By Erin Partridge, PhD, ATR-BC Elder Care Alliance

# NOWAND INTOTHE FUTURE

For many of us working with and around older adults, there are words that make us cringe—perhaps words we would never use ourselves, or words we only use because they are required in certain contexts. Other words seem less problematic, and yet when examined, they carry a message of ageism or stereotype about older adults and aging.

The Elevate Aging project came out of a desire to pause and examine both the language we use as well as where our thoughts and feelings about these words might come from; we had a hunch that some of what needed to happen in order to engage in honest discussion of language was an honest discussion about our own aging processes. In order to inspire change, we wanted to focus on both the negative and problematic areas as well as possible replacement words, areas of opportunity, and joyful aspects of aging.

#### **Project Design**

This project resulted from a collaboration between Elder Care Alliance, CALA, and undergraduate art students. After having conversations with CALA leadership about the idea of a participatory project, Elder Care Alliance worked with TBD\*, a design studio comprised of advanced graphic design students

at California College of the Arts. TBD\* serves nonprofit partners with a wide variety of design services, giving students the opportunity to work with real clients on projects to benefit the community. The design of the project resulted from intergenerational discussions about aging and ageism in popular culture and media.

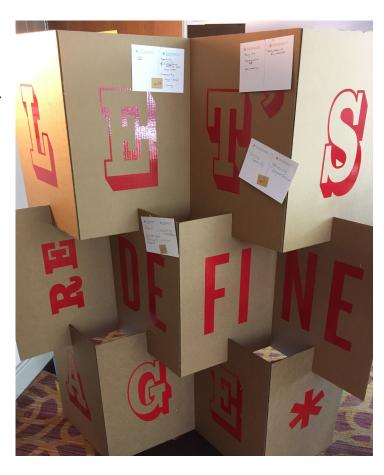
In an initial meeting, students learned about ageism, concerns within and around the aging services field, and problematic use of language. Students talked about their own experiences with older adults in their families as well as their biases and assumptions about older adults in general. Initially, they were invited to engage in a more theoretical project—using type design to explore aging and ageism. As the idea for a participatory project at Elevate, CALA's Conference & Trade Show, took shape, the project shifted to include producing

print material and signage for displaying participant responses. Students were excited about their ideas travelling to Sacramento and being part of a large conference.

Throughout the process, students worked with Elder Care Alliance to refine and reexamine the message. The tension between a clever message and clear, anti-ageist language can be difficult; students were open to feedback throughout the project. Working with young professionals on projects like this is such an important part of elevating aging and elevating our language. Those of us who have been in the field for a while can benefit from engaging in a critical review of our use of words. We also need to invite new generations of influencers and image-makers into the conversation, ensuring future media will present aging and older adults in the best possible light.

## Participatory Project at Elevate, CALA's Conference & Trade Show

While at the spring conference and trade show, we collected over 70 responses—some of which had multiple answers for each question—which we used to create evolving word clouds throughout the three days of the event. These word cloud summaries were shared during general sessions and on social media. We were excited to see how open and honest people were in their responses; many people wrote quite a bit about their own aging process, sharing very personal fears and bright spots. Once we returned from the conference, we utilized a more robust word cloud generator after adjusting the tense and grammar of words and phrases to obtain a better picture of people's responses. The more often a word appeared in responses, the larger it is in the word cloud. Words that appear the same number of times are in the same color.



## What are the words you **dislike** that are used around aging and senior living?

crankv put in a home nursing home senile unit confused placement pain beds wrinkly assisted living old people boring aged dinosaur wrinkle honey activities depressed senior citizen mental behavior bingo ancient ompliant elder convalescent i can't eat that anymore forgotten old folks

## What are the words you **love** that are used around aging and senior living?

home like environment adventurous is the new full of knowledge aged wine fascinating happy empowered elder thriving leading can i help or assist rest inspire care freedom forgetful resident directed strength older adu let's dance connection loving engagement honorable retirement mrs you can do it still beautiful love mature opportunity independence be powerful at accomplished confidence wonder social vintage discovery value stay insane mr expert perennial experience **W** dignity comfortable senior living adventure at living care partner thank you honor vital fun new adventure cared for supporting life enrichment lets get going i appreciate you surrounded by support and love senior Seasoned respect growing every year neighborhood aging heritage experienced

## What are things you **love** about your own aging process?



## What are things you **fear** when you think about getting older?

```
decline
                                       society
                dependence
                                              needing
    loss of friends and
                                  tamı
          not being no-purpose
                                               not being able
                                 knee bad
                     caregiver
    myself coddling
        strikes wishes medicare loss of control
 feeling independence mobility
                                   own help
                                           insular family subjected
                  fun outliving ability
     memory loss
             communities dying
 join people
             alone
                                                   vulnerable
         care leave see just parents incapacitation
   developing bedridden inspired pains inability crisis
ng alone trust others frail
                                          communicate
                                 build due
                                           person friends
                                support
          true doctors keeping
                       watched ones like
                                             gravity
                      love forgetting being bored
 treated
           losing memory want
```

### **Data Analysis**

Upon a further analysis of the words and phrases people wrote on the cards, some interesting themes emerged. We used qualitative data analysis techniques in order to identify groupings of words and phrases and larger, overarching themes. Some of these themes appeared in responses to more than one question and some of the longer responses could be categorized into multiple themes.

