

## Introduction

# The 2015 White House Conference on Aging: Agenda Setting and Issue Framing

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White House Conferences on Aging, dating to 1961, have long captured policy-relevant understandings about the status of older adults in American life. The initial Conference rallied support for the major legislative achievements of 1965—Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act. The 1971 Conference came together with enormous energy, both celebrating and contributing to the major legislative accomplishments of the 1965–1974 decade. The Conference in 1981 was marked by heated exchanges between insurgent Reagan administration officials and those pressing for further aging policy initiatives. In 1995, the Conference stood as a modest firewall against cuts to Medicare and Medicaid being proposed by House Speaker Newt Gingrich and the Republican “Class of ‘94.” The Conference in 2005 was notable, in part, because for the first time the President did not participate—George W. Bush’s visiting an upscale retirement community on the day he was most likely to make an appearance—but also because of widespread concern among delegates regarding the President’s attempt to partially privatize Social Security.

This year’s Conference is centered on highlighting both the needs and the contributions of the nation’s seniors. Organizers have identified four overarching themes critical to elders’ well-being: healthy aging, retirement security, long-term supports and services, and elder justice. While not being unmindful of the larger political realities surrounding the Conference, the rights, roles, and needs of seniors will hold center stage. It is important that such deliberations take place because the demographics and economics of aging continue to shift in important ways. Long gone—thanks largely to public policy—are days when elders were singularly poor and frail. Yet, a new series of pressures associated with extended lives, income differentials, and living environments will mark aging in the years ahead. Complex as these changes may be, they

very often fall along a “cumulative advantage/disadvantage” faultline (Crystal & Shea, 1990). As such, it is essential that Conference participants recognize and address the structured diversity that marks contemporary aging by race, gender, age, and region.

The articles in the following pages address each of the four Conference themes. They briefly assess shortcomings in the identified areas and propose recommendations that the authors would like Conference participants to make to both policymakers and the larger public. The opening contribution from Laura Carstensen and colleagues addressing healthy aging initially strikes an optimistic tone, noting the remarkable progress in elder well-being that marked much of the twentieth century. However, the authors go on to pointedly observe that—in the particular case of obesity and fitness—past success has literally turned to current excess. Many of the earlier advances that contributed to population health are now threatening health and well-being across the lifespan, with obesity and its consequences potentially erasing decades’ worth of health gains. Calling for major changes in lifestyle and an emphasis on prevention, the authors recommend technological advances, workplace redesign and, more broadly, a paradigm shift stressing both individual responsibility and population-wide strategies.

The second contribution addressing healthy aging focuses on community living and new community alternatives for an aging population. Reviewing the emerging age-friendly community (AFC) movement, Emily Greenfield summarizes a host of research, practice, and policy initiatives that have been spawned both nationally and internationally. AFCs tackle a host of interrelated but often separately addressed barriers to healthy community living: isolation, economic insecurity, role loss, lack of mobility, and physical danger. She highlights a series of

local demonstrations and initiatives that show the promise of addressing these issues in a co-ordinated fashion, with specific reference to initiatives by AARP, the New York Academy of Medicine, the Administration on Aging, and the Environmental Protection Administration. Greenfield makes a particular case for Promise Zones, a Department of Housing and Urban Development initiative that might serve as a model for enhanced federal leadership in community living for older adults.

The two articles found here addressing retirement security take very different approaches, one centered on issue framing and the second on administrative rule-making. Eric Kingson and Molly Checksfield challenge White House Conference participants to recast the current Washington debate surrounding Social Security and other retirement income programs. First, allowing Social Security to be caught up in an “entitlement crisis” paradigm leads only to a conclusion that benefits must be somehow cut. Second, the notion that the generations are antagonistic toward one another must be discarded in the wake of overwhelming evidence that generational relations are marked by high levels of reciprocity. Third, the Conference must highlight the escalating levels of economic insecurity currently found among many retirees and sound an alarm for what they and others see as a looming retirement crisis for baby boomers in advanced age. Finally, these perspectives and realities require that policy recommendations be about increases in benefits rather than reductions. Doing so would recognize the needs of millions of elders as well as the ability of higher income individuals of all age groups to contribute more to the system in order to make those increases possible.

