

From Rocking Chair to Legislative Battle

Nearly half the states have "silver-haired legislatures," whose members meet to identify issues and propose legislative solutions. Many of their proposals eventually become law.

By Susan Kelleher

When it comes to doing legislative battle, silver-haired citizens are becoming seasoned veterans. Just ask Saul "Sy" Simons, a 78-year-old Floridian whose voice reflects the confidence of a man accustomed to winning.

"You can't sit back in your rocking chair thinking about how things could be improved," he said. "You have to stop rocking and get out and do something."

Simons is among a growing number of senior citizens who have become advocates for change by joining senior legislatures in their states. There are currently 23 "silver-haired legislatures," where elected representatives from the states' 60-and-older population meet to identify issues, formulate bills and develop strategies for moving their proposals through the state's legislative machinery.

The groups have no lawmaking power and meet only a few days a year. But in some states, they have proven themselves effective in advancing the cause of older adults in areas such as health care, housing and transportation. In California, for example, the seniors have in the past six years managed to get 75 percent of their proposals passed into law. Last year, 60 of the 116 "memorials" were picked

up by sponsors and moved through the Legislature, according to Albert Perrault of Joshua Tree, Calif.

"Our main function," says Perrault, a four-year veteran of the group, "is to identify issues from the grassroots area. The regular Legislature doesn't always have the time to get out around the people like we do. We're out among the people every day and we know their problems."

The members are elected generally to two-year terms and serve on a variety of committees targeted to specific concerns such as health care, income and security, and government operations. The elections are held primarily at senior centers and other areas accessible to older adults.

The amount and source of funding for the groups vary widely from state to state: In Florida, each member pays his or her own way; in California and Louisiana, a voluntary income tax check-off supplies all the funds; in Iowa and Missouri, the state picks up the tab. Other states, like Minnesota and Montana, use a combination of state and private donations to fund their groups while still others (Texas and Virginia) rely entirely on donations. Funding ranges from \$8,000 a year in Wyoming to \$320,000 a year in California, according to the California Commission on Aging. The money is used to pay for housing and transportation for the annual meeting and for materials the groups use through-

out the year.

Because none of the senior legislators receive a salary, the members consider themselves advocates and not lobbyists.

"We're here to develop long-term solutions for tomorrow's problems," said Simons, who believes state agencies are too often wrapped up in today's crises to look further down the road. "We're advocates, but we have to become activists also. We have become activists for what we're advocating... Just because you're vociferous in voicing your opinion doesn't mean you're a lobbyist. It's a fine line."

A few years ago, some California residents felt the Senior Legislature had crossed the line, said Perrault.

"We had a backlash here three or four years ago, which I considered very serious," he said. "Some people were saying that we seniors were for seniors only, that we had an undue influence and that we were selfish. Many of the seniors were upset about it, but I personally think it was a good thing because it made us step back and take a look at what we were doing."

Perrault notes that the five top priorities for this year—priorities that include a state health insurance plan and in-home supportive care—are proposals the group believes will benefit all the residents of California.

Frank Avery, chairman of Missouri's Silver-Haired Legislature Supervisory Board, said the problems affecting senior citizens in the state also affect low-income and handicapped people, so measures the group sponsors frequently will benefit those people as well as seniors.

As examples, he cited a measure to give a tax break to low-income homeowners and renters, another to eliminate the sales tax on prescription drugs, and a change in the state's lien laws that prevents subcontractors from collecting delinquent funds from homeowners unless the contractor has first obtained the homeowner's permission to do so.

The Missouri group also scored a victory that Avery believes will give seniors a bigger say in selecting the next president. "On Super Tuesday," he said, "Missouri will have a presidential primary. The primary won't select the delegates, but it will establish the percentages. The delegates will still be selected by caucus. The seniors were

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Photo: Amir Rah

California Senior Senators Ed Kramer and Peggy Rowe address the press.

interested in a primary because the caucus system requires that they go out at night. A lot of them don't have transportation and it's difficult to get around, especially at night."

