference delegates agreed upon was that the best way to approach a solution for this tremendous problem is locally. Each community has not only the responsibility for the undertaking; it offers the best possible means of working out the problem in practical terms, and to aid these older people in solving their own individual problems.

An active Citizens' Committee on Aging in each community is one of the first essentials for getting the job done. Such a committee can rally the civic-minded forces of the community: local government officials,

public health services and social welfare workers, civic organizations, women's clubs, chambers of commerce, business and farm groups, labor unions, and churches. It can study the problem in terms of older people as friends and neighbors whom the community knows as human beings, provide recreational and social club facilities for them, bring them in closer contact with their churches, and devise methods for encouraging them to take a more active part in community affairs.

Beyond that, it can attack the problem of health through expansion of local public health services and more adequate nursing homes and hospital accommodations. It can establish job-counseling services that will aid workers to overcome the barriers of job discrimination on account of age. It can establish community centers for recreation, social contacts, and as a means of developing creative activities. And in cooperation with the schools it can help establish courses in adult education that would bear directly on helping older people (from 40 up) to make intelligent and sensible adjustments--physical, mental, psychological and economic--to the realities of approaching old age.

Of prime importance is the need to emphasize the great contribution that older people can make to the community welfare. For here is a wealth of experience, skill and judgment that can be, and should be, utilized

for the public good. The idea that old people are essentially people to be "taken care of" must give way to the concept that they constitute a major asset to the community at large, still capable of a vast amount of creative and useful effort.

The Committee on Aging and Geriatrics in the FSA

In establishing such Citizens' Committees on Aging, the local community can look for help and guidance to the Committee on Aging and Geriatrics, established by the Federal Security Agency shortly after the close of the National Conference on Aging. Its purpose is to provide a clearinghouse for information on all matters relating to the field, to encourage research, and to maintain contact with public and voluntary organizations and other groups and individuals concerned with the problem.

Members of the Committee include representatives of the Public Health Service, the Social Security Administration (Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Public Assistance), the Office of Education, and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation--all constituent units of FSA whose work brings them into close contact with various aspects of the problem. The Committee also maintains liaison with the Departments of Labor, Commerce, and Agriculture, and the Housing and Home Finance Agency.

What Can You Do to Help?

In a very real sense this problem of aging presents one of the greatest challenges to our time. Upon our efforts as citizens to deal forthrightly and intelligently with it depends the health and well-being of increasing millions of older men and women as well as the total productive capacity of the Nation itself.

The Federal Government has long since taken various major steps that bear directly on the problem through legislative action establishing old-age and survivors insurance and the Federal-State program of old-age assistance. Federal funds have also been made available to the National Institutes of Health of the U. S. Public Health Service for research into various chronic diseases (closely linked to the aging process) and also the aging process itself. And there is an active Federal-State program of vocational rehabilitation for disabled workers of all ages.

But the real effort, if it is to be successful, cannot and must not rest on the shoulders of the Federal Government. It must be developed by a combination of State and local governments, private organizations, employers, labor unions, and individuals who will work to create a practical down-to-earth program - a program that will help to make it possible for adult members of the community to approach old age with less fear, and with increasing confidence that the later years can be lived happily and constructively.

What can you do to help? What will you do to help?

Reading Material that will prove useful

Man and His Years

An account of the first national Conference on Aging, sponsored by the Federal Security Agency in August 1950. Published by Health Publications Institute, Inc., Raleigh, N. C.-- \$3.25; paper binding \$1.75.

Social Contribution of the Aging

Comprising the entire January 1952 issue of The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, under the editorship of Clark Tibbitts, Chairman, Committee on Aging and Geriatrics, FSA.

Report of the Second International Gerontological Congress.

Held at St. Louis, Mo., September 1951. Published in the Spring 1952 issue of the Journal of Gerontology.

Fact Book

A summary of basic statistical data on the aging problem, published by the Committee on Aging and Geriatrics, FSA, (Revised edition 1952.)

Looking Forward to the Later Years

Public Health Service Publication No. 116, 5 cents.*

Education for a Long and Useful Life

Bulletin 1950, No. 6, issued by the Office of Education, FSA, 20 cents.*

Chronic Illness

Digests of Selected References, Public Health Service Publication No. 10 -- 50 cents.*

Food Guide for Older Folks

Home and Garden Bulletin No. 17, Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture -- 5 cents.*

University of Michigan Publications

Growing in the Older Years, edited by Wilma Donahue and Clark Tibbitts, 1951.

Planning the Older Years, edited by Wilma Donahue and Clark Tibbitts, 1950.

Living Through the Older Years, edited by Clark Tibbitts, 1949.

Published by the University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Mich., \$2.50 each.

Community Services for Older People

Prepared by the Community Project for the Aged of the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago. Published by Wilcox and Follett Company, Chicago, \$3.00.

You and Your Aging Parents

by Edith M. Stern with Mabel Ross, M.D. Published by A. A. Wyn, Inc., New York, \$2.75.

Selected References on Aging

An Annotated Bibliography. May 1952. Compiled by the Library of the Federal Security Agency, Washington.

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