Using a much more focused lens, Pamela Herd addresses how administrative rather than larger policy issues have a deleterious effect on the economic security of low-income elders. She finds that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) contains a number of “administrative burdens” which severely depress utilization rates among elders. The shortfall is alarming, with only one third of eligible elders receiving SNAP benefits in comparison to some 80–90% of eligible younger people. Barriers involve both accessing and maintaining benefits. Underlying factors impeding participation include poorer health and higher rates of cognitive impairment among low-income elders. Herd finds that these conditions lead to three types of administrative burden: learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs. Of these, she finds the last to be most problematic. Herd makes two sets of recommendations, first, to lengthen eligibility periods and, second, to make use of Social Security Administration and Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services data to alert elders to their SNAP eligibility.

Shortcomings in the nation’s current system of long-term care services and supports (LTSS) constitute the Conference’s third issue area. From a time when there was little other than bad news associated with LTSS needs, recent years have seen improvements according to Kali Thomas and Robert Applebaum. More community-based services are available, there are more rigorous nursing home standards, and perverse financial incentives in the system have been reduced. Yet widespread burdens and shortcomings remain: the oldest old population and its attendant ADL deficits are growing, families are under increasing stress, public support comes primarily from the means-tested Medicaid program, and the direct-care workforce faces numerous challenges. Toward addressing these interconnected issues, the authors make six recommendations to White House Conference participants: increase services availability, provide enhanced caregiver support and training, improve technology-enabled care, expand efforts to measure both services quality and client outcomes in LTSS, address needs of the direct-care workforce, and, perhaps most challenging, devise a public–private solution to the endemic financing problems impeding the delivery of needed care. The recently repealed CLASS Act would have moved public support for LTSS toward a public insurance and away from a “welfare” model. It would be good for elements of that model to see the light of day in efforts going forward to improve the LTSS policy landscape.

The fourth policy arena identified by Conference organizers addresses the persistent and underrecognized problem of elder abuse and neglect. The Elder Justice Act of 2010 codified concern about what Daniel Kaplan and Karl Pillemer term this “prevalent and damaging problem.” They itemize the array of consequences that stem from physical, psychological, and financial abuse suffered by an estimated 7–10% of all elders: increased mortality, physical injuries, pain, premature nursing home placement, depression and anxiety, and economic deprivation. Kaplan and Pillemer implore the Conference to confront elder abuse head-on and propose a series of steps that could move forward an elder abuse prevention agenda: develop a knowledge base for prevention and intervention, create a network of service options, forge a co-ordinated policy approach, and reframe elder abuse as a major public health problem. More generally, the authors speak to the need to bring elder abuse to the attention of both policymakers and the larger public, calling for a public awareness campaign, elder mistreatment education, creation of an elder abuse prevention database, and mobilizing advocates toward empowering older people around the prevalence and danger of elder abuse.

Our concluding article comes from Debra Whitman, Chief Public Policy Officer, AARP, who challenges White House Conference participants and others to address

“unsolved mysteries in aging policy.” In introducing what she views as eight such mysteries, Whitman insists that intervention strategies must be cross-cutting, should address individuals’ full lifespan, and be understood to address the concerns not only of elders but of their families and the nation at large. Her “mysteries” encompass the four topical areas identified by Conference organizers and serve as a striking coda to the other analyses and recommendations found in these pages: How can we encourage more people to save more for retirement? How do we encourage people to work longer while taking care of those who cannot? How do we create a Social Security system that meets the country’s needs for the next 80 years? How will we pay for the long-term care services and support needed by an aging population? How will our country get the workforce that is needed to support a vastly larger aging population? How can we support individuals and their families with advanced illness? How do we better protect older adults from fraud and abuse? How can society best deal with growing numbers of people with diminished mental capacity?

The editors of *Public Policy & Aging Report* would very much like to thank AARP for its underwriting support of this issue addressing the 2015 White House Conference on Aging, allowing us to produce and distribute its content

and recommendations to a broad audience of policymakers, advocates, elders, and citizens at large.

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