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## **Congressman Cicilline poised to carry out Claude Pepper's legacy as fiery advocate on aging**

**By Herb Weiss**

Congressman David Cicilline is poised to offer a resolution to re-establish the House Permanent Select Committee on Aging, whose work came to an end in early January 1993, at the conclusion of the 102nd Congress. At that time, House leadership was under pressure to reduce costs and to streamline the legislative process. Recently the Washington, DC-based Leadership Council of Aging Organizations, a coalition of 69 aging organization, has recently called on the House to support Cicilline's measure when introduced.

The resolution to approve the House Aging Committee was passed on October 8, 1974, by a 299–44 margin in the House. Its legislative duties expired during the 103rd Congress, as the House leadership was under pressure to reduce its internal costs and to streamline the legislative process.

“After a lifetime of working hard and playing by the rules, Rhode Island seniors should be able to enjoy their retirement years with dignity and peace of mind. Re-establishing the House Aging Committee will help make this goal a reality. From protecting Social Security and Medicare to lower the costs of housing and prescription drugs, this Committee will help ensure we can deliver better results for seniors here in Rhode Island and across America,” says Cicilline.

### **Looking Back: Memories of Former Congressional Staffers**

According to NCPSSM's Richtman, who served as staff director for the Senate Special Committee on Aging from 1987 to 1989, the House Aging Committee historically served as a the select committee that fostered bipartisan debate from various political and philosophical viewpoints to promote political consensus that, in turn, impacted the legislation that was taken up in authorizing committees. This selects committee would have an opportunity to more fully explore a range of aging issues and innovations that cross Committee jurisdiction, while holding field hearings, convening remote hearings, engaging communities, and promoting understanding and dialogue.

America's aging population warrants reestablishing the House Aging Committee, says Professor Fernando Torres-Gil, M.S.W., Ph.D., Social Welfare and Public Policy Director, Center for Policy Research on Aging at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs. “By 2029, all 80-plus individuals born between 1946 and 1964 will be 65 years of age and over. These so-called “aging baby boomers” will create challenges and opportunities that the Congress must examine, understand and respond to with legislation, oversight and partnerships with government, stakeholders and advocates,” says Torres Gill, who served as the select committee's staff director from 1985 to 1987.

According to Torres-Gil, the complexities of an aging society will increase given the pandemic, the growing voices of immigrants, ethnic and minority groups and the challenges for ensuring the financial viability of legacy entitlement programs: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the Older Americans Act. “Now is the time to bring back this vital congressional “thought leader” on legislative action for the aging and diversity of the United States,” he says.

To illustrate the importance of the House Aging Committee, Bill Benson, Staff Director of the Committee's Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests from 1987 to 1990, (chaired by Congressmen Don Bonker (D-WA) and later James Florio (D-NJ), points to his subcommittee's work on housing issues. “Both before, during, and after my tenure with the subcommittee, we were able to

dig deeply into a multitude of significant housing-related programs and problems facing older Americans. During my tenure alone we conducted at least a dozen hearings just on housing, addressing affordability, quality and appropriateness, contributing significantly to legislative action,” he said.

“I am certain that in just that over a two-year period we held far more hearings on housing and aging than have been conducted, in total, in the nearly three decades since. During this time, there has been almost no congressional attention to housing for the elderly. It is no surprise that today we see homelessness among older adults increasing rapidly, among many other housing problems facing older Americans,” adds Benson, stressing that resurrecting the House Aging Committee is crucial to housing policy for the elderly, along with so many other crucial issues.

### **The Legacy of the Late Claude Pepper**

Kathy Gardner served as Claude Pepper’s staff director of the Subcommittee on Aging and Long-Term Care, from 1984 until his death in 1989, and continued to serve Pepper’s successor, Edward Roybal, until the House Aging Committee was abolished

According to Gardner, few know that it was Pepper who was largely responsible for sponsoring or cosponsoring legislation to establish the majority of the Institutes of Health (including the National Heart and Cancer Institutes, the Deafness and Arthritis Institutes, the National Institute of Mental Health and six other Institutes). “One of his last legislative improvements to the National Institutes of Health was the establishment of the National Center for Biotechnology Information at the National Library of Medicine – without which the mapping of the human genome – which will unlock so many of the mysteries of disease — would not have been possible, she adds.

Between 1982 to 1990, Melanie Modlin served as a Professional Staff Member for the full Committee and ultimately became Gardner’s Deputy Director for the Subcommittee on Health and Long-Term Care. She remembered how the House Aging Committee investigated “Diploma mills,” by setting up its own diploma mill, then a phony accreditation to give the investigators credence. The select committee also held one of the first hearings on Alzheimer’s disease, which was just beginning to become a household word.

Modlin recalled that her Subcommittee was tasked with creating a universal health care bill. “Once more, Pepper and the House Aging Committee was a step ahead of the curve,” she says, noting that this debate has come back to Congress.

**Robert S. Weiner, President, Robert Weiner Associates News, who was a close friend and confidant of Pepper, clearly knew the importance and impact of Pepper’s House Aging Committee on the daily quality of life of seniors. Weiner, who served as Staff Director for the Subcommittee on Health and Long-term care from 1975 to 1977 and Chief of Staff of the full Aging Committee, from 1976 to 1980, remembered, “I was thunderbolt struck when [GOP House Speaker] Newt Gingrich abolished the Aging Committee – the Senate wisely kept theirs.”**

**“Congressman Claude Pepper used the House Aging Committee as a force for the elderly. Bringing it back would be of immeasurable help regardless of which party has the White House in assuring the best health care programs possible, stopping any raiding of the Social Security Trust Fund, and protecting seniors,” says Weiner.**

**“One of the best known aging accomplishments of Claude Pepper was to end mandatory retirement by amending the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, remembered Weiner,**

noting that this would get him the cover of Time Magazine with the tag line the “Spokesman for the Elderly.”

"It was Pepper's idea to bring in Col. Harland Sanders as a witness. Many still remember the 81-year-old Kentucky Fried Chicken King, wearing his trademark spotless white suit and black string tie, and testifying against mandatory retirement in federal jobs," said Weiner, noting that a few years later it would end up also in the private sector, and the bill would pass 359 to 2 in the House and 89 to 10 in the Senate, with President Carter signing the bill despite strong opposition of the Business Roundtable and big labor, he said.

"Cicilline's best strategy would be to personally talk with the House leadership trio of Pelosi, Hoyer, and Clyburn, and persuade one or all of them to ask the others to bring the bill to a caucus vote. If you get these leaders, the deal is pretty much done."

Weiner also noted that among the House Aging Committee's other accomplishments under Pepper's Chairmanship were legislation creating standards for supplemental insurance and holding hearings to expose cancer insurance duplication. "Witnesses were literally forced to wear paper bags over their heads to avoid harassment by the insurance companies. That legislation became law," he said.

### **In Summary...**

Over thirty years after the death of Claude Pepper (D-FL) in 1989, no national advocate has emerged to take the place of the former Chairman of the House Aging Committee, who served as its chair for six years. As a result, House Democratic lawmakers and aging advocates are forced every new session of Congress to fend off proposals to cut aging programs, Social Security, and Medicare.

Gardner believes that Cicilline's efforts to reestablish this needed Select Committee would be a salute to Pepper, the nation's most visible spokesperson for seniors, and more importantly to his desire to establish a "legislative voice" for our nation's most vulnerable population – our senior citizens."

Hopefully, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi will agree with Gardner's assessment. If only for the sake of the nation's seniors.

Herb Weiss, LRI '12, is a Pawtucket 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).