

# ELEVATE

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# NOW AND

# INTO THE

# FUTURE

# AGING

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.

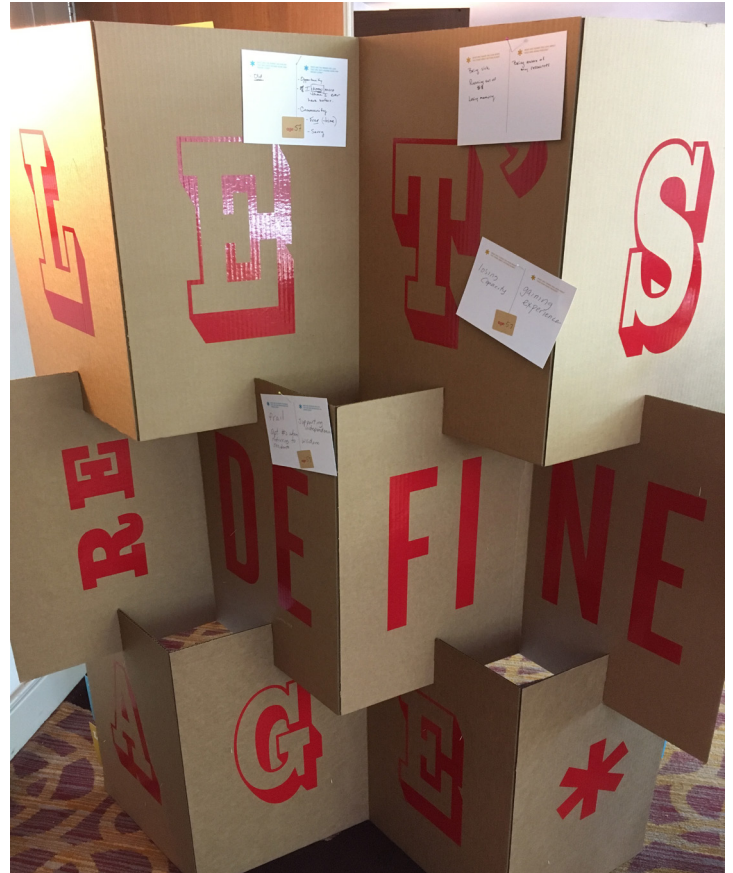
In an initial meeting, students learned about ageism, concerns within and around the aging services field, and problematic use of language. Students talked about their own experiences with older adults in their families as well as their biases and assumptions about older adults in general. Initially, 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?



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







# RE-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, self-confidence, 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.
- **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 <https://mailchi.mp/be9af0247566/defineage>.