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### **Third Time's the Charm for Reestablishing the House Aging Committee**

By Herb Weiss

Twenty-six years after the House Democratic Leadership's belt-tightening efforts to save \$1.5 million resulted in the termination of the House Permanent Select Committee on Aging, U.S. Congressman David N. Cicilline reintroduces legislation to reestablish the House Aging panel, active from 1974 until 1993. Initially the House panel had 35 members but would later grow to 65 members.<sup>1</sup>

According to Cicilline, the House can readily authorize the establishment of a temporary ad hoc select committee by just approving a simple resolution that contains language establishing the committee – describing the purpose, defining members and detailing other issues that need to be addressed. Salaries and expenses of standing committees, special and select, are authorized through the Legislative Branch Appropriations bill.

At press time, for the third time, Cicilline's resolution to re-establish the House Aging Committee has been introduced and referred to the House Committee on Rules for mark up and if passed will be considered by the full House.

#### **The Nuts and Bolts**

The House Resolution (just over 245 words) reestablishes a Permanent House Select Committee on Aging, noting that the panel shall not have legislative jurisdiction, but it's authorized to conduct a continuing comprehensive study and review of the aging issues, such as income maintenance, poverty, housing, health (including medical research), welfare, employment, education, recreation, and long-term care.

Cicilline's House Resolution would have authorized the House Aging Committee to study the use of all practicable means and methods of encouraging the development of public and private programs and policies which will assist seniors in taking a full part in national life and which will encourage the utilization of the knowledge, skills, special aptitudes, and abilities of seniors to contribute to a better quality of life for all Americans.

Finally, the House Resolution would also allow the House Aging Committee to develop policies that would encourage the coordination of both governmental and private programs designed to deal with problems of aging and to review any recommendations made by the President or by the White House Conference on aging in relation to programs or policies affecting seniors.'

#### **Initial Resolution Blocked by the House GOP**

On March 1, 2016, Cicilline had introduced House Resolution 758 during the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress (2015-2016) to reestablish the House Aging Committee. It attracted Rhode Island Congressman James R. Langevin (D-RI) and 27 other cosponsors (no Republicans) out of 435

lawmakers. Seniors Task Force Co-Chairs, U.S. Congress Women Doris Matsui (D-CA) and Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) also signed onto supporting this resolution.

However, it was extremely obvious to Cicilline and the Democratic cosigners that it was important to reestablish the House Aging Committee. Correspondence penned by the Rhode Island Congressman urged House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) and the House Republican leadership to support House Resolution 758. But, ultimately no action was taken because Ryan had blocked the proposal from being considered.

At that time, Cicilline remembers that many of his Democratic House colleagues didn't think House Resolution 758 would gain much legislative traction with a Republican-controlled House. However, things are different today with Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-California) controlling the legislative agenda in the chamber.

During the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2017-2018), Cicilline continued his efforts to bring the House Select Committee on Aging back to life. On March 01, 2017, he threw House Resolution 160 into the legislative hopper. Twenty-Four Democratic lawmakers became cosponsors and but no Republicans came on board. House Speaker Ryan again derailed the Rhode Island Congressman's attempts to see his proposal passed.

### **Third Times the Charm**

Since a Republican-controlled Congress successfully blocked Cicilline's simple resolution from reaching the floor for a vote in 2017, the Democratic lawmaker has reintroduced his resolution in the current Congress with the Democrats controlling the chamber's legislative agenda.

Cicilline is working to get support from both Democratic and Republican lawmakers and has approached the House leadership for support. He plans to again reach out to aging advocacy groups for support, including the Leadership Council on Aging Organizations, consisting of some 70 national organizations, whose leadership includes the AARP, the National Council on Aging, the Alliance for Retired Americans, and the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare.

"Our nation's seniors deserve dedicated attention by lawmakers to consider the legislative priorities that affect them, including Social Security and Medicare, the rising cost of prescription drugs, poverty, housing issues, long-term care, and other important issues," said Cicilline in a statement announcing the reintroduction of his House resolution to bring back the House Aging Committee. "I'm proud to introduce this legislation today on behalf of seniors in Rhode Island and all across America," says the Rhode Island Congressman who serves on the House Democratic leadership team as Chairman of the Democratic Policy and Communications Committee.

According to Cicilline, for nearly two decades, the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Aging was tasked with "advising Congress and the American people on how to meet the challenge of growing old in America." The Select Committee did not have legislative authority,

but conducted investigations, held hearings, and issued reports to inform Congress on issues related to aging.

