

Strong Messages about Frailty

A brief guide to communicating effectively about older people with serious illness and disability



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 many of us face as we get older. At the same time, we recognize the dynamic opportunities associated with the growing number of older people in our communities.

The National Center to Reframe Aging and its research partner the Frameworks Institute have robust guidance for communicating about older people in general, but communicating about frail older people with serious illness or disability presents particular challenges. Overly positive “cheerleading” messages about aging or about the important social and economic contributions of older adults may seem inappropriate or disingenuous when speaking about those of us who may be confronting a serious health challenge or may be homebound.



Three Ways to Talk About Frailty

Still, there are a variety of approaches in the Reframing Aging “toolbox,” particularly those used by the sister project, Reframing Elder Abuse, that can strengthen our communications about frailty.



1

Start with an appeal to “justice”

All good messages start with a powerful appeal to a broadly held value that we all understand. Research from the National Center to Reframe Aging initiative has identified justice or inclusion as an effective way to start our communications. We can remind our audience that a just society cares about all of its members, particularly those who are sick, frail or vulnerable.



2

Use the metaphor of “social structures”

People often think about illness or disability among older people in individual terms and fail to see the larger social conditions and systems at play. Frailty (and many other issues) is therefore viewed as an individual or family responsibility. This prevents us from seeing broader collective programmatic or even policy solutions.

Reframing Elder Abuse research suggests that comparing society to a building, something that can be constructed piece by piece can be effective. This can be adapted when talking about frail older people. Social supports or programs for frail individuals then are a critical part of this larger structure. They help to create a society where we can all get the help we need.



3

Highlight underlying social conditions to explain stories of individuals connected to solutions

The general public often sees frailty, illness or disability as problems for individuals and families. It is important to place any stories you use in context, so that people see the social conditions at play and understand the collective, programmatic solutions that are needed. Focusing on concrete solutions also encourages people to believe that something can and indeed must be done.



Framing Services for Frail Older People: An Example

Here are two brief generic examples of how to pull together an effective message related to community services for vulnerable older adults:



Age-Friendly Transportation Services

As we get older, all of us want to remain as connected as possible to family, friends and our communities. A just society preserves the safety and dignity across the lifespan, but right now, too many of us are sidelined by frailty or serious illness.

Our community is like a building, if the foundation and structure are sound, then all of us inside can live comfortably and safely. You can think of strong programs like Age-Friendly Transportation services, as support beams. They reinforce our community's ability to safeguard all of our area's residents, and they ensure that we all can stay connected to the people and services that keep us as healthy as possible and provide us with a sense of dignity and comfort.

Transportation is critical to Clara Johnson, who is living with mild cognitive impairment, and her daughter Shirley, who is her primary caregiver. Clara no longer drives, and Shirley works most days. Uber is too expensive, and the bus doesn't stop close to her apartment complex. Without access to transportation during the week, Clara can't get to her medical appointments, go shopping, or make it to her lunches and other programs at the local senior center, where she spends Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Age-Friendly Transportation Services fills the gaps in the existing transportation system. Our low and no-cost services include volunteer drivers, group vans and discounts on county point-to-point van services. Every day, we are creating a network of offerings that help people like Clara, indeed all of us, get where we need to go affordably and safely.





A Meal and a Smile, Inc.

Here in Nashville, we are committed to ensuring that all of us have access to the services and programs that we need to live well, connected to the people we care about. The COVID pandemic, however, further isolated many of the most frail among us.

Our community is like a building. If the foundation and structure are sound, then all of us inside can live comfortably and safely. Strong programs like A Meal and a Smile, Inc., act like support beams, reinforcing our community's ability to help all of us stay safe and connected.

Edie Smith, who is 87 and immune-compromised, struggled during the initial lockdowns and then was hesitant about visiting with family, friends and even service providers – even as vaccines became available. A Meal and a Smile, Inc. safely delivers hot meals three times a week to Edie and other isolated or disabled older adults in the area. Its friendly visitor program does weekly phone calls, and earlier this Spring, started outdoor visits with Edie and more than 100 others living in the community.

A Meal and a Smile, Inc. is part of a vital network of program and service providers throughout the city and Middle Tennessee. Every day, we are finding new ways, using both private and public resources, to help people like Edie, indeed all of us, get the help we need.

Creating Powerful Messages for Those Who Are Struggling

Our common work promoting and serving older people in Middle Tennessee can't only be about those of us able to live with economic security, in good health and with access to the people and services we need to live fulfilling lives. Yes, we want to point to the important ways that all of us can continue to make a difference to our families and communities. At the same time, we must find strong and effective messages to lift up and support those of us who need more significant help as we get older.

For more information

Contact Dianne Oliver at the West End Home Foundation (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)***
- ***Reframing Elder Abuse (from the National Center on Elder Abuse)***
- ***Changing the Narrative (from the NextFifty Initiative and the Rose Community Foundation)***
- ***Gaining Momentum: A Frameworks Communications Toolkit (From the Frameworks Institute)***



West End Home
FOUNDATION