In response to the question about disliked words, the most commonly cited words and phrases were "facility" and "old" or some combination of "old" with another word such as "old-timer" or "old folks home." The most frequent themes or categories were about capacity or lack of capacity, words or phrases describing symptoms, or words or phrases used to label people.

The most commonly used words and phrases in response to fears about aging were about loss: loss of friends, family, ability, capacity. Out of 90 total words and phrases, the most commonly identified themes were about medical and physical health, as well as social, psychological, and emotional concerns. Interestingly, appearance was only identified in three responses, despite the ongoing focus on reducing the appearance of aging in the fashion and beauty industries.

On the positive side, the most commonly used words were wisdom or wise. Out of 150 total words or phrases in response to what words people love, the most common themes centered around self-acceptance and wisdom or growth. Continued ability was another key theme. Many of the words were about relationships—community, family, and verbs related to human interactions.

Out of 83 responses to things people love about their own aging, the common themes were similar to the question about words. When talking about our own aging processes, the overwhelming focus was about finding a sense of peace. Many participants wrote about feeling much more confident, balanced, and self-assured than they did as younger people. They also described feeling satisfied about having more time to contribute to their communities and to pursue interests.

It was an honor to witness people participating—many attendees at the CALA conference spent a long time considering what to write, took time to read other people's responses, and engaged in conversation about their ideas. We did witness some anxieties about sharing; one person was nervous about being seen as "too young" and was relieved to see other people from his same age group had already responded and posted their cards. Overall, what we learned from this first round of asking these four questions is that people in our field are willing and interested in engaging in both a critical discussion about language as well as an honest discussion about personal experiences.



# DEFINE AGE\*

### So where will we take the Elevate Aging project next?

We have already started integrating this conversation into our daily work at Elder Care Alliance by introducing the project to our new employees during orientation. We also brought the project to the Boomer Business Summit, another event focusing on the senior living field. We will continue to collect responses and data, including at CALA's Fall Conference and Trade Show this coming November, gaining a deeper understanding of the current feelings and attitudes. In order to spread the conversation out to more communities and areas, we made several different options for participation available (see the link in the sidebar). We will continue to update the social media accounts for the project (@ElevateAging on Twitter & Instagram) and use the #ElevateAging hashtag.

Understanding the current state is just part of the picture as we continue to collect input, we will begin engaging in strategic conversations about word use, advocacy, and education. How can we make changes in our written and spoken language in order to shift the words used in our field? How might working with our elected officials, with advocacy groups, and with other stakeholders enable us to eliminate some of the most problematic words and phrases from common use? One immediate shift we can take, based on the responses to the disliked words question, is making a complete transition to person-first language. This would address the identified problems around labeling people with stereotypic words or labeling them by the symptoms they experience. Looking at the themes identified by participants might point to areas we can provide community education; we can address people's common fears by focusing our messages on the ways we work to address those concerns. On the positive side, we can amplify the benefits of aging people identified by sharing stories related to themes of wisdom, selfconfidence, and self-acceptance among older adults. We see this project as the beginning of the conversation—a starting place. We hope you will consider joining us as we work together in our communities and across our world to redefine and elevate aging. ■

Adriene Iverson is the President & CEO of Elder Care Alliance (ECA). Erin Partridge, PhD, ATR-BC, is ECA's Experiential Researcher in Residence. Together, they are spearheading the Elevate Aging anti-ageism project.

Adriene Iverson, President & CEO, Elder Care Alliance

The Elevate Aging Project reminds us that the words we choose convey how a person is valued and whether that person is seen through the lens of a stereotype or really seen for their unique personhood. Oftentimes we become so accustomed to certain words, we fail to recognize the impact they can have in perpetuating stereotypes and erecting barriers.

WANT TO TAKE ACTION NOW? HERE ARE A FEW THINGS YOU CAN THINK ABOUT DOING:

- At your next team meeting, spend 15 to 30 minutes **brainstorming** the words used around age and aging that people like and dislike, and why.
- Consider **developing a list** (you can start small) of words you won't use in your organization and identify the words you will use in their place.
- Think about moving to **person-first** language—for example, a resident living with dementia, not a dementia resident.
- O Be sensitive to cartoons, cards, and other media that may use humor around older adults and getting older when you put together presentations or get a card for a team member's birthday or retirement. If you switched out "old" with "woman" or an ethnicity, would it still be funny? If not, don't use it.
- Use storytelling to depict positive images of age and aging. Our residents have incredible life stories.
- Think about **hosting a Let's RE-Define Age** display in one of your communities where residents, family members, and team members can participate. You can buy a display or find a free DIY version at <a href="https://mailchi.mp/be9af0247566/redefineage">https://mailchi.mp/be9af0247566/redefineage</a>.