Highlights of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth

DEAN W. ROBERTS, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.P.H.A.
Representative of the American Public Health Association

In response to invitations from President Truman, almost six thousand delegates from all parts of the country and from many foreign nations converged on the nation’s capital on December 3 to participate in the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth. Both in terms of the size of the group and the leadership drawn together, this White House Conference eclipsed the four conferences held in prior decades. The attendance was more than double the size of any of the previous similar conferences and necessitated the use of the largest gathering place in Washington, the National Guard Armory, for its meetings. For the first time, youths themselves were invited to participate and over four hundred of them attended, representing every state in the Union.

The custom of holding decennial White House Conferences to deal with the health and welfare needs of children was initiated by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909, and similar conferences have been held at approximately ten year intervals irrespective of the party in power. The first conference was instrumental in the creation of the Children’s Bureau in 1912 and gave momentum to the national movement to help dependent children stay in their own homes rather than in institutions.

The 1919 conference called by President Wilson formulated the first important body of child health and child welfare standards; speeded up public demand for child labor legislation; and paved the way for the Sheppard-Towner Act, which was the first federal-state cooperative program for improving state and local services for children. In 1930 the conference called by President Hoover produced the most comprehensive statement of the needs of children ever assembled in one set of documents. Its main conclusions were summarized in a Children’s Charter which served for many years as a guidepost in this field. The 1940 White House Conference on Children in a Democracy was broader in scope than the others, considering for the first time economic resources, religion, housing, and recreation, as well as health, welfare, and education. It added impetus to the development of services to crippled children.

There can be no doubt but that the first four White House Conferences were major factors in shaping the health and welfare movements as related to children. What then happened in the first week of December in Washington that may influence public health programs and related fields during the coming decade?

THE PLANNING

In order to understand the meaning of the Midcentury Conference, one must realize that it was not limited to an isolated four day meeting. Actually, these four days represent only one of the major episodes in the months and years of preparation for the conference itself and the detailed arrangements for follow-up. The significance of the prepara-
tory period may in fact outweigh the importance of the conference itself, for in this two year period, the Governor of each state established a committee or commission to study and evaluate the needs of children. The state committees in turn established committees in over one thousand local communities. The state and local groups approached the problem of their youth with such interest and vigor that their accomplishments cannot be doubted, irrespective of the actions taken by the national conference. Each state committee wrote a formal report which will become part of the proceedings of the National Conference. Representatives of state and local groups were brought together in the Advisory Council on State and Local Action which participated in planning the national meeting. This Council issued a printed report on State and Local Action which was made available to delegates prior to the meeting. It is estimated that over one hundred thousand individuals participated in the work of these state and local groups.

Over 460 national organizations, including the American Public Health Association, which have particular interests in work with children participated in the conference. Their representatives were brought together in an Advisory Council on Participation of National Organizations which met several times during 1950. A large number of these organizations submitted reports to the conference reviewing their work with youth and their estimates of the unmet needs. A similar Advisory Council on Youth Participation was made up of representatives of youth organizations. The Advisory Council on Federal Government Participation was made up of representatives of federal government agencies operating substantial programs dealing with youth. Each of the four advisory councils met several times during 1950 and participated in planning the conference. Their reports were printed and distributed to each delegate in advance of the national conference.

The "Chart Book" developed by the Advisory Council on Federal Government Participation is an outstanding conference document. Its seventy-five color charts depict the relationship of children to housing, economic status, disease, education, and specific social problems. It is an important source of clear, illustrative material showing statistically the problems of children and their relationship to a wide variety of environmental factors. Alert health officers will want to secure a copy of this booklet.

Another element in the preparation for the conference is the Fact Finding Report developed by a special technical committee. Over a thirteen month period the staff of this committee combed the nation for technical data related to the needs of children. An enormous amount of material was secured from universities, government agencies, and national organizations working with youth. The purpose was to assemble for the use of delegates all technical data which would be useful to them in pursuing their problems. A 170 page digest of this technical material was distributed to all delegates, but the full Fact Finding Report which will be approximately ten times as large will not appear until spring. Although an interesting document, the Digest published in time for use by the conference delegates was such a boiled-down version that its usefulness was impaired. It appears to be more a compendium of opinion than a book of facts.

