

John W. Macy Jr. Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 04/22/1968
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

John W. Macy Jr. (1917-1986) was the Chairman of the Civil Service Commission from 1961 to 1969. This interview focuses on the President's Committee on the Handicapped program to employ mentally handicapped individuals in the federal government, among other topics.

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By John W MACY Jr

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Third Oral History Interview

with

JOHN MACY

April 22, 1968
Washington, D.C.

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Do you recall if you had any idea at the start of the Kennedy Administration that they were going to be as interested as it turned out to be in the whole area of mental retardation?

MACY: No, I had no immediate indication, although I was aware of the Kennedy family interest in mental retardation, and I had a continuing interest in the federal government's role as an employer with respect to the employment of the handicapped. Prior to the Kennedy Administration, this concern was very largely focused on physical handicaps: those that had been maimed, those that had been blinded, those with deficiencies in hearing. There had been virtually no attention given either to the mentally retarded or to those who had been restored after mental illness. So that this was a new thrust, insofar as an employment concern for those handicaps, that came with the Kennedy Administration.

STEWART: What do you recall about the whole process of dropping the word "physically" from the title of the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped?

MACY: This was brought up early in the days of the Kennedy Administration as the President's Committee on the Physically Handicapped came within the concern of the President, and a number of us who had worked with that committee in other times felt, in view of the rising interest in other handicaps, that the name was too restrictive as it had previously been recorded.

STEWART: You mentioned in your interviews with Fred Holborn that you had a series of meetings with Mrs. [Eunice Kennedy] Shriver regarding the federal government's role in hiring the mentally handicapped, the mentally retarded. Do you recall specifically what she was trying to get the federal government to do other than just employ more people, or was it simply a matter of more people?

MACY: Well, there was a sequence of events that I think is quite interesting in 1963. At the annual meeting of the President's Committee on the Handicapped, I gave the major address pointing out the experience of the federal government with respect to the handicapped going back to 1945 and the start of the program. It was a rather ringing peroration about the achievements of the federal government in this particular area. When my speech was concluded President Kennedy came on the platform and recognized the Handicapped Employer and Employee of the Year and gave a very fine address about the importance of providing employment opportunity for the handicapped. And generally it was a very encouraging and heartwarming experience for those of us who had been interested in the handicapped. This occurred early in May of 1963.

In the course of the series of meetings that related to that particular conference, Mrs. Shriver gave a speech--I believe it was the women's committee luncheon--and in that speech she was very critical of the federal government and its policies with respect to employing the handicapped. Then she cited in her speech, and I quote, "There is no record of the employment of a single mentally retarded man or woman," the reference being to the federal government. And this received a great deal of newspaper play in that very popular portion of the newspapers, the woman's page. Having read the speech in the newspaper, I then called Mrs. Shriver and said I was very much interested in what she had to say, had she read a copy of my speech of the previous day. She said, no, she hadn't, so I sent it to her.

STEWART: This was your first contact with her?

MACY: This was my first contact with her on mental retardation. You see, the President's message on the mental retardation program had been in February of that year; this followed the work of the task force. So that we were all becoming increasingly conscious, because of the President's leadership, in the whole field of mental retardation, and particularly with respect to the use of rehabilitation training in preparing those who had been handicapped for some kind of meaningful employment. She was entirely right in criticizing the federal government. We had been talking about doing something; there had been some urging that there be collaboration between federal employers and the rehabilitation centers to do something about this. But there'd been no organized program; there'd been no clear-cut indication that this was an important part of the federal program. So, following Mrs. Shriver's speech and my conversations with her, I directed the Civil Services Commission staff to review all of the literature in the field; to talk to employers who had been successful in placing mental retardates; to meet

with representatives of the Kennedy Foundation; to talk to Mary Switzer in [Office of] Vocational Rehabilitation; and to give to me, not later than June 13th, a proposal which would be a tentative program prospectus outlining an ongoing effort by the federal government to do something with respect to the employment of the mentally retarded.

Having developed that within the period of time specified, I then had a meeting on July 30, 1963, with Mr. and Mrs. [R. Sargent] Shriver, with Dr. [John M.] Throne, with Mr. [Michael] Galazon, with Dr. James Garrett, and with Don Stedman. We had a luncheon meeting at the Hay-Adams [Hotel] on that date.

STEWART: These were people from the Kennedy Foundation?

MACY: These were people from the Kennedy Foundation, and from Vocational Rehabilitation, and from the President's Committee on Mental Retardation, which at that point had been created under the aegis of HEW [Department of Health, Education and Welfare] but with an office in the White House.

STEWART: Dr. Warren.

