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Social Security in spotlight at Conference on Aging

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MANCHESTER – The national president of the AARP urged the 500-member audience attending the New Hampshire Conference on Aging on Thursday to dispel stereotypes about growing old by challenging them.

But it wasn't until Marie Smith, a former employee and manager at the Social Security Administration, rallied the troops to support "moderate" and "sensible" changes to Social Security that she drew a round of applause that echoed across the hall at the Center of New Hampshire-Radisson Hotel, where the fifth annual conference was being held.

"What we cannot do is let a solution be worse than the problem," Smith said. "Private accounts that drain money out of Social Security clearly are not a solvency option. They would cut guaranteed benefits, create a mountain of debt and pass a huge bill on to future generations."

Smith said Americans now and in future generations deserve a Social Security program that relies on a stable, risk-free foundation that can't be "outlived" by contributors and provides disability and survivor benefits to protect workers and their families. The program should invite "full participation" to be fair, include adequate benefits for low-wage retirees, and base benefits on contributions with annual adjustments that reflect the cost of living.

She urged the audience to hold Congress accountable and invited listeners to join an AARP rally in Concord today intended to send a message to Washington.

"We're going to send a loud and clear message to the United States Congress that now is the time to put aside polarizing ideas that won't work and get serious about strengthening Social Security so that it will be fair – and will be there for everybody," she said.

During her 30-minute address, Smith touched on a number of issues near and dear to older citizens' hearts: age stereotyping that defies national statistics about aging; health maintenance strategies that enrich the quality of life in the later years; and opportunities for social and political activism, including the challenge of helping to change the nation's healthcare system.

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"The size of our 65-and-older population is expected to double over the next 30 years. The fastest growing segment of our population is those 85 years of age and older – with the second fastest being those 100 years of age and older," Smith said. "Many membership organizations would be delighted to have 35,000 members. AARP has more than 35,000 members who are over 100 years old!"

Smith said stereotypes about old age are so ingrained that during the filming of the movie "Cocoon," directed by Ron Howard, the three stars, all over 70, were told they weren't acting their ages.

"He (Howard) decided that these veteran actors weren't acting like 'old people.' Their posture was too straight. Their step was too lively. Their speech was too clear," said Smith. "So what did young Mr. Howard do? He hired acting instructors to teach these 70-year-olds how to walk, talk, and gesture in a way that better fit his image of 'old people.' "

During her speech, Smith pointed out that about one in five older Americans lives in a nursing home; that most older people are not sick or frail; and that successful treatments for Alzheimer's disease, osteoporosis, and incontinence could cut the nation's nursing home population in half.

She said a recent survey of Americans between 75 and 84 found that three out of four reported no disability, while after 85, four in every 10 reported being fully functional.

"People of all ages now go to school to learn new skills, to develop abilities, to train for a new profession or just to be more knowledgeable," Smith said. "And people are working well into their 80s and 90s with no thought of retirement."

But Smith also stressed that wellness in old age depends on personal responsibility – strategies that include attention to nutrition and exercise as well as an optimistic outlook.

These issues, however, require social and political supports, she continued, ticking off a list that included strengthening Social Security and access to health care and prescription medications, and establishing effective community transportation systems.

"We cannot afford to wait until the swelling populations of older Americans force us to make the changes necessary to make our communities more livable," Smith said. "We need to begin preparing right now."

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