

White House Conference on Aging A Summary Report on The Focus Group Project November, 1994

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The report includes opinions of older Americans from cities throughout the United States.

Introduction

The White House Conference on Aging Focus Group Project started last February and is continuing through the end of 1994. The first phase was implemented by Helen Kerschner and the University of New Mexico Center on Aging (in cooperation with The Gerontological Society of America and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program). Funding was provided by the Retirement Research Foundation. Funding for the second phase of the project is being provided by The Corporation for National Service.

The overall purpose of the focus group project has been to fulfill President Clinton's mandate to the White House Conference to: reach out to the grass roots; get in touch with real people; meet with constituents on their own turf; involve older Americans in a meaningful activity; and discover the "real world" of aging. Gathering opinion information and identifying themes and trends has been one of the key outcomes of this process. Thus far, the process has involved 192 people (age 60 and over) in 11 locations throughout the United States. See the attached chart for more information.

Responses to Focus Group Questions

Up to fifteen questions have been asked in each focus group. The following summary provides an indication of the opinions of focus group participants about: (1) what it means to get older; (2) the special concerns of older people; (3) generational relationships; (4) treatment by the media; (5) what the President should know about aging; and (6) the keys to healthy aging.

1. What Does It Mean To Get Older?

Focus group participants were asked to complete the statement, The first thing that comes to mind when I think about getting older is..... Their responses convey an overwhelming message of fear, many of these fears were expressed as questions:

**Will I be safe from...health problems, poverty, crime?
Who will take care of....me, my family etc.?
Will I be...worth anything , able to stay fit?**

Am I ready for...retirement, a nursing home?
How much longer will I be....independent, able to ambulate, volunteer?
How much longer will I be...able to take care of myself, remain independent?

In general the fears concerned health, finances, security, dependency and worthlessness.

Fears Related to Health: health problems, health care and medical care, health determination, health insurance, who pays for expensive medications, maintaining good health, how will health be affected.

Fears Related to Finances: not enough money, financial security, the high cost of living, high taxes, need to lower taxes.

Fears Related to Loss of Independence: remaining independent, staying in own home, being able to take care of oneself, loneliness, loss of some abilities, loss of privacy, treatment in a nursing home, finding a good nursing home, being able to do same things as when young.

Although a majority of focus group participants expressed fear about getting older, several participants in every focus group expressed **happiness about the past** (i.e. "having lived the good life") or a **belief that growing old opens up new opportunities and challenges**. (i.e. **being able to play the role of the elder; not having responsibility; being able to enjoy learning, leisure, life and making contributions.**)

Specific comments about the future included:

"I will have the opportunity to pass on experience to the young."
"I will be able to live the good life after having worked so hard."
"Every year will bring a new awareness."
"I won't have responsibility for my children."
"I will be able to do what I want to do."
"I will have the opportunity to provide service."
"I will have the opportunity to learn."
"I will have time to enjoy life."
"I will have more time to be with loved ones."
"I will be able to be useful."

2. What are Older People Concerned About?

In response to the statement, As an older person in America, I am most concerned about......focus group participants expressed a variety of concerns about **health care, financial security, and maintaining independence**..concerns similar to those associated with getting older. Additionally, they expressed concerns **about the future, their grandchildren, and about coping with change**.

3. What are the Challenges of Aging?

When asked to complete the statement, The biggest challenge that I face as an older American is... the major fears of **health, finances, loneliness and safety and security** were similar to those which focus group participants expressed about getting older. Additional challenges included ones associated with **locating transportation, adapting to change, and coping with social ostracism**. Specific comments included:

"Worrying about financial security"
 "Affordable and competent health care"
 "Fear of being lonely and poor"
 "Being treated as second class citizens"
 "Keeping busy"
 "Protection on the streets"
 "Finding good housing"
 "Paying high prices for necessities"

4. Are Older People Satisfied with Generational Attitudes?

In each of the focus groups, participants were asked to complete two statements: (1) I believe most younger people view older people as....; and (2) I believe most older people view younger people as...

