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The Life Planning Network is the leading association supporting professionals who assist people at this life stage. We intend to bring into everyday use proactive and purposeful planning for the second half of life. Learn more at lifeplanningnetwork.org.

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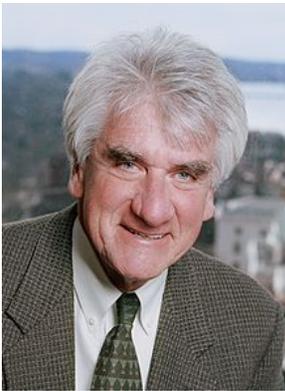
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LPN-Q Interview with Thomas P. O’Neill III

Bruce Frankel

Few people are better positioned to talk about the intersection of politics, public policy and aging than Thomas P. O’Neill III. A former Massachusetts state legislator and lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (1975 to 1983), he also bears an extraordinary political legacy—as the son of the late Speaker of the House Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill.

As the founder and chief executive officer of O’Neill and Associates, he heads one of New England’s leading public relations and government affairs consulting firms. His expertise spans the public and private sector in areas that include transportation, healthcare, higher education, financial services and nonprofit development.



A longtime leader in Greater Boston’s health care sector, O’Neill has served in prominent roles on several health care governing boards and currently acts as chair of the board for Tufts Health Plan Foundation. Its mission is improving the health and wellness of the diverse communities it serves. It has given more than \$21 million to Massachusetts and Rhode Island nonprofits that improve healthy living with an emphasis on older adults, has begun funding programs in New Hampshire and is focused on funding programs that move communities toward achieving age-friendly policies and practices. O’Neill graciously agreed to a last-minute phone conversation with LPN-Q Editor Bruce

Frankel about politics, policy and aging.

The health and longevity of older adults has increased greatly. Many people are living active, healthy lives well into their 80s and beyond. Still, from a political and government policy perspective, we continue to lump this active majority with the much smaller group of frail and dependent elders. This has the effect of ignoring the interests and needs of people at retirement age who don't fit the stereotype. What can we do to change the narrative among politicians, government agencies or, more broadly, society?

That is the charge of the Tuft’s Health Fund Foundation. Its mission is healthy aging. We’re learning an awful lot about neurology, sure, but we’re also learning about habitat, education, eating habits, how people have come to a point that they have grown older with varying degrees of success. It has to do with education; it has to do with genes, certainly; it has to do with where you live; it has to do with who you

occupy your time with; it has to do with how you keep your mind operating and busy.

Can you flesh that out a little?

Take the average person living in Holyoke, Massachusetts. It's a poor community with a disproportionate share of people living below the poverty level. Education is among the lowest in the state. Its ethnic breakdown is as diverse as one will find. People work as hard there as anywhere and for as long as they possibly can. If you live in Holyoke and you're age 65, chances are that you're on five meds. By contrast, if you're living on Beacon Hill in Boston, where by chance you're likely to be better educated, had a more professional life, have occupied your mind and kept it busy, you're likely to be on only one to two meds, on average.

Those things are scientific in art form. But I think this narrative needs to be told and written to tell people that fact of life. It will help decision makers—elected and appointed—to draw conclusions—if not in a different way, at least in a more enlightened way—about changes that have to be made within society. We have to educate people. We have to feed people appropriately. We have to tell them that the end of life cost of healthcare can change if we pay attention to it. And we can legislate that. But what we need to do is create a great, informed policy and then watch legislation change.

So, is the thrust that we have to educate legislators?

Educating leaders, including our religious leaders, our business leaders, and the elected leaders, of course, because they're the ones who will eventually be responsible for policy.

Are leaders uneducated on this subject?

Uneducated is a harsh word. I would say that need to be better informed. In part, today, legislators are so overwhelmed by so many things that somehow you have to get through the chaos, so that they can understand better than time has allowed them to focus at this point.

Is there anything that might crystallize their focus, such as the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Data Report (from Tufts Health Fund Foundation, which provides data on 121 healthy aging indicators in 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts)?