MACY: Dr. Stafford Warren was the chairman of the Committee, and he was represented at this meeting. I represented to them at that time the proposal for a government program which called for action by each department and agency through an organized plan for the employment of the mentally retarded who had been trained by and referred from vocational rehabilitation agencies, the idea being that the departments would develop a plan that would be their ongoing effort and we would provide an expected authority. In other words, these people could be appointed without competition to identified jobs that were included in the program. There was enthusiasm at the meeting about the plan, and I suggested that we establish several demonstration programs in various places around the country in order to get this under way with appropriate

promotional effort and with an increased understanding on the part of federal employers as to how this program would operate.

On August 7th, Mrs. Shriver responded by suggesting eighteen cities, specific cities, as good places to start projects on the placement of the mentally retarded. She drew upon her knowledge of the existence of public and private agencies that would be responsive in vocational rehabilitation. So that she and the Foundation were working closely with us. Then I sent to the President late in August the memorandum which really became the basic charter of this program, and this is the memorandum of September 12, 1963. It was a memorandum that was addressed by the President to the heads of executive departments and agencies. In this he set forth his policy on the role of the federal government as an employer in the employment of the mentally retarded. We really have projected our entire program from the base of that charter memorandum ever since.

STEWART: Do you recall if there was any substantial change in the plan from the time that you first discussed it with Mrs. Shriver and these other people until the time it was actually promulgated by the President?

MACY: No, basically the plan that was developed within the Commission, with the principles of an approved plan, agency by agency, with cooperation with local vocational rehabilitation agencies, with very close supervisory preparation for this, with a special reporting system so that we would know how we were coming along--these basic elements were embodied in the program as it was approved by the President and distributed throughout the government on September 12th.

The contribution that Mrs. Shriver and her associates made was getting word around to the centers of vocational rehabilitation to cooperate with this program and identifying cities which would be most fruitful as an initial effort. There was a feeling on her part, on the part of others that attended the meeting, that it was important that we have at an early date some demonstrations that could be used as models for other parts of the country, not only for the federal government but for private employers as well.

STEWART: Was there any concern, do you recall, among people at the Commission that the increased publicity on hiring mentally retarded might, in effect, be too much and might eventually produce even an adverse effect--for example, considering the impetus that was being given to hiring minorities at that time and hiring the handicapped as other types?

MACY: There were some wags who said that there really wasn't any point in the federal government emphasizing mental retardation in its employment, that that was generally viewed as a characteristic of all federal employees. That kind of gag was prevalent in some centers. There was a feeling on the part of some traditionalists that this was a departure from the merit system and its fundamental purposes and therefore was questionable. But I found very quickly there was a very strong reaction in favor of this program. Here was an opportunity to make a significant social contribution as a part of employment practice. We found that in many instances there were jobs of a routine nature that could be performed by those who had been retarded, those with low IQ's, and performed at a higher level of productivity or with great satisfaction than had been the case with the people that were employed.

Over the long haul, since 1963, this has opened our eyes to a number of conditions in employment that have been very helpful to us in redesigning some of the standards that we had. We have actually in recent times, as a result of this experience, talked somewhat about over-qualification for some jobs. This program has given us the basis for looking at our qualifications, for seeing if it isn't possible to open up some jobs that call for less in the way of educational preparation or lower levels of IQ measurement. So that this program had benefits beyond the benefits, the very direct benefits, that have flowed to those who were mentally retarded.

STEWART: I saw a figure that, as of June 1964, twenty agencies had hired eighty-four people, and sixty-eight of these were in Washington, and sixteen in the field. Was this response in the first, say, six or eight months as good as you expected?

MACY: Actually, it was better than I expected, because this was a remarkably short tooling-up time for a major employment activity in the federal government, and, as you point out, we were stressing other special programs at that particular time. I was very much involved with the President and the Vice President and the Attorney General on the effort of the federal government to be a better employer of minority members. It was during this particular time that there was great stress on improving our merit system operations so that more Negroes would be reached for employment in the federal government. This was in May when this initial effort was being pursued. We had just been through the Birmingham episode, so there was a good deal of emphasis in that area. But nevertheless this program was rapidly tooled up, rapidly accepted, a high degree of cooperation throughout the federal service. Some agencies were more responsive than others but the actual employments that were reported by the spring of '64 really exceeded my usual optimism.

STEWART: Do other types of handicapped people come under the same or a similar special hiring authority? If not, was there any criticism at why single out the mentally retarded among the handicapped to come under the special authority?

MACY: We had a somewhat similar authority that was available for use on a case by case basis, with Commission approval, for those who were severely handicapped. We had some experience with that, so that that was already on the books as an exception. There had been suggestions that other categories receive the same kind of consideration as the mentally retarded since 1963, but for the most part we have continued to say that for other handicaps it is possible for the individual to compete and to compete effectively on the basis of ability rather than disability.

STEWART: Was there ever any fear in publicizing this program that the problems, the very serious problems, in hiring and training mentally retarded people would be minimized or would be played down excessively?

