

## INTERPRETING AGING TO THE PUBLIC\*

by JOSEPH S. WINSTON

*Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio*

THE fact that aged population, in almost every community, has grown by leaps and bounds is well known and needs little elaboration. We are also well aware that the proportion of older people in the general population will increase even more in future decades. Thus, the "problem of the aging" has become a popular topic of public discussion.

I have been asked to discuss how widespread negative attitudes toward the aged can in time be changed so that older persons will be accepted as capable of leading fuller lives as individuals important in their own right. At the outset, however, it should be emphasized that more positive attitudes toward the aged are becoming discernible. The public has become more receptive toward the fostering of positive attitudes because of the impact of the larger number of older people in the community, increased interest in health and welfare programs, social legislation, pre-retirement planning, golden age recreational programs, and other similar developments. Essentially, the climate is good for the development of programs of interpretation to demonstrate that the

aging population can continue to be a constructive and contributing part of the community.

However, there still remains a great need to counteract the stereotyped attitudes that have existed toward the aged. Various approaches to changing these negative attitudes have been suggested. These recommendations have not always been accepted, or if they have, they have not always been successful. The reason for failure may be in one of two important areas; either failure to appreciate the desires of those whom the programs are designed to serve, or, important to our discussion, failure to counteract certain rigid attitudes of the public toward the aged. The tendency for the most part has been to plan *for* rather than *with* older persons. Accordingly, we may often be justly accused of perpetuating many of the public's attitudes in planning programs for the aged. The community must become aware that if a large segment of our population is to play a meaningful role in our society, it must deal forthrightly with its own attitudes toward the aged. It must recognize that a large group of people who can vote, who represent an enormous purchasing potential, and who can align themselves with organized causes, must have greater status in the

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community. Failure to accord them such recognition may deepen their feelings of dependency and of being unwanted.

In order to examine any interpretative program we need first to isolate the negative attitudes which require correction. For purposes of our discussion I have listed only a few of the concepts which have developed toward the aging population.

(1) *Mass Concept*.—The public has visualized the aged as a group, ignoring the fact that individuals with different personality problems and needs make up this group. This attitude presumes that "old age" begins at a specific year and that the solution to the "problem" is the same for everyone in the group. This concept has even been encouraged by legislation and employment practices.

(2) *Economic Concept*.—Older persons have been considered economic liabilities. Work opportunities have been youth oriented, and society has failed to offer older persons the opportunity for a satisfying and productive livelihood. Many who are able and eager to continue working have been forced by these attitudes into positions of economic dependence, deprived of opportunities for gainful employment. This has frequently led to enforced lowered standards of living for older persons. Older people, who need adequate housing, food and medical care, are frequently least able to afford them on their limited incomes from savings, pensions and retirement funds.

(3) *Incapability of Growth*.—This attitude presupposes that little can be done for older persons except to feed, clothe and house them. This stems from the failure to recognize them as individuals. There has been little understanding of the needs, desires and feelings of our senior citizens. Our social agency services and medical programs have only recently begun to indicate an awareness of the basic concept that the

aging person must be treated as an individual, and to base their program on this concept. Recognizing this, agencies have begun to develop specialized programs that are geared to the aging group and give expression to the multiplicity of needs of this group of people. This approach points up sharply the need for a clearer insight into the behavior pattern of the individual older person.

(4) *Social Isolation*.—This concept follows the theory that older people should be set off by themselves. Because of this attitude many older persons, whether living in the community or in institutions, are often deprived of social interaction. Older persons themselves often accept a passive role as their lot. It is true that the older person often has less initiative to make social contacts and needs a stimulus to take advantage of social opportunities. It has been demonstrated, however, that to a great degree, adjustments of older people depend on the extent to which they are part of a social group.

(5) *Physical and Mental Health*.—Frequently, because of limited financial resources, older persons who need medical and psychiatric attention have received inadequate care. This was also attributable to the fact that medical facilities in many communities were not geared to the treatment of illnesses of the aged and long term illnesses. This stemmed from the belief that such care would "do them no good anyway." The medical profession is just beginning to break down this misconception and is developing constructive medical programs for older persons.

If we are to make headway in fostering positive attitudes toward the aged to the community-at-large we must first convince the social work profession of their validity. Many social workers still have question about the older client's capability of growth. A family

agency with no conviction of the value of specialized services for older persons, which believes that older people cannot make effective use of casework help, and regards its work with the aged as manipulation, obviously cannot effectively interpret attitudes to the community running counter to its own practice.

It is not within the province of this paper to discuss the many significant and far-reaching developments in the field of the care of the aging in all areas of service—non-institutional services (including casework, group work, vocational services, medical programs, boarding and foster homes, etc.); institutional care (including out-resident programs, custodial and day-care services). However, to "sell" the community on these programs, and to gain public support, requires a major program of interpretation. We are not only concerned with interpreting agency services *per se*, but even of more importance with creating a climate for older persons in every community where they can develop as contributing, happy and productive citizens.

