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Florida's Claude Pepper was a giant in Congress. It should restore his committee on aging | Opinion
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Opinion BY ROBERT WEINER AND BEN LASKY UPDATED MARCH 21, 2022 7:20 PM



Claude Pepper once said that, "Ageism is as odious as racism or sexism." CLAUDE PEPPER FOUNDATION

Claude Pepper's legacy in Miami and throughout Florida, with roads, bridges, senior centers, parks, forums and organizations named after him is remarkable. He was on the cover of *Time Magazine* on May 2, 1938. He was in the U.S. Senate at the time. But the most significant part of Pepper's legacy, especially as he grew older, was returning to Congress years after he lost his Senate seat and chairing the House Select Committee on Aging. Pepper pushed the ban on mandatory retirement (with Kentucky Fried Chicken's Colonel Sanders as a witness), protected nursing homes, expanded home healthcare and bolstered Social Security, with solvency through 2034. 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 that House Speaker Tip O'Neill made him chairman of the House Rules Committee, the chamber's most powerful. Pepper then became the ranking Democrat on the Aging Committee, but effectively ran it, because you could only chair one committee. 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 with a revived House Aging Committee, which was abolished when the House killed off all select committees in 1993. The elderly now are threatened with Social Security "reforms," meaning cuts. Senior citizens also disproportionately died from COVID-19 in nursing homes in Florida, New York and around the country. More than 200,000 have died in nursing homes; 42% of U.S. COVID deaths in the first five months of the pandemic happened in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, which *Forbes* called "the most important statistic."

When distancing, masking, vaccines and transparency started to kick in for patients and staff (under pressure), it got a little better, but for many it was too little, too late. Thousands died because healthcare workers failed to follow the transparency, staffing and safety standards that Pepper had passed into law for nursing homes. Nursing homes and assisted-living facilities were let off the hook by governors from Florida's Ron DeSantis to Andrew Cuomo, then governor of New York, for hiding their states' number of COVID deaths.

A reactivated House Aging Committee is pivotal. The legislation is authored by David Cicilline, D-R.I. It has 41 cosponsors. At 80, House Whip Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., often reminds people that the "wisdom of elders" complements the enthusiasm of youth. Strong supporters include Democrats Jan Schakowsky, of Illinois, and Doris Matsui, of California. They lead the Democratic Caucus' sub-group on Aging.

Key Florida sponsors include Democrats Reps. Ted Deutch, Lois Frankel, Charlie Crist, Kathy Castor and Darren Soto.

The National Leadership Council on Aging, 69 organizations representing the nation's more than 100 million citizens over 50 and 50 million citizens over 65 has just sent a letter, led by Chair Katie Smith Sloan and former Senate Aging Committee Staff Director Max Richtman, to all members of the House. The Council asks members to cosponsor the bill in order to compel 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. Florida is one of the country's preeminent states for seniors — there are more than 6 million citizens over 50 and 3 million over 65 — all 27 Florida representatives should cosponsor this legislation. They should be joined by all of the House Democratic Caucus and many Republicans to gain a persuasive 100 to 150 cosponsors.

This should be approved now 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.

Read more at: <https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article259629314.html#storylink=cpy>



Robert Weiner



Ben Lasky