That the seniors have been able to have an impact on the system speaks of the broad nature of their proposals and the importance of the senior voting block, said Avery.

"In our state," he said, "we have a good percentage of seniors who do

issues for several reasons: They have more time to think about them and they're affected by more things as they get older. Seniors vote in bigger percentages than other ages."

The Silver-Haired Legislature, said Avery, provides seniors with a voice they otherwise wouldn't have.

"In the past, a lot of these people were represented by trade groups or unions or merchants organizations," said Avery. "As they retire, they have no one to speak for them or consolidate their ideas. We try to do that. These people need representation. Once you retire, you face different kinds of problems and no one's there to represent you."


Millie Gillitzer, a member of Wyoming's Silver-Haired Legislature and the state's Advisory Board to the Commission on Aging, said giving seniors what she called "a coherent voice" in legislation has resulted in greater attention being paid to seniors' concerns at the state level.

"We learn what is important to the seniors in our community and bring those issues to our legislators," she

legislators in each county and we can bring our concerns to them.

"Seniors' problems," she said, "were not addressed as thoroughly as they are now because there was no organized voice to get the message through. With the senior legislature, we were better able to explain our concerns and tell them what we needed."

Although the elderly citizens spend a great deal of time as representatives of their peers, there are many rewards, said Simons of Florida, who spends between \$800 and \$1,000 of his income attending legislative functions.

"I get satisfaction in knowing that I'm trying to do something for my fellow person," said Simons. "I got involved in this because I was appointed to serve on the city of Hallendale's Human Resources Department and dealt with indigents and people who couldn't care for themselves. I was also visiting my friends in rest homes and found (the homes) in deplorable conditions. I knew just going to the local office would get nothing done. The only way to see anything accomplished is to get involved in legislation." 

Silver-Haired Legislatures Meet in 23 States

State	Year Started	Members			Session	Percent of Pop. over 60 Years	Funding Source
		Uni-cameral	Lower House	Upper House			
Arkansas	1977	99			1 day biennial	18.5	Title IV grant money
California	1981		40	80	4½ days annual	14.3	Income tax check-off
Florida	1978		40	120	3½ days annual	23.1	Supported by members
Georgia	1978		27	75	4 days biennial	13.4	Office of Aging
Hawaii	1983	Hawaii County Continuing Education Project				11.8	AAA* contracts the University of Hawaii/Hilo
Indiana	1977	100			3 days biennial	14.9	Office of Aging and local agencies
Iowa	1978	100			3 days annual	17.9	State funds through AAA*
Kansas	1982	125			3 days annual	17.4	Coalition on Aging
Louisiana	1986		15	35	2 days annual	13.4	State income tax check-off
Massachusetts	1980		40	160	1 day annual	17.5	State Department of Education
Minnesota	1988		67	134	3 days annual	15.9	State money matched by donations
Missouri	1973		30	120	3 days annual	17.7	State funds through AAA*
Montana	1980	65			3 days annual	15.2	State money matched by donations
Nebraska	1981	49			3 days annual	17.4	Senior Council and Race Track
North Dakota	1980	167			biennial	16.5	Local funding and federal grant money
Ohio		Development in progress				15.3	
Oklahoma	1981		22	44	3 days biennial	16.7	Member contributions and donations
Rhode Island	1981	80			varies biannual	18.6	State Department of Elderly and House of Representatives
Texas	1987	132			3 days annual	13.3	Donations
Utah	1982		29	75	3 days annual	10.6	Donations
Virginia	1983		40	100	3 days annual	16.9	State appropriations
West Virginia	1981		34	100	3 days annual	16.9	State appropriations
Wyoming	1982	48			3 days annual	11.8	Education funds and donations

Sources: California Coalition on Aging and 1980 Census

*Area Agency on Aging