Programs of interpretation, whether they concern the program of one agency or attempt to counteract a whole community attitude, call for a multiple approach. To create the proper climate in any community involves more than stating clichés about the aging. Propaganda and legal and political measures have a part in changing community attitudes, but cannot provide the sole answer. A touching movie fostering a better understanding of older persons may make an impression on the audience, but without a deeper involvement by the viewers, it may soon be forgotten. Likewise, public assistance legislation may improve the lot of older persons financially, but may not change negative community attitudes. Constructive, effective interpretation involves a two way relationship

between the interpreter and the public. There must be a positive program and goal shared by both the interpreter and the community.

At this point, it might be advisable to sketch in as background our recent experience in further developing Cleveland's program for its Jewish aged. In 1953, resulting from the concern of lay leaders and professionals in the Jewish community that a broad perspective of the Jewish aged in the community was needed to plan for necessary services, a survey committee was appointed to study the needs of older people and plan programs for meeting those needs. The committee agreed at the outset that a community program for the Jewish aged should have as its objective the provision of maximum opportunities for older people to live independent, dignified, happy and useful lives to the fullest extent possible. It should offer community services to all who need them, recognizing that needs are found in all economic groups. In order to achieve the objectives certain basic assumptions were made:

(1) Whenever possible, programs should be preventive of further deterioration, and should help older people keep well, busy and happy.

(2) Older persons should be helped to remain in their own homes as long as possible.

(3) Treatment appropriate to their needs should be available whenever required; in institutions, in hospitals or in their own homes; or through agencies providing casework, group work or other services.

(4) There should be a free flow of persons to services and of services to persons.

(5) Maximum use should be made of all community resources through both public and private agencies.

Both lay and professional persons were

involved in this study. Also, many older people were interviewed to learn more about their needs and aspirations. The development of recommendations was the responsibility of a lay committee, which because of its own activity became better informed of the needs of older people. In the study process both the lay and professional participants developed an overall community perspective, a less parochial outlook, and a firmer conviction that an overall program for the aged is more than one of custodial care. These factors were of considerable importance in the subsequent interpretation to the community.

Cleveland's Survey on the Jewish Aged and Chronically Ill Aged spelled out a specific program. One of the major recommendations was the establishment of a Commission on Services to Older Persons to plan and coordinate services to the aged. Among the Commission's many responsibilities is interpretation, namely "disseminating information about community services to older persons and stimulating community acceptance and support of these programs. As existing programs are expanded or new ones are set up, the Commission should help agencies responsible for them to develop necessary publicity methods, so that the programs may be properly used."

Here then are suggested two specific vehicles for interpreting two specific areas of work with the aged. First, the Commission as an overall planning group is responsible for interpreting to the community a program involving specific goals and philosophy, as well as for interpreting agency programs and assisting them to develop their own interpretation programs. Second, it is the responsibility of the agencies to interpret their own programs which are based upon a philosophy of the constructive use of resources of the older persons. In Cleveland we are hopeful that this two-

pronged integrated approach will play a vital role in counteracting negative attitudes toward the aged.

By the best use of the skills of our professionals, our agencies can help the older client realize his own potentialities. He needs help to understand that he can play a vital role in changing community attitudes by virtue of his own attitudes and through demonstration of an ability to continue making a contribution to society. This means the older person needs to maintain good physical health and a positive mental set. Thus, there is a need to interpret positive attitudes to the aged themselves. Also, help given to the family in understanding the older person serves a direct purpose in alleviating the social problem in the family. It also constitutes interpretation to the family of the needs of older people in general and the community services designed to meet those needs. Further, there must be recognition that the older person is an individual who presents the same kinds of problems as younger people. There is no magic dividing line separating "young" from "old." A 65 year old client may have the same drives, problems, assets and inadequacies at 59 as he has at 65.

Let me cite two illustrations of a positive approach, one involving clients of an agency, the other demonstrating the potentials of a group of older persons. The Jewish Vocational Service of Cleveland, as part of its program for the aged, has instituted an "employer panel." Rotating groups of employers meet with clients of the agency to discuss job needs. First hand, these employers are faced with the fact that many of their preconceived negative attitudes about older persons are fallacious. One employer recently summed up the feelings of his associates—"these older people are no different than many of the younger people we employ." The agency reports that the employer panel pro-

gram has had remarkable results, not only in obtaining jobs for its older clients, but also in changing negative employer attitudes in the community. For example, several employers who participated in this program have become active solicitors for the agency in obtaining jobs for older people with other firms. Also, this service is a means of making the employer more aware of the problems of the employee and more amenable to making minor job modifications.

