

Year for the Elderly

BY ROBERT E. SEGAL

"Goodies for Oldies" is the sardonic way The New Republic chooses to label the White House Conference On Aging due up in December, 1981. The editors put that mischievous heading on the piece, while noting that the gathering of 2000 silver-haired delegates, even in its planning stages, has chewed up \$3,000,000 of the taxpayers' money and has involved a staff of 65.

That's one slanted way of looking at the confab for the cause of the rapidly growing segment of Americans in their winter years. There are other approaches: (1) new Census figures show that 51% of the 714,000 additional people who fell below the poverty standard in 1979 were 65 or over even though the elderly count for only about 11% of the total population; (2) strong Older Americans Act provisions grew out of the earlier Conference on Aging; (3) when powerful bureaucrats in Washington tinker with Social Security, the elderly tremble especially in a

time of devastating inflation; (4) no group wants all-embracing medical and hospital care guarantees more passionately than the vulnerable aging.

But these are only the major concerns. And since this is also the International Year of Disabled Persons, affecting millions of elderly, we shall be hearing a great deal about conditions and needs of these segments of our population.

Perhaps no American has served more effectively as spokesman for the aging over recent years than Congressman Claude Pepper, Chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging. An octogenarian himself and the only member of the House who also served in the Senate, Claude Pepper remains vigorous and vigilant, putting in many 12-hour days of fighting for legislation sought by older Americans.

Looking over Mr. Pepper's shoulder, studying notes from grass roots warm-up sessions for the Conference On Aging and for the special needs of the elderly disabled, I believe the following digest may prove helpful to those interested:

At the top of Mr. Pepper's list of priorities is abolition of mandatory retirement before 70, a battle he has won. Eventually, he hopes

to eradicate every trace of age discrimination in employment. Who knows -- he may have President Reagan in his corner on that sensitive issue; for the man now handling the most grueling job in the nation has turned 70 himself. But will Mr. Reagan, sworn to a policy of deep budget cutting, deal tenderly with human services for the elderly widowed, infirm, and disabled?

Pepper will fight to keep unsavaged such elderly assistance programs as social security, Medicare, Medicaid. Against heavy odds, he will work for comprehensive medical and hospital insurance at government expense. He joins with those elders who want to avoid uprooting from homes. Institutionalization often at taxpayer's expense, is a bad rap for thousands of men and women in their winter years.

Turning to the importance of the designation of 1981 as the International Year of the Disabled, he finds estimates of the handicapped in the United States running as high as 72 million. Here again, a huge segment consists of people over 65 and over --- crippled, chronically ill, shut in, foreclosed from moving about painlessly in society.

These want desperately to have representation on planning boards affecting their lives. They long for a chance to work. Neglect and loneliness add to their unease. They are fair game for vandals. Abusive treatment is often their lot. Many commissions have studied their transportation and housing needs; but few have been reported. Home-makers are difficult to obtain. Decent recreation remains largely a dream. Mental deterioration is often their lot, some insurance companies victimize them; in bitterly cold weather, fuel assistance cannot always be obtained. They are stereotyped disgracefully.

Will the Conference on Aging and observance of the International Year of Disabled Persons really enrich the thin quality of their lives? Chances are not good; but hope must not be dismissed.

JERUSALEM (WNS) -- Schools throughout Israel were closed as the teachers unions called a one-day strike to back their pay demands.



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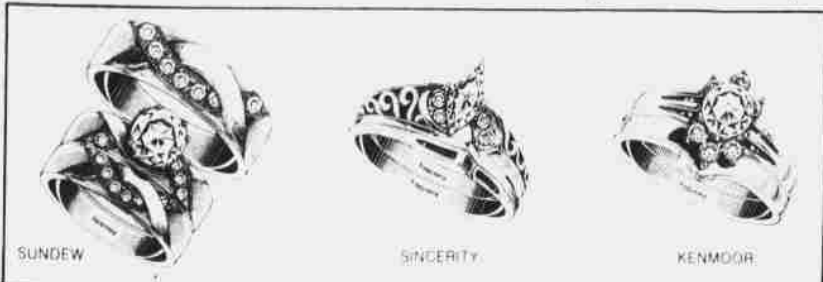
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