

Address by Senator John Heinz  
Southwestern Area Agency on Aging  
Pittsburg Hilton Hotel, Pittsburg Pennsylvania  
June 6, 1982

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am honored to be before you as a guest of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Area Agency on Aging. Your Southwestern "Triple A" has performed an outstanding job on behalf of Mon Valley Seniors. Last year, they funded over 316,000 meals in 24 senior centers and another 165,000 meals for the home bound. Without these meals, thousands of seniors could have gone without an adequate diet so necessary to continued health.

In addition, the Southwestern Triple A has taken the lead in meeting other needs in our area, such as support for the Primary Medical Center which cared for nearly 16,000 patients last year. They have established an adult day care program, a special recreation program for the functionally disabled, and a hospice education program. Each of these programs has enabled thousands of older persons from the Mon Valley to live independently, and each has been absolutely essential in supporting the efforts of those families who continue to provide care to their older members. I would be remiss if I did not compliment Bob Willison for his outstanding work as Executive Director of the Triple A. It is literally true that the Southwestern Triple A is considered the model area agency on aging by experts and colleagues anywhere in our country. Will you join me in giving Bob a well deserved hand.

Furthermore, a good deal of credit is due to the Southwest Pennsylvania Health and Welfare Council and its able and talented chief, Wendell Ramey. Wendell, without your inspired leadership it is difficult to imagine that your council could have experienced its tremendous growth in service to people. Your record in innovation - finding new ways and means of helping people - is enviable and unsurpassed, and we congratulate you.

The work of the Triple A is invaluable and irreplaceable. Bob and Wendell, I congratulate and I salute you and your staffs. You have a record of which we are all proud.

I hope all present realize that however fine the work of the Triple A has been up to now, its continued excellence on behalf of Mon Valley Seniors can only be assured in the future if we in Congress remain the active advocates for older Americans.

I believe that the Senate Special Committee on Aging -- which I am privileged to chair -- has been a voice of conscience in the Senate for the concerns of older Americans. Those of us on the committee have tried to ensure that older persons are treated

fairly by the Federal Government in these times of economic trial and budgetary tribulation. Beyond this, I believe that our goal is not just to ensure economic security or adequate health care or services -- important as these are -- but to advocate and realize both government policies and societal attitudes that will endow older men and women with more genuine opportunities for self-fulfillment.

But the Federal budget is today's immediate concern, and a vital part of the Budget that I know you are concerned about is the Older Americans Act. In the 1983 budget, the Administration proposed to reduce OAA funding for transportation, outreach, and in-home services, and Title V employment programs and perhaps even more significantly -- the budget would have cut over 18 million meals provided both at centers and to persons who are homebound. I frankly find it hard to believe that the budget planners really understood the devastating consequences of these proposals on the lives of millions of older Americans. As we demonstrated at our committee hearings on this part of the budget, letting this proposal take effect would have driven thousands of senior citizens out of their homes and into vastly more expensive nursing homes.

In March, I called upon the President to rescind these proposals... and upon my colleagues to reject them. I am pleased to report that -- as a result of our work -- the first budget resolution adopted by the Senate two weeks ago assures that these programs will be continued as is and fully funded at the levels authorized by the Congress.

Another threat we are fighting are the proposals to count emergency energy assistance payments as income for food stamps and counting food stamps as income for housing. Because the poorest people - the poorest senior citizens - receive the most help from these programs, they would be hurt the most. Those needing energy assistance the most would lose the most food stamps. Those needing food stamps the most would find their rents increased the most.

I have therefore called upon the President to abandon these proposals. It is not too much to ask that those who have built this country should not have to choose between heating and eating. It is not too much to demand that those who brought us safely through the great depression and two world wars should be treated with compassion and respect and not be thrown out into the cold.

