

THE 1981 WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON AGING

Kathryn Corbett, Faculty Emeritus
Charlotte Tropp, Director, R.S.V.P.

From November 29 to December 3, 1981 four persons from Humboldt and Del Norte Counties attended the White House Conference on Aging held in Washington D.C. Kathryn Corbett, an Emerita Professor, and Charlotte Tropp, Director of the campus-sponsored Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), were voting delegates. William Hale from Fortuna and William Landis of McKinleyville were observers, attending sessions with non-voting status. Mr. Landis and Ms. Corbett were elected by a process starting with an Area Workshop held in November, 1980 and culminating at the California State House Conference on Aging held in April, 1981. Charlotte Tropp and William Hale were appointed by Governor Brown. All four were also delegates to the California State House Conference; by the time they got to the White House Conference on Aging (WHCoA) they were well-aged in aging.

It is unusual for the two delegates from the far Northern Coastal Counties to be affiliated with Humboldt State University. A single report for the *Forum* will not suffice; thus, this article is cooperative. Kathryn Corbett will summarize her personal impressions of the event and Charlotte Tropp will hypothesize on the accomplishments.

Kathryn Corbett:

The event was huge—2300 attended as delegates, 1500 as observers. In addition, uncounted hordes of media professionals, exhibitors, allied groups such as Gray Panthers (an activist group), assorted persons to take care of other persons in wheelchairs, and the curious also attended. There were young and old, handicapped and fit, militant and conservative, ethnic groups of all classifica-

tion, bearded and cropped, high *couteur* fashion and Butterick Pattern specials. It was a veritable human zoo, quite literally taken from the peoples of contemporary America. It was also the first conference I ever attended where most of us wore our glasses and where there was always somebody trying to help me on and off the escalators. I was prickly about this service at first but finally gave up, thinking to myself that the young man with the beautiful Southern accent really needed to earn his merit badge. My shock upon arriving at Dulles Airport, where we were met by Boy Scouts who were there to help the aging delegates with their luggage, should have prepared me for how I was classified.

I was starry-eyed at the idea of being a delegate to the White House Conference. As a professional in social work I knew how historically important these citizens' assemblies had been. Out of the 1961 Conference came Medicare and the Older Americans Act of 1965, upon which most of the current structure for services to the aging rests. The 1971 Conference led to the establishment of nutrition programs, the Federal/State aging network now operating, the important Senior Centers and the National Institute on Aging. The record of accomplishment from past conference recommendations was exhilarating. I arrived in Washington D.C. knowledgeable about aging issues, a veteran of two area conferences and the State House Conference, literally "raring to go" and wanting to forge a program for aging in the 80s.

I arrived to find that my working conference had turned into a political maelstrom. The Conference had been politicized, more accurately it had been "Reaganized" by a last minute appointment of 400 delegates named by Secretary Schweiker, and by

the appointment of a Conference Chairwoman six weeks before; the former Conference planners had been summarily dismissed. Rules were rigidly set before delegates arrived, and three committees, Economic Implications, Economic Well-Being (these two dealt with Social Security) and Health Care were stacked with newly appointed delegates.

The 400 last minute appointees were never identified, but I located several on my own. One woman with whom I chanced to sit had been appointed two weeks before. She had never participated in activity concerned with aging, and said her sole experience in the human service field was working with a few volunteers several years ago. She had not attended any of the area workshops, and had not been to the California State House Conference. As a last resort I inquired if she had attended the California Caucus the night before. She replied, "No, I was at a political meeting. Secretary Schweiker appointed me." She was, however, a very pleasant person with whom to chat. She had full voting rights as a delegate.

What to do about it? Stifling rules, stacked committees, muted observers, suspicion rife. The California delegation, almost 300 of us, met and decided to express our anger by stating our protest, but announcing that we would stay and fight. I saw no purpose in walking out. The outrage was not big enough for that course of action, and a walkout would only hand the field to the enemy, who (as I had correctly judged by that time) were there with votes, but not with knowledge and know how. I walked into 14 hours of grueling committee work armed with a belief in the importance of the conference and with the confidence that I could use my years of faculty governance experience in dealing with the parliamentary rules which were imposed upon me. (Just pretend it's a ruling from the Chancellor's office and go at it).

Most of the delegates were highly-skilled, articulate persons who cumulatively were the most knowledgeable persons in the field of aging I had ever had the privilege of working with. The arbitrary, dictatorial Chairwoman was a common foe. We churned out our recommendations. Due to the restrictions they were not winnowed into the finely worded report we could have done. We were not allowed to participate in making OUR report. We were refused the opportunity to observe the making of our report, and for the final Conference report could only vote once—for all the Committee reports or for none. We fought vainly for the right to vote on Committee reports individually, but

were denied even that. The fate of the final report is still unknown to us.