Yes. It was the first of a series of reports issued. We have leaders from the various communities, various subdivisions of government, various leaders of the business,

come together to understand it, to talk about it, to digest it. And to have it become part of the policy so that when the mayor of Boston puts out an RFP (request for proposal) for 2030 to figure out what the city is going to look like and how its makeup is going to be composed, he actually added in aging health as a component to be discussed by business, medical, religious leaders and professionals who were on that commission and who understand how to develop future policy.

Are you hopeful that that kind of educational process can make a difference?

I'm quite convinced that it not only can, it has made a difference. From the first report that was issued legislation was drawn up and passed creating more money for communities to plan for healthy aging. Now, that's just the tip of an iceberg that needs to be floated to a more general sphere of water, but it proves the point.

As has been well demonstrated, older adults have the experience, power, skill and motivation to contribute in significant ways to solutions to longstanding social challenges and to private enterprise. Why is it so hard to get decision-makers to acknowledge, engage and mobilize this human capital resource?

If you're talking about a new (government) program, it's because a new program will cost something, and that would be a challenge for an elected leader. But broadly speaking I don't find that it takes that long. It takes an incident to make government move because, generally speaking, it better performs when it's reactive. And again, the panoply of issues that the average legislative leader or governor is confronted with is so numerous that there's just a lot of noise on the way to the railway station. It's difficult.

So, these reports, these meetings of leadership coming together, lending themselves to focus on the issue of aging—and aging healthy—and what needs to be done within the community for quality of life, what needs to be done in our educational circles, what needs to be done in medical circles, is important stuff. But it gets through.

Is there any way to incentivize companies and corporations to look beyond the stereotypes of age to employ, train, and appropriately take advantage of the skills, experience, and knowledge of older adults?

It's a fascinating question. The answer is that the most enlightened of our business leaders see it. Oftentimes, leadership comes from the public sector, and what you find is the longest-serving civil servants tend to get rotated out of work because they're the most costly employees a public system has. So, you're asking a question about a situation that happens in the private sector as well. The most costly portion of business is the employees' salaries. And the most costly employees are the

longest-serving ones. It's a cultural challenge that needs to be dealt with—or dealt with in another way.

We have people here, with my company, who have been here 25 and 30 years. I find that hard to believe. But it's true. In one way, they're the best performing. They're certainly the best thinkers, the most wise. But in other ways they're slowing down. So what we try to do is rearrange the deck chairs a little bit so that they understand that they don't have to come to work five days a week, they can come to work two and a half days a week, for half the pay, but we keep them involved.

Can government help craft those kinds of incentives?

I don't know where public service unions come down on this. But it seems to me that if there were a way to do this, the entrepreneurial leader in a public place would find a way. I believe that.

When I was in office, we had kitchen cabinets of people. We wanted to get their sense of things and their intelligence, but we couldn't appoint them to jobs, for any number of reasons. Either they worked or they were retired, but they had something to say that made sense and you needed them. Or you'd reach out to people who served in positions earlier who were now retired and maybe bring them back—maybe not be paid—but you at least wanted to show them that you appreciated their wisdom. I think that happens as well.

The fundamental issue about growing old with less medical complications really sits at the seat of primary school education.

Could you elaborate on that?

Sure, the further one goes in school, the healthier you're going to be. The more you learn, the healthier you're going to be. And the sooner you learn that and understand it and make the progression through educational life it's going to benefit you. That's a proven. If you feed kids three meals a day, they have a better chance in life.

Is there a role for government to play in reuniting generations, creating more robust intergenerational communities?

