

Twenty Million Going on 30

R. L. Reeder, Purdue University

After a survey of states was made to determine the status of Extension's efforts in programming for senior citizens, the author became alarmed at the seemingly little concern shown in this area. Reeder shares his findings and challenges Extension professionals to examine their priorities and assume responsibility to meet the need of programming for the elderly.

Is it too early to ask when Extension will begin to take seriously the problems of programming for the elderly in rural areas?

Those few specialists around the country who are trying hard to get programs going will take offense at such a question, yet as one of them writes: "It is good to have someone with whom to sympathize over the difficulty of launching a retirement program in a youth-worshipping world. I get so very discouraged"

We know that people are living longer and retiring earlier, and that a growing proportion of the elderly make their homes in non-metropolitan areas. Those who work with older people know that there are special problems to be considered, often problems on which universities can offer considerable expertise. Why then do only four states report major programs for this audience?

HEW in a publication prepared last year for the White House Conference on Aging says:

In round numbers, each day about 4,000 Americans celebrate their 65th birthday, and about 3,000 aged 65 and over die, leaving a net increase of about 1,000 persons. . . . By the year 2000, there will be a minimum of 28 million Americans aged 65+. . . .

Forty-two states show the proportion of older residents increasing between 1960 and 1970. Of those who reach 65, 68 percent of the men have wives living; 54 percent of the women are widows. Of every 100, 67 percent live in a family situation, 28 percent live alone or with nonrelatives, and only 5 percent live in institutions.

Trying to get some material together for a paper on communicating with the senior citizens, we were alarmed at the scattered interest among the states. The tone

of the replies is — well we have our programs and older people can take them or leave them, like anybody else. Such flippancy wouldn't show through had we asked about programs for young homemakers, youth, or even for cattle and hogs.

It's clearly in order for Extension to program for the basic physical needs of the senior citizens. Until food, shelter, and clothing are adequate to keep the elderly in the mainstream of society, there's not much use trying to deal with their more subtle problems, about which we don't feel competent anyway.

On the other hand, we shouldn't delude ourselves into thinking that the problem has been swept under the rug because we assign it to a few home economics specialists. These people are sincere, but they can't do it alone. Help in food and housing scratches only the surface of many complicated problems. Those specialists who begin to know older people find it impossible to extricate themselves from the troubles that go beyond one person's specialty.

Let's look at a few of them. In 1970, slightly over one-fourth of the older men were still in the labor force. The HEW report says:

In spite of employer satisfaction with their own middle-aged employees such workers face great difficulty in security a new job once they become unemployed. . . .

About 4.7 million older persons or almost a quarter lived in households where the total income fell below the poverty threshold for that specific household type. . . .

Health care expenditures for an older person are 3½ times those of an under-65 person and all of the public programs combined pay only two-thirds of the bill; medicare alone pays between 40 and 43 percent of the total bill for health care.

The University of Iowa Institute of Gerontology conducted a survey of the attitudes and interests of Iowans over 60 in 1960. Ten years later, Iowa State sociologists interviewed 235 of these Iowans again. During that decade, hobbies had replaced radio and television as the most frequently mentioned source of enjoyment. More than half mentioned church activities in 1960, but only 13 percent did so in 1970. Contact with their children dropped from over 66 to 7 percent. Their most frequently mentioned anxieties concerned health, happiness, and financial security — but those concerns were for children and other relatives, not for themselves.

It's primarily to their families that older people turn for help. Says a study by the Home Economics Research Institute, prepared for the Iowa Commission on Aging:

Elderly persons prefer to live independently in their own homes. Even those persons with minimal amounts of money, poor housing, poor health, and other difficulties indicated no desire to move from their present situation.

In our interviews for the paper last summer, we were told often about health problems. Transportation, the ability to get around, was

critical. Yet the most commonly expressed need was the desire to be useful, to be doing something of value to others.

There ought to be clues here to basic Extension programming. Of the 31 states that replied to my questions, only the 4 with specialists who had titles related to aging seemed to have well-defined direction and objectives. There's sincerity and even some creativity scattered around, but it generally lacks the usual Extension enthusiasm. Most mention working with state and federal councils on aging, and taking part in conferences where federal money is involved. Most have expanded nutrition programs for the elderly, with one state reporting 60 percent of its nutrition work being done with people over 65.