I have also been concerned that the administration and people on the budget committee have suggested that medicare hospital patients be required to pay new charges -- called co-payments -- for each day they are hospitalized. These charges would amount to hundreds of dollars in additional out of pocket costs for the typical medicare patient. Those who think that the way to hold

down medicare costs is simply to force senior citizens to pay more ought to know that older Americans already pay an average of \$800 out of pocket each year in medical costs and they ought to realize that medicare today pays only 45% of the average senior citizen's health care bill. We should not be piling another burden on backs already bent to the breaking point. Instead, we should be restraining the exorbitant rise in the cost of hospital care. It is not the senior citizen who is the problem, it is the cost plus system we use where the sky is the limit that threatens to bankrupt medicare and any other American who is unlucky enough to be without comprehensive health insurance. Instead of shifting costs to already hard pressed consumers, we should reform the system, as I have proposed in the CHAMPS bill, by giving medicare beneficiaries the right to enroll in health maintenance organizations and other preventive health benefits at the same or lower cost. We have many demonstration projects that prove this works well. This is the year to act on what we know. I also believe the time has come to make tax credits available for families who provide care for older relatives, for Medicare payments for hospice care, and to move forward with a so-called title XXI approach to help us develop a national policy for long term care.

And just as freedom from the fear of a financially devastating illness must remain a national commitment to our senior citizens, so should we guarantee the freedom from fear of crime. For any American to have to go through each day afraid of being mugged, robbed or terrorized is a denial of basic civil rights. Yet today we force too many senior citizens to live a life of constant concern because we don't catch those who prey on the elderly. And even when we do the punishment is inadequate to the crime. Worse still those who are attacked usually suffer twice -- for our criminal justice system treats the criminal better than the victim. In the hearings we recently held on my victim assistance bill, I won't soon forget the testimony of 77 year old Harriet Cunningham. Attacked by a purse-snatcher and thrown to the pavement she will never again be free of the crippling pain in her arm. The hoodlum who attacked her also harassed her at home, trying to scare her out of testifying in court. Today, her assailant has been released from prison and she is afraid to go anywhere outside by herself. That her story is typical of many others is a national outrage.

We need stiffer penalties for those who prey on our frail or helpless or elderly, and we need a criminal justice system that treats the victim with consideration and respect.

I believe the Senate will enact the Heinz-Laxalt victims bill this year because it is becoming clear to all that a society that denies older persons freedom from fear denies the dignity and independence that is the right of every American. But if there is one over-riding issue and concern to me particularly as Chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, it is Social

Security. As you may know, I am also a member of the National Commission on Social Security Reform and I believe it is my responsibility to be the Senates advocate for our senior citizens.

The week before last, when we were considering the budget resolution, the senate agreed with my proposal to take Social Security out of the debate on balancing the budget. I urged this course and the permanent solution of removing Social Security from the unified budget not only to remove Social Security from election year politics, but also in order to ensure that no one is ever tempted to use Social Security savings in order to pay for more military spending or to help balance the budget, and to force Congress to look at Social Security over the long-term and not just as a year to year budget item. Some of my budget committee colleagues were angry that I forced this issue, but I could not, in conscience, stand by and allow either party to play political football with out nations most important single commitment to people.

There is no program more important to the American people than Social Security. Social Security is not just keeping a promise to the 36 million retired Americans who have earned their Social Security benefits. It is just as solemn a pledge to the 115 million workers (and their families) now paying into the system who have a right to expect something in return.

Some people think Social Security ought to be a modest little supplement to other sources of retirement income like pensions, savings, annuities and retirement employment. For example, some people say that we don't need to depend on Social Security in the future because private pensions will expand. But the fact is that only 16 percent of all retirement income today comes from pensions. And the fact is that, nearly a decade after the passage of ERISA, only one of five retirees collects anything at all from a private pension. What such people need to know is that 9 million seniors are virtually dependent on Social Security -- for them that monthly check represents 70 percent or more of their entire income. And there are millions more who are only slightly less dependent on Social Security. The reality is that Social Security is, and must remain, the basic and most important source of retirement income for all Americans.

No one should deny that Social Security has no problems. We all know that in the short run, Social Security has run into a temporary solvency problem because the economy has failed to continue to grow. In the long run, thirty or forty years from now, a mounting deficit is expected because Social Security will have to support a higher proportion of retired persons on a smaller base of contributing workers.