(1) How younger people see older people. The majority of focus group participants expressed the opinion that **younger people see older people in negative terms.** The most common responses included phrases such as....**a burden or a potential burden; old fashioned and over the hill; non- productive and useless; old money bags, a source of cheap loans and a financial crutch; senile and frail; authoritative and pushy, as inadequate and antiquated; irresponsible and irrelevant; helpless and confused; out of date, out of step, out of focus, and out of touch.**

Those opinions that reflected **a more positive view** included phrases such as: **an inspiration, and our greatest natural resource.**

(2) How older people see younger people. The majority of focus group participants expressed the opinion that **older people see younger people in negative terms.** The most common word which was used was **disrespectful.** A variety of interesting phrases were used to express other negatives:

"They have a microwave mentality."
 "They want it now."
 "They make money but they don't save."
 "They don't care about the future (they don't recycle)."
 "They only run to their elders when they are in trouble."
 "They think things grow on trees."
 "They lack work ethics and moral standards."
 "They are our hope for the future, but they have misguided values and they are shallow."
 "They are not very considerate and respectful of age."
 "They believe in me first and you owe me."

Other comments used words such as **irresponsible, self-centered, decadent, immoral, extravagant, spoiled, indifferent, impatient, not serious enough, confused, intolerant, rootless and anchorless, know-it-alls, overly liberated; and ungrateful.**

The positive opinions emphasized views which held that **youth are the future or custodians of the future.** Other positive comments used words such as: **loving, self sufficient, exhilarating, challenging, intelligent, and energetic.**

5. Are Older People Pleased with their Treatment in the Media?

Focus group participants were asked to complete the following statement: I believe that, for the most part, the media presents older people as.... In general focus group participants indicated that **the media presents older people in a negative light. The three most common phrases they used to describe their opinions about media treatment were: (1) as a problem, (2) as a burden, and (3) as helpless.**

Several comments which they used to describe their treatment in the media were:

- "We are dismissed when the going gets tough,"
- "They show us as feeble in mind and body,"
- "We are viewed as a drag, especially because of Social Security,"
- "We are portrayed as out of step with the visions of the younger generation,"
- "All the stories are about outdated and old fashioned older people with no education."
- " They lump all older people together, it isn't sensitive to the differences."

Other comments indicated that **the media treats them as: helpless and out of touch, as worried when the majority are happy, as useless and dumb.** For those who expressed a different view, they saw **an evolution of the media toward a more positive image of aging.** One of the reasons given for this more positive view was that: **elders have more discretionary money to buy advertisers' products.**

The more positive comments indicated that **the media is confused and really doesn't know how to treat older people; the media is moving to a more balanced view; and the media is portraying older people in a positive light because elders have more discretionary money to buy advertisers' products.**

6. When Does Aging Begin?

When asked to complete the statement, I believe aging starts (my aging started) when.... focus group participants responded, for the most part, in negative terms as indicated by: physical or mental deterioration, acceptance of limitations, and loss of youth and youthful ideas. These negative comments tend to fall into two groupings: association with mental outlook and association with life events. Alternatively, several comments indicated a general lack of concern with aging. Selected comments are included below.

Association with Mental Outlook

- "...when you make up your mind that you are old."
- "...when we lose youthful ideas."
- "...when you close your mind."
- "...when you let it."
- "...when you think you are old."
- "...when you are bored with life."
- "...when you start thinking more about the past than about the future."

Association with Life Events

- "...in 1912...the year that I was born."
- "...when the body starts deteriorating."
- "...when the children leave home and the dog dies."
- "...at retirement....for me it started at 56."
- "...when your mind and body don't function as well."
- "...when I can no longer take care of myself."

"...when I have to sit in a rocking chair."
"...when you want a job but nobody wants to hire you."
"...when senior discounts kick in."
"...at about 70."

Lack of Concern with Aging

"...with some people it never starts...they never seem to get old."
"...if you're young at heart, aging never starts."
"...I don't even think about it."
"...If you feel old, act old, and let yourself look old...then you're old."
"...I haven't started to age yet, I'm only 80."

One of the key themes which can be drawn from the responses is that if you are young at heart....aging (in the negative sense) never happens.

7. What is the Message from Older Americans to the President?

When asked to complete the statement, If I were in a position to tell the President of the United States one thing about our nation's elderly population, I would tell him...two comments which were made in every focus group were:

"Don't mess with Social Security."
"Seniors are a valuable resource."

Other things which participants wanted the President to know were that **they are a resource; they have political clout and the President should be aware of it; the President should pay attention to health care, financial and support needs; and the President should stabilize taxes and leave Medicare alone.**

Numerous suggestions were made to encourage **a more positive view of older people:**

"We are a large group of independent individual older persons."
"Utilize older persons' knowledge and expertise."
"Seniors are a valuable resource."
"The elderly are smarter than you think."
"Most elderly are capable of performing."
"Listen to us, we vote."
"We have the same needs and desires we had when we were younger...we're just a bit slower now."
"Older people are also older in experience."
"The elderly can be useful and provide service."
"You need more older people in your administration, your staff is very young."
"Don't forget our wisdom and experience."

