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International Day of Persons with Disabilities
Panel on Aging and Disability
Conference Room 4, United Nations Headquarters
New York, NY
Thursday, December 3, 2009

Panel Remarks

Thanks and Acknowledgements

Thank you for inviting AARP to participate in this panel discussion. As always, it is an honor to be here at the United Nations, alongside so many diplomats, thought leaders, and advocates. It is enormously gratifying that every single year, we can anticipate the 3rd day of December, a day we dedicate as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and affirm our vision of a world in which persons with disabilities are full and equal participants in community life.

On behalf of AARP, and as a member of it's national Board of Directors, I'd like to thank the UN Department of Economic & Social Affairs and collaborating organizations for organizing the panel. I am very pleased to be here.

Aging and Disability: A United States Snapshot

Let me begin by asking you to consider the following snapshot of the aging and disabled population in the United States (US). Many of you may be familiar with some of this data – or similar data from other countries. Nevertheless, it helps to frame the scale of the challenges.

- In 2007, 30% of people ages 65 to 74 reported having one or more disabilities. 53% of people ages 75 and older reported the same;
- In 2006, 14 million people age 65 and older reported having difficulty walking a quarter of a mile, and 11.5 million reported difficulty climbing ten steps without resting;
- In 2007, 13% of older people had trouble with at least one daily activity, such as eating, dressing, and bathing, or household tasks;
- In 2005, 15,800 persons aged 65 and older died from falls. 1.8 million Older Americans were treated in emergency rooms for their injuries, and 460,000 were hospitalized.

What this data points to, is the strong connection between aging and disability. The likelihood that people can become disabled increases as they age. Whether we're talking about chronic illness, declining vision, decreased physical fitness and flexibility, or any other sort of disability, aging is a factor.

The data becomes more compelling, though, when we consider the demographic shifts taking place in so many parts of the world. From AARP's vantage point, these population shifts raise pointed questions about how increasing numbers of older persons and persons with disabilities will live: Will their communities be 'livable?' Will they have access to the health care they need? To what extent will they be able to live independently? What will their quality of life be like?

By 2050, there will be 2 billion older persons on the planet, compared with 600 million today. For the first time in history, older people will outnumber children. As well, it is estimated that 650 million people around the world are presently living with disability,

70% of this number in developing countries where conditions facilitating disability tend to be more prevalent.

Demographic shifts will ultimately re-engineer contexts of development and security around the world, and test the capacity of governments to provide fundamental quality of life for hundreds of millions of older disabled citizens. Social compacts will need to be recalibrated and support systems transformed to meet this need.

AARP and Disability

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was a landmark decision for the US.

AARP is a leading advocate for older people in the US and around the world and has been increasingly responsive to the needs of members who have disabilities. AARP works collaboratively to complement the efforts of other disability rights groups by using its vast resources to support people over 50 with disabilities. And that is precisely what AARP has been doing for the past decade or so.

We issued two reports called “Beyond 50” that address disability issues. We have partnered with organizations interested in developing mobility options for older people with disabilities such as AgeLab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on new vehicles for the disabled and with Easter Seals on community transportation initiatives. And we have collaborated with the National Association of Home Builders in sponsoring an awards program for home design that accommodates all abilities.

Aging in Place

If there is a unifying theme for AARP's engagement on disability issues, it is aging in place. This idea has, in fact, become a cornerstone of AARP's thinking.

For older persons worldwide, there really is no place like home. The research is remarkably consistent in showing that it is extremely important for older people (with and without disabilities) to be able to remain in their homes, remain in their communities, and stay out of institutions. A recent AARP survey indicated that nearly 90% of the 50+ population wish to stay in their homes and communities as they age, where they have strong social networks and a sense of familiarity. Certainly, no surprise!

Aging in place offers numerous social and financial benefits, among them, life satisfaction, health, and self-esteem, three keys to successful aging. Researchers have also found a strong correlation between active participation in the community and general life satisfaction. According to one survey, 46% of people with disabilities, compared to 23% of people without disabilities, reported feeling isolated from their communities.

So, I return to the pointed questions concerning how we will meet the practical day to day needs of increasing numbers of older persons and persons with disabilities.

Livable Communities

Building on the aging in place theme, AARP addresses these questions through the prism of the "livable community."

AARP has defined a “livable community” to be one that has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options, which together facilitate personal independence and the engagement of residents in civic and social life. When communities become more “livable”, when they plan ahead and work with builders, civil engineers, and municipal leaders to ensure people feel welcomed, are not inconvenienced by their disabilities or their age, people can enjoy a high quality of life.

AARP is actively engaged in two aspects of livable communities: housing and mobility. On the housing front, we continue to promote the concept of visitability – a homebuilding approach that routinely integrates core accessibility features such as zero-step entrances, wide doorways, and main-floor bathroom facilities.

On the mobility front, AARP is part of the Complete Streets Coalition which educates the public on roadway design and advocates for policies that balance the competing needs of all modes of transportation, including biking, driving, or walking.

As people age, however, it gets harder and harder to hold on to that sense of freedom. Disability, frailty, health issues, and other constraints get in the way of living with total independence and control. In livable communities that offer mobility choices, it IS possible for people to maintain independence and quality of life as they age.

In sum, AARP believes that livable communities benefit everyone, and meet the needs of older persons or persons with disabilities to be able to live anywhere. With the proper planning and foresight, anyplace can be made to be livable or visitable.

The MDG Angle

So, in its own small way, AARP likes to think it can be helpful in modeling practical strategies for meeting the needs of persons with disabilities so that they can be full participants in their communities. And this is precisely where we can find common cause with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In seeking to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, for example, we must set our sights on breaking the bidirectional link between poverty and disability, in which precarious living conditions lead to disability and the exclusion of the disabled from community life exacerbates poverty.

Or in seeking to ensure environmental sustainability, we can mitigate environmental dangers that can lead to the onset of many disabilities, and improve access to clean water and sanitation so that the disabled may more readily take part in economic and social activities.

The Historic Moment

To conclude, I would suggest that this is a historic moment for the disabled community worldwide. It is rife with opportunity because of what we know about impending demographic shifts. And there appears to be dynamism, innovation, and promise.

With a new UN Messenger of Peace on Disability, we can raise global awareness on issues related to persons with disabilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is advancing. The recent signing and ratification of the Convention by the US is most welcome indeed.

And from where AARP sits, it is as if conversations we have been having for years – on mobility, livability, care, and design for older people – have all gained traction at once. Indeed, I am quite confident that we have the means, the constituency, and the political will to achieve the MDGs in a way that is responsive to persons with disabilities.