It will be a surprise to most that the conference was financed for the most part by voluntary contributions from foundations and national organizations interested in young people. Congress made two appropriations of $75,000 each, but the total contributions of voluntary groups was considerably larger.
THE CONFERENCE

In the language of the National Committee, the Midcentury Conference, "bases its concern for children on the primacy of spiritual values, democratic practice and the dignity and worth of every individual. Accordingly, the purpose of the conference is to consider how we can develop in children the mental, emotional and spiritual qualities essential to individual happiness and responsible citizenship and what physical, economic and social conditions are deemed necessary to this development." This theme was one which presented a broad challenge not only to those in the field of public health, but also to workers in education, religion, social work, and recreation. Indeed, outstanding representatives of these disciplines and many more were brought together in the conference. In order that the needs of minority groups might be fully considered, provision was made for representation by minority racial groups in numbers roughly proportioned to their contribution to the population of the nation. In addition some two hundred foreign delegates representing thirty nations were present as observers. Those planning the conference were faced with the enormous task of developing a procedure for the conference which would provide the delegates with the necessary technical information and a real opportunity for personal participation and contribution to its work. The plan developed included major addresses by eminent authorities and a series of thirty-one panel discussions for the development of substantive material relative to the theme of the conference. At these panels delegates presented data and discussed it, but did not develop conclusions or recommendations. This was the province of the work groups which constituted the real core of the conference. There were originally thirty-five work groups, but because of size some subdivided into smaller sections. The work group most closely identified with public health was "Health Services in Relation to Healthy Personality Development," led by Dr. Hugh Leavell, Chairman of the Executive Board of the American Public Health Association. The recommendations of the work groups were presented to the conference as a whole in a plenary session at which time formal action was taken.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of the conference were so numerous that it is not possible to give them all here. There were some, however, that will be of particular interest to health workers and may be summarized as follows:

That prompt action be taken at the national level to provide funds to supplement those of states and localities and to stimulate the early development of adequate local health service throughout the country.

That all professions dealing with children have, as an integral part of their preparation, a core of common experiences on fundamental concepts of human behavior, including the need to consider the total person as well as any specific disorder; the inter-relationship of physical, mental, social, religious, and cultural forces; the importance of interpersonal relationships; and the role of self-understanding; and emphasis on the positive recognition and production of healthy personalities and the treatment of variations; and that lay people be oriented through formal or informal education to an understanding of the importance of the foregoing concepts.

That steps be taken at national, state, and local levels to improve the facilities and increase the output of professional schools preparing persons for services to children.

That governmental and voluntary agencies work to meet the needs of wives and children of the personnel in the armed forces moving to new communities to insure their absorption into community life and the provision of adequate housing, health, educational, recreational and spiritual services to meet their needs.

That public low rent housing projects, cooperative housing for middle-income families, slum clearance and urban redevelopment be carried forward at an early date.

That new housing facilities give special attention to health, recreation, and social needs.
That youth representatives be placed on boards of various community agencies in order that they may participate in planning and operation of community programs.

That minimum standards be enforced by appropriate state agencies for day-care nursery schools, kindergarten, foster care homes, and hospital care.

That migrant and seasonal workers be given all of the health, housing, sanitation, and educational services available to other children.

That local boards of education accept full responsibility for providing adequately for the education of children with physical and mental handicaps.

That racial segregation in education be abolished.

That further federal aid be provided for education in tax-supported public schools.

That television be more widely used as a medium for mass education.

That school lunches be provided and that children unable to pay for their lunches be furnished them free.

EVALUATION

The writer approached this conference with real doubts as to the possibility of substantial accomplishments by a gathering of so large a number of individuals representing such a variance of interests and attitudes, unaccustomed to working together, and attempting to resolve their differences and reach conclusions within the brief span of four days. Nevertheless, with the conference behind us, it appears that most of these handicaps were satisfactorily overcome by careful planning and hard work by a diligent staff and a large number of interested volunteers. As would be expected, there was a certain amount of special pleading by self interested groups, but this was not a dominant feature, and the delegates themselves did not permit it to deviate them from their principal purposes. Within the limitations imposed by size, recommendations were developed in a democratic manner and there was a reasonable opportunity for any delegate with a real conviction to have his point of view considered and acted upon. The fact of having many different professional interests represented by distinguished leaders was both stimulating and deflating; stimulating because of so much constructive thinking on the problems of youth from so many different points of view, deflating to those who had come to regard their particular line of work as the only important one.

The fact that the conference was conducted under the shadow of one of the most critical world crises of our time forced delegates to think in terms of fundamentals rather than to waste time on superficial considerations.

It is too early to evaluate the significance of the conference in terms of its effect on the lives of children. It can be said without reservation, however, that it focused a clear spotlight on the key importance of personality development in our society. The influence of our educational, social, health, recreational, and religious institutions and practices on personality development was analyzed with great care, and important recommendations for the future were adopted. If even a small fraction of the recommendations are carried out by families, communities, private agencies, and government, this Midcentury White House Conference will take its place among the previous four as a landmark in the strengthening of our social, health, religious, and educational services for children.