

It is my pleasure to address the Eighth Statewide Convention of the Massachusetts Older Americans, and I welcome the Older Americans to the City of Lowell.

The theme of this conference, "the unfinished revolution", is a fitting one because it reflects not only a growing sense of unity among senior citizens but also a growing awareness in government and society in general that we have a special responsibility to our senior citizens who have contributed so much to society.

I would like to speak today, therefore, about the efforts in Congress to improve the quality of life for our older Americans. Primary among our responsibilities to the elderly are adequate housing, responsible and low cost health care and economically realistic income maintenance formulas.

As a member of the House Banking and Currency Subcommittee on Housing, I have become acutely aware of the crisis of elderly housing and neighborhood deterioration. I believe that the Congress should treat the problem of elderly housing as a major legislative priority. It is widely acknowledged that a significant number of elderly people live in homes which are unsuitable because of deteriorating neighborhoods and are otherwise not within reasonable proximity to shopping areas, recreational activities, and social services. In many cases, older Americans cannot afford decent housing and, due to property taxes, all too frequently cannot afford to remain in homes which they have occupied most of their lives.

In response to the absence of sufficient elderly housing, the Congress recently voted into law the Housing Authorization Act of 1976,

authorizing an additional \$2.3 billion over the next three fiscal years to fund the Section 202 Housing For The Elderly Program. This legislation authorizes direct loans to public and private nonprofit sponsors wishing to develop rental housing for persons age 62 and over.

This senior citizen housing program was enacted in 1959, phased out in 1969, and reauthorized as part of the 1974 Housing and Community Development Act. Prior to the enactment of the 1976 Housing Authorization Act, the Republican Administration would permit only construction loans to be made for senior citizens' housing. The 1976 Act directed the Administration to make the Federal assistance available for long-term financing at a reduced interest rate. Prior to the Housing Authorization Act the interest rate on elderly housing financed under the 202 Program was approximately 9%. By changing the formula upon which the interest rate charges were calculated, the Housing Authorization Act reduced the interest rate on these direct Federal loans from 9% to approximately 6½%, thereby reducing the rent that an elderly tenant would have to pay for such an assisted project. The reduced interest rate and the additional authorizations provided for elderly housing were strongly opposed by the Ford Administration, but were enacted into law at the insistence of the Congress. By providing additional multi-year authorizations totaling \$2.3 billion, it is estimated that some 35,000 units of assisted housing for our senior citizens will be provided on an annual basis.

The House Banking and Currency Committee has conducted hearings on legislation to revitalize deteriorating city neighborhoods. As a cosponsor of the Neighborhood Revitalization Act, I am hopeful that the

role of older neighborhoods in our society will ultimately be appreciated. It is vital that our government and financial institutions acknowledge the crucial function of our nation's older neighborhoods and pledge their support to their restoration. These neighborhoods allow our older Americans the opportunity to enjoy a community in which they have invested much time, effort, and pride. They provide a forum for social and cultural exchange and in short -- are the color of our melting pot society.

Legislation to reduce property tax burdens on the elderly, the Older Americans Assistance Act, has been introduced in the 94th Congress and referred to the Ways and Means Committee. This bill, H.R. 3523, would have established a \$500 million per year trust fund within the Treasury Department from which each state would be allocated a specific amount for the financial support of property tax relief programs for the elderly. I anticipate that the question of property tax relief to elderly renters and homeowners will be addressed in more detail in the 95th Congress.

It is clear that our retirement income formulas for older Americans are not responsive to economic reality. In 1974, 50 percent of all older families had incomes below \$7,300. Sixteen percent of all older persons aged 65 and over were living below the poverty threshold of \$3,000 for older couples and \$2,300 for older persons living apart from relatives. In many cases, this poverty is the result of government policies which are insensitive to the needs of the elderly. Our formulas for Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, and Food Stamps in many ways

Paul E. Tsongas
October 1, 1976
Page Four

cannot meet the day-to-day needs of older Americans on fixed incomes.

As you probably know, the House passed and sent to the Senate legislation to improve the Supplemental Security Income Program, including an amendment which I cosponsored involving the S.S.I. pass-along. This would insure that SSI recipients in Massachusetts would receive the full benefit of federal SSI cost-of-living increases.

Minor changes in the Social Security Act and the Food Stamp program were also legislated this year. However, a far-reaching reform of our income maintenance formulas is crucial if we are to be sure that our senior citizens can retire in dignity and comfort.

As a cosponsor of the Kennedy-Corman National Health Insurance Bill, I look forward to the eventual establishment of a comprehensive health care program which will respond to the needs of all Americans, regardless of financial status. I was an enthusiastic supporter of the Health Services Act which is now public law. This legislation authorizes the creation and expansion of home health care systems for the elderly as well as the implementation of a federal study to determine how the health care needs of the elderly can best be met. These efforts will be supplemented by the Older Americans Amendments of 1975 which expand community social services and nutrition programs for senior citizens.

Action in the 94th Congress to improve housing, expand home health care and senior information services, establish Community Service Employment for older Americans and related programs are important advances in responding to the problems of Older Americans.

Page Five
October 1, 1976
Paul Tsongas

However, we must continue to press vigorously to amend our senior income maintenance formulas and alleviate the tax burdens on the elderly. And we should see to it that all Americans receive quality health care. It is crucial that we afford our older Americans the opportunity to continue to lead productive and meaningful lives after retirement, unencumbered by the fear of inadequate health care, imminent poverty, and dangerously deteriorated neighborhoods. I am hopeful that further strides toward these ends will be made in the 95th Congress.