I believe both problems are entirely manageable if we act wisely and promptly. Those who suggest that the system can only

be saved through some kind of draconian major surgery are, in my judgment, surveyors of false doom who are either ignorant, irresponsible or sadistic. The National Commission on which I serve will make comprehensive recommendations in November and to be followed by Congressional action in December.

I am not going to predict what the Commission will recommend to assure solvency, but I believe that our recommendations -- and any action taken by the Congress-- must meet several vital tests. If any proposal fails to measure up to these standards, it should be rejected.

The first test is that no one now receiving benefits should have their benefits reduced in any fashion. There are 24 million Americans - retirees and dependents who receive most - more than half - of their income from Social Security and to break our pledge to them is to force them onto welfare. Social Security is a pledge that once given must be kept.

Secondly, proposals that the Commission recommends and the Congress adopts -- whatever else they do -- must assure the long-run solvency of the Social Security system. It is not enough to guarantee the solvency of Social Security for the next 5, 10, or 15 years. We must assure its solvency for future generations as well. And the reason why is that, today, public opinion polls tell us that 3 out of every 4 workers under the age of 45 do not believe that they will receive any benefits when they retire. Without the support of these younger working Americans, whose contributions today support 70 percent of all Social Security payments, we cannot assure continuation of the system for them... or even for current beneficiaries including yourselves.

Third, in any effort to solve Social Security's long-run financing problem, we must guarantee and protect the benefits of all future beneficiaries who will be truly dependent upon Social Security for their retirement income. As is true today, we can expect that millions upon millions of future retirees will count on Social Security for all or most of their income. To break our solemn promise to those who have supported our Social Security system with their contributions today would be a total and cruel betrayal.

Finally, we must maintain the principle that our elderly and retired will share in any improvement in this Nation's standard of living. Any proposal that places an artificial cap on the cost-of-living adjustment would guarantee that older Americans would suffer a continuing and worsening erosion of their purchasing power and thus their very ability to survive.

There are many ways to assure the solvency of the system without violating any of these principles. One of my colleagues, Senator Boschwitz of Minnesota, recently went so far as to make a speech entitled "24 ways to help save Social Security" in which

the combined savings, if all were enacted, would be 120 billion just in the next three years. We don't need to enact all or any of his suggestions, we don't need to rule out additional revenues, either. The point is that in a system which will outlay 1.5 trillion over the next 5 years, a lot can be done without breaking our word. The American people have built Social Security with their hard earned contributions over the last 45 years. We in the Congress have the responsibility to strengthen and protect it for generations to come. As your Senator, I can assure you I am dedicated to this goal.

I look at my Chairmanship of the Special Committee on Aging and my position on the Social Security Reform Commission as two of the most effective tools I have to work on behalf of older Americans. What I have discussed with you today is part - but only part of an urgent national agenda to realize the full potential within every senior citizen and therefore every American. Ours must be a still broader vision where we succeed in breaking down the barrier that keep active and vital older Americans such as you from full participation in society. As I believe I proved to the delegates of the White House Conference on Aging last year, our society needs the talents, skills and experiences that older Americans want to contribute; and we will need those talents in this decade. To ignore this is to impoverish ourselves, young and old alike.

To realize this goal there is much that must be achieved. But we - you and I together - can decide today to commit ourselves to destroying the stereotype that older people are somehow a burdensome, dependent, unproductive segment of our society. My fear is that too many of our older citizens have accepted and internalized these attitudes -- to the detriment of all of us. We must make a collective effort to alter this attitude and to destroy the debilitating prejudice of ageism. The White House Conference has made a good beginning, but only you can help us finish the job in time. With your active help and participation, we can make this the year in which we really start to shatter the negative stereotype of the older American. With your help we can make this the year in which we end the annual budget threat to Social Security. With your help we can make this the year in which we begin to transform the health care system into a more humane, cost-conscious, and effective system. Working together we can really lay the groundwork for a society that respects age and the elderly, and that truly realizes the benefits of the experience, wisdom, and judgment of older Americans. Working together I know we can make a brighter future not only for older Americans, but for our children and our children's children -- older Americans of the future.