

Dismantling Ageism: Language Matters!



At home, in the town office, at work, and in all of your communications, language matters!

Why? Because language shapes perception in ways we don't always notice and the words we choose can quietly close doors. Terms like "senior" and "elderly" carry associations with decline and dependency and they tend to signal to people in their 60s that a service was designed for someone much older. The truth is, no matter how old someone is, they rarely see themselves as the target of those words. When older people are asked what they'd prefer to be called, most don't love any of the available options but the majority can get behind "older person."

Simple, respectful, and accurate.

Below are the recommendations the Associated Press made in May 2020 to all media outlets that abide by their Styleguide in relation to older people. We must adopt these recommendations in all of our spoken and written communications, and ask others to do the same:

- Use older people/person or older adult instead of senior, senior citizen, elder or elderly. * •
- Aim for specificity when possible, i.e. people over 60, or a woman in her 60s. •
- Provide context when discussing age when possible.
- If an official or organization uses words like "seniors" or "the elderly" ask for specifics to understand the age range being described.
- Do not use "the elderly" as reference to a group.
- As with all people, describe the person as the person wants to be described.*

**Some people of color and indigenous people use the term elder to describe themselves or older people in their community. This is an equity issue that must be considered.*

FrameWorks Institute's research on Reframing Aging is the basis for the above recommendations, and their findings lead to some additional ways we can use language to combat ageism. These include:

- **Be inclusive** – literally everyone is aging! Be intentional about reducing “us versus them” thinking by never “othering” older people. Check your language – are you doing things for others? Shift your words to be inclusive – “building communities that work for everyone,” or “making it possible for us all to get the help we need.”
- **Focus on the collective** – our new longevity means our old systems don't always work for us anymore. A focus on the individual triggers unproductive thoughts – “they didn't save enough,” “where's the family,” or “they decided to live in the middle of nowhere.” An individual cannot solve our workforce shortage, create public transit solutions, or build enough housing that works for tens of thousands of older people. These are systems problems that require collective solutions.
- **Resist the crisis metaphor** – we are nearing or are past crisis in many issues. However, crisis speak causes people to feel there is nothing they can do. Instead, frame big issues with the metaphor of ingenuity – remind people we've solved tough challenges before – if we can send people to the moon, we can solve our earthly problems!
- **Avoid stereotypes, bias, and generalizations** – the images we use can also perpetuate stereotypes and bias. Our websites might show young people as vibrant (positive) and older people as frail (negative), or may buy into the aging extremes of positive (fully able bodied and loving retirement) or negative (bed-ridden and needing care). Strive to offer a balanced view of the lived experience of older people not only in your words but images.



Want to learn more? Consider joining
the Maine Council on Aging's
Leadership Exchange on Ageism

