

# Getting Better about Older

*A brief guide to communicating effectively for aging services*



West End Home  
FOUNDATION



*Aging service providers, advocates, and funders — all of us — want to generate more engagement and funding for our critically important work serving older adults. We are all too aware of the challenges older people face, and we recognize the dynamic opportunities associated with the growing number of older people in our communities.*

*We may shout from the hilltops, but too often, the rest of the world seems unconcerned with the demographic projections that older people will comprise an increasing share of the population. National research has demonstrated that our messaging around older adults can actually result in decreased support for needed programs and policies.*

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***So, how do we communicate more effectively about these issues and build support for our work?***



## ***Reframing Our Communications***

Part of the answer (and one part that we can control) is to reframe our arguments and reconsider the language we use when we talk about aging and older adults. The National Center to Reframe Aging has identified several helpful communication approaches. We present some of these below.



## ***Framing: What We Mean***

As the Frameworks Institute has noted, “...framing refers to the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue in order to cue a specific response; as researchers have shown, the way an issue is framed explains who is responsible and suggests potential solutions.” So, what are the key parts of an effectively framed message about older adults?



## Crafting a Better Message

Many in the general public have biased, negative assumptions about older people – that they are frail, less able, or tech-backwards. In order to counteract these and other stereotypes, we need a complete message that presents a commonly held value, explains the problem at hand, and ends with a concrete solution (See Boxes for examples). Without this full description, our audiences will often default to more commonly held (and unhelpful) ideas about older people.



- **Starting with a value we all understand:** A good message aims to connect to all people, especially those who are not actively supporting the concerns of older adults. Research from the National Center to Reframe Aging identified two values that can be effectively employed.

**The first is justice, that all of us, no matter our age, deserve recognition as valued members of society.**

**The second is innovation, that there are numerous opportunities for exciting and new approaches to aging services.**



- **Explaining the Problem:** Next, we have to lay out what's wrong.

**In the case of a justice message, we need to call out the ageism that limits investments in programs and policies for older people.**

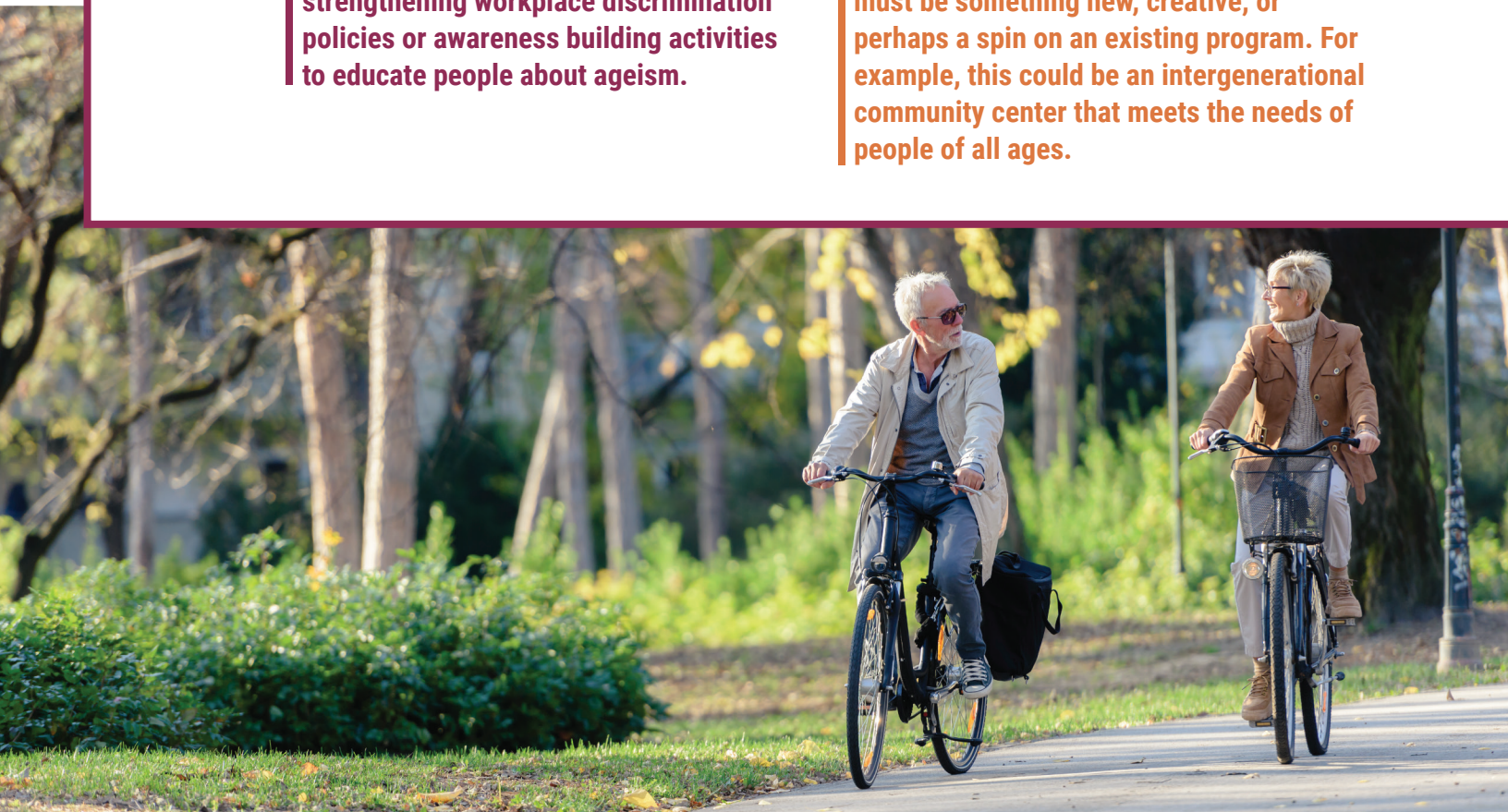
**In the case of an innovation message, the problem is that current programs and policies are insufficient or outdated, and fail to meet the needs of a growing number of older adults.**



