

Our Guest Editor

Larry Polivka Talks About Aging Policy and the States



LARRY POLIVKA

As the United States faces its most urgent domestic policy crisis in decades, with huge implications for older people and those who work in their behalf, this issue of *Generations* is timely. A look at aging policy in relation to the states reveals the dominant challenges in aging and also provides the perspective that is crucial for long-term solutions. Historically, the states have been central in establishing and carrying out most aging policy in this country, and state governments and agencies will remain at the front line in responding to the current economic crisis. For all who must address the urgent and the long-term challenges of an aging society, consideration of the roles and actions of the states—past, present, and future—is essential.

Our guest editor for this issue is Larry Polivka, whose work has long been at the heart of aging policy development and implementation. He is a committed advocate for older people and a distinguished scholar in aging. Since 1992, Polivka has served as director of the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging at the University of South Florida's School of Aging Studies, where he is also an associate professor emeritus. From the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, he served as policy coordinator for health and human services in the executive offices of Florida Governors Bob Graham and Bob Martinez and then as director of the Florida State Unit on Aging.

Polivka's commitment to public policy as a way to assure the well-being of elders arose, he says, from seeing the good that government could do when it worked well. "I'd been a Goldwater Republican as a student in 1964," Polivka says, "but my mind was changed forever when

people started talking about privatizing the Tennessee Valley Authority and Social Security. I was a kid from Tennessee; the TVA had worked well for our area. And Social Security was successful. It had been crucial for my grandfather, who was blinded in a coal mine accident as a young man. He lived another fifty years—gracious and strong, helping his family survive the Depression. The idea that we didn't need Social Security, and then Medicare, to me made no sense and was inhumane."

As a policy advisor to Governor Graham and then staff director of Florida's commission on aging, Polivka played a role in a number of pioneering nursing-home-reform and other long-term-care initiatives. When he became head of the Florida State Unit on Aging, he found that people in state agencies were eager to do things better, he says. "When presented with a vision and a plan, they really pitched in: consumer direction, assisted living, homecare—we started earlier than most states."

What are the opportunities for state action now? "The era of neoliberalism and obsession with privatization is over, at least for now," Polivka says. "But the cupboard has been left bare. It will take a long time to rebuild the revenues to shore up current programs and develop the new ones we will need for the aging of the baby boom generation. The aging network will have the opportunity to step up and build on the resources that exist in the states now, to solve these problems or at least reduce their impact on vulnerable people like the frail, low-income elderly?"

—Mary Johnson