MACY: No. From the beginning we recognized the necessity of supervisory preparation for this type of program and also the necessity of a continuing evaluation of the placement by professional people in the vocational rehabilitation field. So that the combination of those two forces tended to overcome in most instances a concern that might have developed about this.

STEWART: Do you recall ever discussing mental retardation personally with the President? I think you mentioned that the last time you saw him the general subject was handicaps.

MACY: Yes, I saw President Kennedy on November 7, 1963, for a meeting of state representatives of handicap committees. The President very graciously received these people in the Rose Garden, even though the weather was rather inclement. My impression was that the preparatory work for his participation had not been very thorough. As I waited in the Cabinet Room to meet him, to go out for the occasion, I was called into his office, and he said, "John, what's this all about?" So in about twenty seconds I filled him in in a rapid-fire fashion about what was involved. He very quickly grasped it and then he went out onto the portico, or into the portico, and addressed these people. We were joined by General Melvin Maas, who was the chairman of the President's Committee. General Maas was accompanied by some of the other officers of the Committee. Out in front of the President were the visitors from the states. The President elaborated on the points that I had made. I had made very strong representations to him about this program. I suggested to him that this might be something that he would wish to discuss with the state people. So he made quite a point of that. In the course of the meeting, after he had spoken, General Maas presented him with the new seal of the President's Committee on the Handicapped, with the word "physically" deleted, and this was presented to the President at that time. And General Maas made some comments about how he wanted to discuss with the President some matters concerning the Navy. There was some joshing back and forth between the Navy and the Marines, of which General Maas has been a ranking officer. There are some very fine photographs of this occasion which ought to be in this file. In the discussion before the appearance and in some brief words that we had afterwards, the President reasserted to me his strong interest in this program and his desire that the federal government assume leadership in showing the way on the employment of the mentally retarded. It was very clearly on his mind, and he viewed this as an important program that he had inaugurated. He made it very clear he was looking to me as his agent in seeing to it that these expectations were realized.

STEWART: They had some problems, as I understand it, in hiring a young mentally retarded fellow to work in the White House. Do you know anything about that?

MACY: Mrs. Shriver mentioned that, that there had been some difficulty in getting a mentally retarded gardener employed in the White House. And this employment experience was one that was referred to. I think the President and Mrs. Kennedy had sought to place somebody there even before our program was under way. The first actual placement that we had was on January 8, 1964, here in the Civil Service Commission. Knowing that you were coming today, I checked to see where that person is at the present time and I'm pleased to report that that person is now working for the Bureau of Public Roads on a full-time basis and at a higher level.

President Johnson very quickly picked up this program, gave it strong support, was interested in the reports that I gave to him. So that this was one of many programs where the theme from the new President was "Let us continue." This has been the case ever since, so that today the figures show that there have been forty-five hundred mentally retarded persons in forty-one agencies hired over that time and that thirty-two hundred and forty-four still remain on the job, which means that 71 per cent of those employed over that time remained--which is a higher retention rate than we would have from those who show no retardation at all.

Our general conclusion has been that 92 per cent of the placements have been successful in the sense that they were able to do the work and able to perform it satisfactorily. I have a treasury of individual cases which point up how well this has worked out, where there have been promotions involved or transfers to more responsible work, and very heartwarming acceptance on the part of supervisors at just how this has worked out.

We pursued a number of different promotional devices. The Kennedy Foundation was very helpful. For example, in March of 1964 they developed a series of slides and tapes for a mentally retarded program. These we distributed widely throughout the country as further preparation. In February of '64, we developed a pamphlet on supervision of mentally retarded that was drafted by the Vocational Rehabilitation Administration; this was distributed. We had a meeting here in Washington in February of three hundred and fifty agency coordinators for the employment of the handicapped and gave them a full briefing on the particular characteristics of this program.

And so virtually every month through the intervening four and a half years, there has been one event or another which related to this. Our regional offices pursued a variety of educational programs with respect to the program and have continued to do this. We developed a one act play late in 1964 on the plight of the mentally retarded, which we not only gave within the federal government but provided opportunities to have it viewed by those in the private sector. We had a number of open houses at sheltered workshops where supervisors and personnel people viewed the mentally retarded in training. We found this was very useful in breaking down some misconceptions about mental retardation that some of these people may have had. The various groups interested in mental retardation have cooperated very closely with us. The President's Committee on Mental Retardation, appointed in 1965, has received our reports and given us criticism with respect to our operation.

So I would say that out of my experience as chairman of the Commission now for over seven years I would point to this as one of the most gratifying experiences I've had, both in human terms--and those terms are very obvious--but also with respect to the federal government's taking leadership as an employer in opening up opportunities for this important segment of handicapped people.

STEWART: Certainly, when you consider it started from practically nothing . . .

MACY: Yes, this was one that really started from a dead stop, and now there are forty-one different agencies with programs. This is a virtually complete coverage of the federal government and the number of different occupations and trades in which these people are employed. It's a great story.