8. What Are the Keys to Healthy Aging?

Focus group participants were asked to complete the statement, "I believe the key to healthy aging is... Is the key nutrition? A few say it is the key. Is it health care? Some say yes. Is it good social services? Very few say that is the key. Is it money? Amazingly very few say it is. Then, in the opinion of focus group participants, just

what is the key? **Involvement in activities, a good mental outlook, and helping others.**

The columns below indicate some of the top choices in each of these three areas.

Keys To Healthy Aging

Involvement	Mental Outlook	Helping Others
keeping active	good mental outlook	giving to others
being a productive citizen	optimism and hope	having friends
being busy	healthy self image	caring about others
involvement in community	mental & physical health	having an interest in others
volunteering	being happy	kindness toward others
continuing to learn	being joyful	being with family
continuing to travel	keeping an active mind	concern for those with less
experiencing new things	self discipline	helping make the world
having meaningful work	being glad for every day	a better place

Summary

The focus groups have enabled the 1995 White House Conference on Aging to gather opinion information from older Americans across the country on a variety of issues . These opinions indicate that from the participants' point of view we should be aware of many problems which older people face as well as opportunities which they create. Several of these problems and opportunities are summarized below.

Fears: health, finances, security, dependency and worthlessness

Concerns: health care, financial security, dependency., the future, grandchildren, and coping with change

Challenges: health, finances, loneliness, safety, security, locating transportation, adapting to change, and coping with social ostracism

Challenges: playing the role of the elder; not having responsibility; being able to enjoy learning, leisure, life and making contributions

How Youth View Older People: a burden or a potential burden; old fashioned and over the hill; non- productive and useless; old money bags, a source of cheap loans and a financial crutch; senile and frail; authoritative and pushy, as inadequate and antiquated; irresponsible and irrelevant; helpless and confused; out of date, out of step, out of focus, and out of touch.

How Older People View Youth: irresponsible, self-centered, decadent, immoral, me first, extravagant, spoiled, indifferent, impatient, not serious enough, confused, intolerant, rootless and anchorless, know-it-all, overly liberated; and ungrateful.

Media Treatment of Older People: as a problem, as a burden, as helpless; but some media moving toward a more balanced view of aging.

A Message to the President: don't mess with Social Security, and remember that someday you will be older, pay attention to health care, financial and support needs; stabilize taxes, leave Medicare alone, be aware that older people are a resource; they have political clout and the President should be aware of it.

The Keys to Healthy Aging: involvement in activities, a good mental outlook, and helping others.

In conclusion, older Americans who have participated in the White House Conference on Aging Focus Group Project have made it clear that they see a lot of negatives in their lives and are concerned about a number of issues which affect them. At the same time, they can articulate those issues and believe they have tremendous wisdom, energy and experience; can make important contributions to the country; and desperately want us to value them and utilize their opinions. In other words (often their words) they want to be involved and productive.

**White House Conference on Aging
Focus Group Project**

Location	Date	Participants
Albuquerque, NM	Feb. 8, 1994	18 Participants (mixed)
Tampa, Fla.	Feb. 17, 1994	20 Participants (urban)
Los Angeles, Ca.	Feb. 21, 1994	15 Participants (minority)
Chicago, Ill.	Feb. 23, 1994	18 Participants (urban)
Boston, Mass.	Feb. 28, 1994	14 Participants (mixed)
Laguna Pueblo, N.M.	July 2, 1994	11 Participants (Pueblo Women)
Albuquerque, NM.	July 5, 1994	7 Participants (institutionalized)
Little Rock, Ark.	June 10, 1994	19 Participants (mixed)
Harrisburg, Pa.	July 11, 1994	15 Participants (rural)
Harrisburg, Pa.	July 11, 1994	11 Participants (care givers)
Corpus Christi, Tex.	Aug. 19, 1994	15 Participants (rural)
Corpus Christi, Tex.	Aug. 19, 1994	9 Participants (urban)
San Francisco, Ca.	Aug. 24, 1994	15 Participants (Chinese)
Spokane, Wa.	Aug. 26, 1994	5 Participants (Indian Elders)

* It should be noted that a focus group of 15 High School Students was conducted in Albuquerque, NM, in July, 1994. The purpose of the focus group was to gather opinions of a group of high school students on issues of aging. Two important messages conveyed by the group were concern for the older population (especially for older family members), and fear about their own aging.