American Association of Retired Persons

Definition: AARP from The Columbia Encyclopedia

a nonprofit, nonpartisan national organization dedicated to “enriching the experience of aging”; membership is open to people age 50 or older. Founded in 1958 by Ethel Percy Andrus as American Association of Retired Persons, AARP now has over 30 million members, enabling it to act as a powerful advocate for older Americans on public policy issues such as social security and health care. AARP also distributes information on topics of interest to its members, sponsors community-service programs, and provides various services to its members. It publishes Modern Maturity and My Generation magazines and a members’ bulletin.

Summary Article: AARP from Encyclopedia of Health Services Research

The AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) is the nation's largest association representing individuals 50 years of age or older. With more than 39 million members, the AARP is an influential advocate at the federal, state, and local levels on public policy issues concerning aging and the elderly, and it is also instrumental in shaping public opinion. The AARP conducts policy research, publishes various reports and several widely circulated popular magazines, and sells various products and services, including life and health insurance, prescription drugs, and travel services.

History

Ethel Percy Andrus (1884-1967), a retired California high school principal, and Leonard Davis (1925-2001), a New York insurance executive, founded the AARP in 1958. Andrus taught in California for many years, becoming that state's first female high school principal. After retiring, she became concerned with the poverty her fellow retired teachers experienced who were living on meager pensions. Davis, with Andrus's encouragement and help, pioneered insurance programs for retirees. He would eventually form the Colonial Penn Group of insurance companies, and he went on to found the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics of the University of Pennsylvania.

Before founding the AARP, Andrus established the National Retired Teachers Association (NRTA) in 1947. Andrus's initial goal was to promote her philosophy of productive aging and to respond to the needs of retired teachers. After successfully working with Davis to develop insurance policies for them, Andrus developed other benefits and programs, including an early discount mail-order pharmacy service. With the growing success of the NRTA's programs, thousands of other retirees who were not teachers wanted to obtain them. So in 1958, Andrus and Davis established a new organization open to all retired individuals—the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). In 1999, the association changed its name to AARP.

Membership

Membership in the AARP is open to any person aged 50 or older. Members need not be U.S. citizens or residents. Most members live in the United States, although about 40,000 members live outside the country. Although most AARP members are retired, more than 40% of its members work part- or full-time, which is why the association shortened its name from the American Association of Retired Persons to simply AARP. The median age of members is 65 years; slightly more than half of the members are women.
Vision, Mission, and Organizational Structure

The AARP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization. Its vision is for a society in which everyone ages with dignity and purpose, and it helps people fulfill their goals and dreams. Its mission is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for all as they age and to leading positive social change and delivering value to members through information, advocacy, and service.

The AARP is organized into a central headquarters, state offices located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and more than 2,500 local chapters throughout the nation. Its national headquarter is located in Washington, D.C., to allow its staff and volunteer leaders access to the federal government. The national headquarters coordinates the activities of the field operations and state offices and supports the initiatives of the local chapters, which are separately incorporated groups that provide members with opportunities to volunteer in their own communities. State chapters identify areas of legislative concern locally and support volunteers and staff as they work toward accomplishing the goals and objectives of the association and its members.

The association has two affiliates: the AARP Foundation and AARP Services, Inc. The AARP Foundation’s focus is to lead positive social change to help people aged 50 and older, especially the most vulnerable, by delivering information, education, and direct service to communities and families. Specific AARP Foundation programs include various training programs, free tax preparation and counseling for seniors, and homeowner interests. AARP Services, Inc., is a wholly owned subsidiary of the AARP. It manages a range of products and services made available to the association’s members, provides marketing services to the association and its member service providers, and manages the association’s Web site. Some of the programs that AARP Services, Inc., manages are Medicare supplement, long-term healthcare, insurance (automobile, life, and homeowners), and member discounts and savings on prescription drugs, eye health services, and eyewear products.

Advocacy Activities

The AARP is the largest advocacy group in America for those 50 years of age and older. Its advocacy activities include monitoring issues affecting older Americans, taking public positions, and expressing its views to state and national lawmakers and regulatory agencies. The association also undertakes selective litigation in age discrimination, pension, healthcare, economic security, and consumer cases.

To define its advocacy endeavors, the AARP reviews existing data, conducts its own research, and surveys its members to gather information on their concerns and views. The association’s board of directors is given the task of discussing and balancing various perspectives. The board hears from experts, elected officials, business and industry representatives, and a special advisory council consisting of 25 volunteers. The council makes recommendations to the board, which then approves federal, state, and local policies. The AARP’s top advocacy priorities currently include issues such as health, financial security, independence and long-term care, and consumer protection. The association’s lobbying efforts helped the passage of Medicare Part D, the Medicare drug benefit, in 2003. It was also instrumental in stopping changes to Social Security in 2005.

Criticism

Over the years, the AARP has been sharply criticized. Some have criticized the AARP's lobbying efforts, which they believe, in many instances, are geared primarily to advancing the association's business interests. Others have criticized AARP because it derives so much of its revenue from advertising, and selling insurance and other products, accusing the association of acting like a forprofit company. This
allegation was taken so seriously that in 1995, Republican Senator Alan K. Simpson of Wyoming, then Chairman of the Finance Committee’s Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, held hearings investigating the AARP’s nonprofit tax-exempt status. The investigation, however, did not reveal sufficient evidence to warrant revoking its nonprofit status. The association has also been criticized as using scare tactics to frighten its older members to influence their opinions. Last, the AARP has been criticized for assuming it can represent the views of all its very large and diverse membership. Some of its members were disappointed that it supported the passage of the Medicare Part D drug benefit, which they viewed as being poorly designed, confusing, and complicated.

See also
Access to Healthcare, Health Insurance, Long-Term Care, Medicaid, Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Benefit, Nursing Homes, Public Policy, Vulnerable Populations

Web Sites
AARP: http://www.aarp.org
Administration on Aging (AOA): http://www.aoa.gov
American Society on Aging (ASA): http://www.asaging.org
United Seniors Association (USA): http://www.unitedseniors.org

Further Readings


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