Also in Cleveland under the impetus of a retired business man, and with the active support and guidance of the Welfare Federation of Cleveland and the Jewish Community Federation, some 80 men and women have organized the "Cleveland Senior Council." The purpose of the organization is to utilize the many skills of a retired group of professional and business leaders as volunteers in community enterprises. The Council has concerned itself with the development of opportunities for elderly people who have lost positions of responsibility through forced retirement or others who wish or are compelled by similar reasons to continue their usefulness in other positions. The Council also accepts requests from those in the community who are either contemplating new ventures or who are in businesses already established and who seek counseling advice. Finally, the Council acts as a clearing house for any requests from civic groups for such services as either it or its members might render to community projects. Such requests might cover a wide range of activities such as the search for a member or members who would be willing and able to take over important assignments on worthwhile community projects. Accordingly, members of the Senior Council are demonstrating to the community the capabilities of older persons.

Here then are just two examples of what can be accomplished. A success-

ful golden age lounge program, important strides in rehabilitation by medical facilities, successful job placements, workshops and retirement counseling by a vocational agency, a successful case load by a family agency, significant programs by homes for the aged, etc. go far beyond the client himself. These demonstrations are meaningful to the client, his family, the agency board, committees and volunteers and to the community-at-large. Carrying this thesis to its logical conclusion, there is a mutual relationship between the agency and the community. This is not to be naive, however, and to assert that agencies have fulfilled their responsibilities toward counteracting negative attitudes in the community by successful work with their clients alone. They must continue to use all available techniques to interpret their programs and goals to their board, committees, volunteers and the overall community.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss interpretation techniques. It is self-evident, however, that the use of all sound public relations methods (public relations committees, brochures, visual aids, radio, television, newspaper publicity) must be utilized. In the final analysis, agency staffs, boards, committees and volunteers must have a deep conviction about their work, and a clear understanding of goals, if they are to maintain community support. A sound interpretation program has its effectiveness in the character and quality in the agency program and services. The best source of interpretation is the agency representative who may be a member of the professional staff, the board, or other volunteer, who is most familiar with and cognizant of these programs and services.

In addition to agency interpretation programs, other groups (i.e. planning and coordinating bodies, government departments, professional societies, unions, clubs, etc.) also have a significant role to play in interpreting positive attitudes

towards the aging. The interpretation program of the Commission on Services to Older Persons is descriptive of a broad approach as contrasted to what individual agencies are doing, although the two approaches must complement each other and overlap. The Commission is planning various types of group interpretation programs (meetings, brochures, etc.) utilizing most of the usual media.

How then can its approach be unique and more significant? From the beginning the Commission has involved many people in its interpretation program—Commission members, lay and professional agency personnel, other groups within the Jewish Federation and allied organizations, such as the Council of Jewish Women, etc. As each group is part of an interpretation program, its influence fans out to an even larger public. The Commission not only involves people in interpretation programs, but of even more importance, it has helped them become participants in programs for the aged. In its coordinating responsibility, the membership of the Commission and its subcommittees have an opportunity for the first time through work experiences to become knowledgeable about all of the services to the aged and their relationship to each other.

Secondly, the Commission conveys a community perspective on the needs and desires of older people, as well as interpreting community services. An important part of this approach is to interpret positive attitudes to older people, to help them gain insight into their own importance and role in the community.

Thirdly, as part of its planning and coordinating function, the Commission has the responsibility of pointing up unmet needs and involving the community in the solution of these needs. For example, as a result of a study of the needs of older persons and interpreting to and

acceptance by the community of the need for more institutional nursing care in Cleveland, the creation of a new nursing home facility is being realized.

Finally, in its role as a consultant body, the Commission assists other groups and organizations to interpret positive attitudes toward the aging, to the community. The Commission also works with other comparable organizations such as the Welfare Federation of Cleveland, etc., who likewise have a responsibility for interpreting positive attitudes.

In summary, because of the recent widespread interest in the aging, we have a better opportunity than ever before in planning interpretation programs to counteract stereotyped attitudes toward older persons and to "sell" our goals and programs to the community. To do this effectively requires an approach stressing the positive attributes of older persons. However, by their own acceptance and example, if the aged are convinced of their own worth as individuals with contributions to society, the community will be more prone to accept them as contributing citizens. It is the responsibility of both agencies and other groups to help them achieve this role and interpret their achievements to the community. Positive attitudes must be based on sound programs, conviction of the positives of older people, an understanding of dynamics of the individual older persons, research, and professional skill. Planning for interpretation programs requires the best efforts of all interested groups in the community, both lay and professional. There is no simple answer to counteracting negative attitudes toward the aged and all sound media of interpretation must be utilized. My thesis, however, is that the success of the interpretation program will be based on the quality of service rendered to the community of the aged.