- **Offering Solutions:** Finally, we have to propose a way to address the problem. These should be as concrete and specific as possible.

**For a justice message, this may be strengthening workplace discrimination policies or awareness building activities to educate people about ageism.**

**For the innovation message, the solution must be something new, creative, or perhaps a spin on an existing program. For example, this could be an intergenerational community center that meets the needs of people of all ages.**





## **A Fully Framed "Justice" Message**

*No matter our age, we all deserve to be included, to participate fully in the life of our families, community, and nation. This applies to all people in Middle Tennessee and around the rest of the country, young and old.*

*We may not realize it, but there is a great deal of ageism in our society. Ageism is the systematic discrimination against a person or group of people based on their age (younger or older). These attitudes reflect an implicit, sometimes unconscious bias. Over time, these attitudes can result in a variety of bad outcomes for older people's health and well-being and serve to exclude people from family, work, and other activities.*

*We can create a better Middle Tennessee by:*

*Building awareness of ageism through the media/social media // Supporting intergenerational programs that promote interaction with a full range of community members // Advocating for workplace policies that prevent this kind of discrimination; or [add your own idea].*



*The ability to see a problem, imagine a solution and roll up our sleeves and make it happen is central to how we operate here in Tennessee.*

*As we get older, we build momentum, new possibilities. Even for the frailest among us, there is always something we can do to remain connected, to contribute to family and community, to live with purpose and meaning. Unfortunately, our current set of policies and programs, many developed more than 40 years ago, no longer fully meet our needs or enable us to join fully in the life of our communities as we get older.*

*We need to rethink our approach and reimagine our system of care with ideas for the 21st Century like intergenerational community centers, Lyft or Uber for older people, or [add your own idea].*

## **A Fully Framed "Innovation" Message**



## Reframing Tips

In addition to creating fully reframed messages, here are a few straightforward tips to get you started on communicating more effectively about aging:



- **Stop the “Silver Tsunami”**

This alliterative, evocative (and unhelpful) metaphor has unfortunately caught on in the media and beyond. It suggests that the growing number of older people is an uncontrollable natural disaster and there is nothing we can do about it. Don't use it.



- **Go from “Them” to “Us”**

One of the simplest and most profound ways to communicate the universality of aging is to use the first-person plural (we/us) when talking, for example, about how more and more of US (instead of older adults) are living longer and healthier lives.



- **Embracing aging**

Avoid conflict-laden terms like struggling, confronting, or tackling aging. Aging is a natural process to be accepted and even celebrated, not fought.

## For more information

Contact Dianne Oliver at the West End Home Foundation ([Dianne.oliver@westendhomefoundation.org](mailto:Dianne.oliver@westendhomefoundation.org)) about additional ways you can learn about reframing your communications.

Or check out these helpful web sites:

- ***The National Center to Reframe Aging* (from *The Gerontological Society of America*)**
- ***Changing the Narrative* (from the *NextFifty Initiative* and the *Rose Community Foundation*)**
- ***Gaining Momentum: A Frameworks Communications Toolkit* (From the *Frameworks Institute*)**



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