"They are hard to reach" is the most common thread running through the reports. Such things are mentioned as workshops, clubs, meetings, mass media stories, conferences, and correspondence. Newsletters of various kinds have met with some success. Publications specially designed, and television programs aimed at the elderly have been tried, but not evaluated for impact.

Senior adult committees are being tried and include representatives from interested agencies. Several states report they helped form senior citizen councils. Study groups on problems of aging have been started. Some states mention programs or plans for "preparing for

retirement." One state offers a three-way emphasis: preparation for retirement, adjustment after retirement, and education of the community to senior citizen needs.

There is a strong trend toward finding ways to help older people, such as organizing volunteer programs, training for those who work with the elderly, and getting consumer aides into their homes. Some are trying the use of 4-H members who go on friendly, recreation visits. Visiting, referral, and telephone reassurance are informal parts of some programs. Yet our interviews indicate that this is often regarded as "do-good" help without much consultation with older people themselves. How can it be tied to the need to be independent, to be involved in planning their own programs, to be useful and helpful to others?

Subject matter mentioned most in the reports is, of course, in the home economics area, usually under the guidance of family living people. Food and nutrition get attention from 19 of the 31 states replying. Money management, low income, and finances get 13 mentions. Recreation is tied with housing at eight. Clothing gets six votes; crafts and hobbies, five.

In the one-to-four mentioned category are several that would rank higher surely if we understood this audience better. Health, the number one priority for senior citizens the world over, is at this level in our programs. Transportation gets attention in only two states.

Four states offer programs on family relations, a tricky but high priority problem. Personal adjustment and development get sparse attention. Three states are trying to get community involvement.

Would you believe that only 1 of 31 educational institutions mention education, and only 1 state has the courage to tackle the problem of employment?

Two states report pre-retirement programs for something that is only slightly less inevitable than death, a subject only one state is trying to face.

Several states indicate that home agents handle the programs as they're requested locally, even though no statewide program has been planned. In fact, home economists seem to be trying to handle a difficult job here without much encouragement. Does this mean we're not taking it seriously? Or are home economists the only ones who see it as a growing and important problem in local communities?

Isabelle Buckley, specialist in aging at North Carolina State University, has developed a comprehensive and philosophical approach that ought to attract attention. There, the Aging Department is considered a separate department similar to 4-H. She has one agent in each of the 100 counties assigned with this responsibility. Thirty agents come each year for training on a rotating basis.

"At first the agents even giggled," she says, "embarrassed to introduce me by my title."

Her plan is to join with other programs in Extension and build senior citizen programming into them. It's not going to be easy, and she thinks it may be five years before the attitudes change against thinking about old age. She has a strong pre-retirement plan built into most of her material, and again here she's bound to find resistance.

Her personal philosophy should get attention, however. It goes like this:

Believe that the older person is an individual, an adult, and should be so treated. He has basic human needs as long as he lives. He has rights and responsibilities as a citizen, but the community may need to help him maintain his independence. His most valuable asset is his experience.

Believe that the senior citizen has a contribution to make to society.

Believe that providing a healthy environment reaps more benefits longer from senior experience and knowledge.

Believe that at certain stages through the cycle of aging, the elderly may need protective and supportive care from family and community.

Who is aging? We all are. . . .

If we in Extension can't relate to that, here are a few other suggestions from the report of the recent White House Conference:

Education for older persons should be conducted either apart from or integrated with other groups according to their specific

needs and choices. Where feasible or desirable the aged must be granted the opportunity to take advantage of existing programs with both old and young learning from each other. . . .

Pre-retirement education and counseling should be provided locally throughout the nation by trained instructors, starting at least five years before retirement age. . . .

Given proper resources, opportunities and motivation, older persons can make a valuable con-

tribution. They are also capable of being effective advocates of their own cause and should be included in planning, in decision making, and in the implementation of programs. . . .

Says Dr. Bernice Neugarten, chairman of the Committee on Human Development, The University of Chicago: "Education should be spaced through the life cycle, and higher education should serve adults of various ages, not just the young."