Yes, sure. That's particularly true for those in the role of the well-conditioned and smart mayor or the governor or the local congressman, or the person who has their hand on fiscal policy or budgetary policy at the local, state or federal level. This is how I get to it:

As a legislator, I was only responsible for one major piece of legislation. It came as an amendment (to a proposal to build an extension the Red Line (rapid transit line) in Boston. (Kevin White, the mayor then, first promoted it because he realized that if he did that, people who could afford in Quincy (a suburban city), though not in Boston, could come back into the City of Boston and work. I met with planners and they convinced me that if you can move people around in a compatible fashion by using people movers so that the young can get to school and the old can shop, go to a church, go to a hospital, find their way to friends, whatever it might be, you would keep the city and the quality of life viable. It not only worked, it saved (now- vibrant neighborhoods) Porter Square and Davis Square. It took 60,000 automobiles off the streets. But it also gave a quality of life. It was just one feature of quality of life. That's what public policy can do.

What's most important, from a political point of view, and what's the central concern of the Tuft's Health Fund Foundation regarding Age Friendly cities?

There are the things most people think about and have a need for: It's about transportation, it's about housing, it's about aging people having mobility and understanding that some people can't afford it. And when they can't afford it, what then do we do? Make sure that people have walkways, bicycle ways, ways to get up and do exercise, and make sure that a home is affordable at the same time.

Can a mayor or elected official really do something about that?

Yeh, they really can. They can give more affordable housing units and force developers to put them into every concentrated major development deal that's being done within the city. It's taking as many people movers as we can possibly muster from neighborhood to neighborhood so that people can have that mobility that we talked about so they can shop or go to a doctor's office or go to the dentist or go to church or whatever. So that they can have as normal a life as one city can possibly afford to give them without breaking any budget. There's a terrific amount of thought being given to it today, especially as the population ages.

Does making cities age friendly pay for itself?

By keeping families together, I know it pays for itself. I know it's healthy for the community. The family unit being kept together, with contact of itself, so there's communication, so that people see family members and friends. That's tremendously important for mental health.

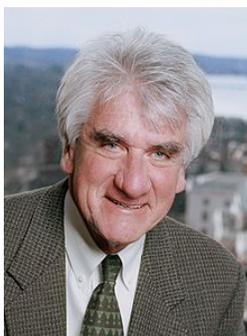
You're now 72. What's your personal experience with aging? What lessons have you drawn from your personal experience?

I was in Washington the other day, running, when I received your call. I'm an old jogger. And I remembered the day I turned 60. In those days, I ran five miles a day. And on that day I wound up running as far as an old cemetery, in Harwich, where what happened to catch my eye was the inscription on a tombstone which said, "Here lies Captain Jacob Doan"—a fabulous old Cape Cod name, whatever it was—"who died of age in his 60th year." Jesus! How life has changed!

I was talking to another writer just last week, and I asked him, on turning 70, what his finding was. "You know, Tom, I've never thought more clearly or better than I do today," he said. I've been thinking about that all week. I found his statement to be true of me as well. I've never thought more clearly. Now, I don't know if that's a summation of being fortunate enough to be healthy, have a long working career, have the benefit of travel, reading, some level of sophistication, and an accumulation of events and experience. I'm sure that has something to do with it. But it also has something to do with the working mind that stays active.



Bruce Frankel, MFA, the Editor of *LPN-Q*, Communications Chair for The Life Planning Network and co-Chair of LPN New England. He is the author of the of prize-winning, *What Should I Do with the Rest of My Life? True Stories of Finding Success, Passion, and New Meaning in the Second Half of Life*. He was an editor of *LIVE SMART AFTER 50! The Experts' Guide to Life Planning for Uncertain Times*. He is an author of the best-selling *World War II: History's Greatest Conflict*, a ghost writer and editor of other books. Bruce is the Editorial Director for BSLI Redstring. He can be reached at Brucefrankel@mac.com.



Thomas P. O'Neill III, a former Massachusetts state legislator and lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, is the son of the late Speaker of the House Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill. He is the founder and chief executive officer of O'Neill and Associates, one of New England's leading public relations and government affairs consulting firms. A longtime leader in Greater Boston's health care sector, O'Neill acts as chair of the board for Tufts Health Plan Foundation.