What we did turn out is surprisingly good. Due to our persistent protest the United States Senate is making another poll and we hope something will come from that. Thanks to the political chicanery and our loud screams, which delighted the national media, we got more publicity than any former White House Conference. We also learned what a hard battle we have on our hands to get human services within the present political climate.

As a citizen I was deeply affronted by the insult to what I considered fundamental American voting rights: free debate, open process, impartial reports, fair parliamentary procedure. The blatant attempt to skew the conference, to shelve conference reports, to deny us voting rights on committee reports all led me to strong opposition to the current political climate. To have it happen at the White House Conference made me angry, not at the issues but at the subversion of democratic processes.

What do we think we accomplished?

Charlotte Tropp:

The bottom line of the White House Conference on Aging in terms of a judgment of its success or failure, is the quality of the recommendations that came out of it, the national policy on aging that is formulated as a result, and the actual programs and benefits evolving in the Eighties to enhance and enrich the lives of this nation's older citizens. The WHCoA outcomes were fruitful, considering the confusion and hostility generated by the poor planning and political maneuvering. Delegates and observers working in the fourteen committees produced over 668 recommendations as well as numerous minority statements.

Of central concern to all the committees was the role of the federal government in meeting needs of the aging population. The battle between the federalists and the antifederalists was waged at every level of the Conference, but in the main, delegates recommended retaining at least the current level of federal commitment. Involvement of the private sector was also emphasized.

The delegates were also split on their expectations for the outcome of the WHCoA. There were those of us who appeared foolish because we felt this once in a decade opportunity should be well used to prescribe an agenda for the Eighties and beyond, from which a comprehensive and coordinated national policy on the aging, with

appropriate legislation, could evolve. Other delegates were frightened, with good reason, about the effect of inflation and the economy on older Americans trying to live on fixed incomes, and about the present Administration's budget cutting penchant at the expense of benefits for the poor and the aged. Their agenda was to fight to maintain the status quo.

The body of recommendations shows that both factions were served. For example, on the most controversial question of the WHCoA, changes in Social Security benefits, delegates were divided between those who believe that current and future beneficiaries should suffer no loss of benefits and those who view the systems' fiscal integrity as being impossible to uphold without change. After a bitter fight, the following resolution was offered:

BE IT RESOLVED: That the Conference strongly opposes any reduction in benefits being paid current Social Security recipients, and strongly recommends that Congress and the Administration make every effort possible and fiscally reasonable effort, with regard to the security of Social Security system, to maintain no less than the real protection that is currently provided to all participants.

But there were also a significant number of other recommendations in both of the economic committees which dealt with an guaranteed minimum annual income for older persons financed through the general revenue of the U.S. as a gradual replacement for Social Security and SSI (Supplemental Security Income).

Besides Social Security, highlights of other important areas for which recommendations were made should be noted. In the area of employment, resolutions were made for reduction or elimination of all age restrictions in the marketplace, an end to mandatory retirement, elimination of the Social Security earnings limitation at age 65, and incentives to the private sector for hiring and retaining older workers. Other recommendations called for expansion of public employment programs like Senior Community Employment, Green Thumb, Foster Grandparents, Senior Companions, promotion of part-time work, flex-time and job sharing, and training programs.

Health-related issues were discussed in three committees (Health Care and Services, Options for

Long-Term Care and Promotion of Wellness). The most controversial of these was the Health Care and Services committee, which overwhelmingly blocked or tabled every resolution calling for a national health or insurance plan. This committee finally produced a resolution "to continue the search for a national health plan." Other significant health resolutions dealt with the establishment of financial aids and/or tax incentives for families who care for older persons in their homes, expansion of mental health services, Medicare and Medicaid coverage for home care, for intermediate care and hospice programs, emphasis on a person-focused case management system, emphasis on a continuity of care system in the home, the community and in institutions, expansion of Medicare coverage to include perscription drugs, dental care, ambulatory services, adult day care and preventive and maintenance care and expansion of ombudsman services.

The committee on education and training recommended that mandatory gerontological training be legislated for persons who work in the health fields as well as a gerontology certification program for para-professionals who work in the aging programs, i.e., nutrition site managers, senior center directors and nursing home aides be established. Delegates from this committee also presented resolutions for expanded educational opportunities for older persons, education of the general public about aging, and intergenerational programs to promote an age-integrated society.

There was a special committee set up to deal with the growing needs of the largest and poorest segment of the older population, older women. This group recommended that increases in the federal budget for social service programs should at least equal the increases in the federal budget for defense. It also recommended implementation of non-taxable pension benefits for widows, increasing of SSI benefits to 110 percent of the poverty line, eliminating in-kind and living with others penalties, providing portability and vesting to protect women's rights to spouse's pensions and benefits, and establishing displaced homemaker centers to provide counseling and training for women who need or want to re-enter the job market.

As an aging practitioner (pun intended) in Humboldt County four months after the event, I view the White House Conference on Aging as a fantasy. The cold reality is that programs we recommended to be expanded in December 1981 have

