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Move Afoot to Restore House Aging Committee with Pepper Legacy to Protect Seniors



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Pandemic deaths, Nursing Homes, Home Care, Social Security, Medicare Would Be improved by Sunlight of Oversight

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By Bob Weiner and Ben Lasky

Claude Pepper's legacy in Miami and throughout Florida, with roads, bridges, senior centers, parks, forums and organizations named after him, is remarkable. Even in Tallahassee, at Florida State University, there is the Claude Pepper Center and a library in his name, because Pepper was the state's senator before serving as the Miami congressman. As senator, he was Roosevelt's representative in Congress and created Land-Lease and defended the New Deal. He was on the cover of *Time Magazine* on May 2, 1938.

But the largest part of Pepper's legacy, especially as he grew older, was chairing the House Aging Committee, which featured banning mandatory retirement (with Colonel Sanders as a witness), protecting nursing homes, expanding home health care, and protecting Social Security with solvency through 2034 (agreed to by President Ronald Reagan, Speaker Tip O'Neill, Pepper himself and the entire House and Senate). That put him on the cover of *Time Magazine* again on April 25, 1983, as America's "Spokesman For the Elderly."

He did such a good job with the Aging Committee that Speaker O'Neill made him chairman of the House's most powerful committee, the House Rules Committee. Pepper then became the Ranking Democrat on the Aging Committee, but effectively ran it, because you could only chair one committee. We remember when some people started saying Pepper was "too old" for House leadership because he was in his 80s. O'Neill's Chief of Staff, Gary Hymel, told us, "No, we know what Claude can do."

Pepper was his own best messenger when he said, "Ageism is as odious as racism or sexism."

Pepper's bill that banned mandatory retirement passed 359-2 in the House and 89-10 in the Senate.

Now, Pepper's legacy may be enhanced further by a move to protect the elderly with a revived House Aging Committee, which was abolished when the House killed off all Select Committees in 1993.

The elderly are now threatened with Social Security "reforms," meaning cuts. Senior citizens also disproportionately died from Covid in nursing homes in Florida, New York and around the country. More than 200,000 have died in nursing homes. Forbes called "The Most Important Statistic" the fact that 42% of US Covid deaths in the first five months of the pandemic happened in nursing homes and assisted-living facilities. That number later went down to around 33%. When standards, distance standards, vaccines, and transparency started to kick in (under pressure in many facilities), it got a little better but for many it was too little too late. Tens of thousands died because healthcare workers failed to follow the transparency, staffing, and safety standards that Pepper had passed into law in nursing homes.

Once vaccines became widely available in 2021, a majority of nursing-home workers remained unvaccinated for six more months. Nursing homes and assisted living facilities were let off the hook by governors from Ron DeSantis (R-FL) to Andrew Cuomo (D-NY) for hiding their number of Covid deaths.

A reactivated House Aging Committee is pivotal. The legislation is authored by David Cicilline (D-RI) and championed by activist Herbert Weiss. It has 41 cosponsors. Whip Jim Clyburn, 80 (D-SC), often reminds people that the "wisdom of elders" complements the enthusiasm of youth--we need both. Strong supporters include Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Doris Matsui (D-CA)--they lead the Democratic Caucus's sub-group on Aging.

Key Florida sponsors include Rep. Ted Deutch (D-Palm Beach), Rep. Lois Frankel (D-West Palm Beach), Rep. Charlie Crist (D-St. Petersburg), Rep. Kathy Castor (D-Tampa Bay) and Rep. Darren Soto (D-Orlando).

The National Leadership Council on Aging, consisting of 69 organizations and representing the nation's over 100 million citizens over 50 (over six million in Florida) and 50 million citizens over 65 (three million in Florida), has just sent a letter, with the effort led by Chair Katie Smith Sloan and former Senate Aging Committee Staff Director Max Richtman, to all 435 members of the House. The Council asks members to cosponsor the bill in order to drive the House Democratic Caucus to approve it and bring it to the floor for a vote.

As a House committee, it only needs the House's approval, where there is now a majority of Democrats. As the country's preeminent state for seniors, all 27 Florida representatives should cosponsor this legislation and should be joined by all of the House Democratic Caucus and many Republicans to gain a persuasive 100 to 150 cosponsors for this resolution. This should be approved by the caucus and congress now, including with Republican support so that it isn't a partisan issue in a new congress.

The Aging Leadership Council letter, sent last week, asserts, "Now is the opportune time to reestablish the House Select Committee on Aging. Every day, 12,000 Americans turn 60. By 2030, nearly 75 million --or 20 percent of the country-- will be 65 or older. As America grows older, the need for support and services... also increases."

Older voters vote Democratic and Republican. It's close. In 2020, while Joe Biden won the popular vote by seven million, Donald Trump won the senior vote 52% to 47%. It's not a matter of party. Seniors' quality of life is not political.

With Pepper's legacy as the guide, pandemic deaths, nursing homes, home care, Social Security, and Medicare would be improved by Sunlight of Oversight.

Robert Weiner was the Chief of Staff of the House Aging Committee under Cong. Pepper and senior staff in the Clinton and Bush White Houses and for Cong. Koch, Conyers, Rangel, Sen. Ted Kennedy, and Four-Star Gen. Barry McCaffrey. Ben Lasky is senior policy analyst for Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.

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