“The re-establishment of the Permanent Select Committee will emphasize Congress’s commitment to current and future seniors. It will also help ensure older Americans can live their lives with dignity and economic security,” says Cicilline.

### **Looking Back in Time**

In 1973, the House Permanent Select Committee on Aging was authorized by a vote of 323 to 84. While lacking legislative authority to introduce legislation (although its members often did in their standing committees), the House Aging panel would begin to put the spotlight on specific-aging issues, by broadly examining federal policies and trends. Its review of legislative issues was not limited by narrow jurisdictional boundaries set for the House standing committees.

In 1993, Congressional belt-tightening to match President Clinton’s White House staff cuts and efforts to streamline its operations would seal the fate of the House Aging Committee. House Democratic leadership cut \$1.5 million in funding to the House Aging Committee forcing it to close its doors (during the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress) because they considered it to be wasteful spending because the chamber already had 12 standing committee with jurisdiction over aging issues.

Even the intense lobbying efforts of a coalition of Washington, DC-based aging advocacy groups including AARP, National Council on Aging, National Council of Senior Citizens, and Older Woman’s League could not save the House Aging Committee. These groups warned that staff of the 12 standing committees did not have time to broadly examine aging issues as the select committee did.

Aging groups rallying in the support of maintaining funding for the House Aging Committee clearly knew its value and impact. In a March 31, 1993 article published in the *St. Petersburg Times*, reporter Rebecca H. Patterson reported that Staff Director Brian Lutz, of the Committee’s Subcommittee on Retirement Income and Employment, stated that “during its 18 years of existence the House Aging Committee had been responsible for about 1,000 hearings and reports.”

As an advocate for the nation’s seniors, the House panel prodded Congress to act in abolishing forced retirement, investigating nursing home abuses, monitoring breast screening for older woman, improving elderly housing and bringing attention to elder abuse by publishing a number reports, including *Elder Abuse: An Examination of a Hidden Problem* and *Elder Abuse: A National Disgrace*, and *Elder Abuse: A Decade of Shame and Inaction*. The Committee’s work would also lead to increased home care benefits for the aging, and establishing research and care centers for Alzheimer's Disease.

### **Aging Advocates Give Thumbs Up**

“The Senate has had the wisdom to keep its Special Committee on Aging in business which has meant a laser-like attention on major issues affecting seniors including elder abuse, especially scams and other forms of financial exploitation,” says Bill Benson, former staff director of the Committee’s Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests. The House has been without a similar body now for decades, he notes.

Benson adds, “With ten thousand Americans turning 65 each day we are witnessing the greatest demographic change in human history. It is unconscionable to not have a legislative body in the House of Representatives focused on the implications of the aging of America.”

Max Richtman, president and CEO of the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, served as staff director for the Senate Special Committee on Aging from 1987 to 1989. He agrees that it’s time once again for the House to have its own committee dedicated to older Americans’ issues.

With the graying of America it is more important now than ever that seniors’ interests are represented as prominently as possible on Capitol Hill, says Richtman. “There is so much at stake for older Americans today, including the future of Social Security and Medicare, potential cuts to Medicaid, and the myriad federal programs that lower income seniors rely upon for everything from food to home heating assistance. We fully support Rep. Cicilline’s efforts to re-establish the House Permanent Select Committee on Aging,” he states.

“We enter 2020 in the midst of the predicted aging of America including the fact that all boomers are now over age 55, says Robert Blancato, president of Matz, Blancato and Associates, who was the longest serving staff person on the original House Aging Committee, from 1978 to 1993.

“We need the specific focus that only a select committee can offer to the myriad of issues related to aging in America,” adds Blancato, noting that it would be a coveted Committee to be named to from both a policy and political perspective.

Four years after the death of Congressman Claude Pepper, (D-Florida) in 1989, the former Chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging, serving as its chair for six years, would have turned in his grave with the House eliminating his beloved select committee. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi might honor the late Congressman who was the nation’s most visible spokesperson for seniors, by bringing the House Select Committee on Aging back this Congressional session.

*Herb Weiss, LRI’12, is a Pawtucket writer covering aging, healthcare, and medical issues. To purchase Taking Charge: Collected Stories on Aging Boldly, a collection of 79 of his weekly commentaries, go to [herbweiss.com](http://herbweiss.com).*