Framing Strategies to Advance Aging and Address Ageism as Policy Issues

Frame Brief | FrameWorks Institute

This brief lays out an approach to changing public thinking about aging in America. The goal of the strategy summarized here is to increase public support for policies and practices that can be advanced to support a robust, healthy, age-integrated society. The brief touches on (1) the patterns in public thinking limiting the policy climate, (2) the priorities for building public understanding, and (3) specific communications techniques that have been proven to expand people's thinking about aging and aging policies.

To reap the longevity dividend, America needs an aging attitude adjustment.

Right now, aging simply isn't an issue Americans are thinking about as a matter that requires a public response. This reality reveals a serious risk of policy inertia, or worse, rollbacks of existing supports. Unless the field of advocates who care about aging issues cultivates a more visible, more informed conversation on older people, it will remain difficult to advance the systemic changes needed to adjust to a society with increased and increasing longevity. Our research shows that aging is misunderstood in America and that the misperceptions create obstacles to productive practices and policies.

To change this dynamic, the field of aging needs to advance a set of core ideas that creates the shifts in public understanding essential to building the political will to create a more age-integrated society. Understanding this, eight leading national aging organizations and nine forward-thinking funders set out to find a way to develop and then drive a more productive narrative on aging issues. As the research partner for the Reframing Aging Initiative, the FrameWorks Institute conducted social science research to arrive at reliable, evidence-based recommendations for reframing this social issue.

This memo summarizes the key recommendations and offers a set of framing priorities, strategies, and frame elements (or themes) for the field. It is meant to inform the multitude of strategic communications undertaken by the field's many different coalitions, organizations, and programs. The recommendations are intended for mission-driven advocates for better aging policy and practice—whether that advocacy happens through issue campaigning, services development, field-building, nonprofit leadership, policymaking, philanthropy, research, or other forms of work in the public interest.

If you use communications to make the case for adapting society to the needs of an aging population, the evidence-based recommendations here will be useful to you. You won't find a catchy slogan, but you will find guidance that helps you work more intentionally and strategically to advance the conversation about older people in the United States.

If the aging field shares communications priorities, we can change the conversation.

The goal of this strategy is to build public understanding. But how, specifically? More specific objectives are required, but they shouldn't be left to intuition or guesswork. FrameWorks' analysis of the gaps between the field's goals and the public's perceptions yields the following set of priorities for communications efforts:

- **Redefine aging itself.** Reframing the issue requires disrupting the "othering" of older people and sending the message that older age, like any other time in life, involves both challenges and opportunities. Why? Our research shows that negative assumptions about aging held by the public lead them to disassociate themselves from aging and take the fatalistic stance *that nothing can be done* to improve aging outcomes.

- **Highlight how social contexts and social policy influences aging.** To move aging onto the public agenda as a policy issue, the field needs to reshape the public's current belief that health and financial security in older age are entirely matters of an *individual's* good decisions and careful planning. The public must come to appreciate that wellbeing in later

life is influenced by a range of social policies (e.g., health care policies, tax policies) and social structures (e.g., the way American communities typically arrange housing and transportation) and, crucially, that these aspects of society can be changed.

- **Elevate awareness that ageism exists and that it can be addressed through sound policies and practices.** Ageist views, which persistently thwart older peoples' full participation in society, are not part of our citizens' collective consciousness. This blind spot perpetuates ageism and makes efforts to reduce it more difficult to pursue. The field needs ways to introduce this topic to the American public that appeal to broad constituencies and point to public solutions.

- **Create a sense of shared stake, public purpose, and potential for improvement.** The aging field must make clear the consequences of positive or negative aging outcomes— that they are shared across society and not limited to the individuals or families experiencing them. To do this effectively, communicators must take care to mute the public's tendency to dismiss the role of public policies and maximize the sense that collective action is necessary, appropriate, and holds the promise of making a positive difference.

Tested themes allow the field to address communications priorities and coalesce around a common language.

What would be the best ways to address these communications priorities? Through a carefully designed series of studies, FrameWorks found several frame elements, or themes, that were demonstrably effective in communicating the priority concepts outlined above and in boosting knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences. These themes are outlined here, with further explanations and examples below.

- **Use the value of *Ingenuity* to gain support for changes that drive better outcomes in aging.** An *Ingenuity* frame positions desired policies or approaches as opportunities to solve problems and tap into American innovation.

- **Position an aging society as an untapped resource by comparing aging to forward momentum.** In testing, the *Building Momentum* metaphor provided people with new language for talking about aging—something quite different from the currently available cultural idioms (e.g., "fighting" or "battling" aging, the importance of "staying young"). Researchers even found evidence that this metaphor reduced people's ageist attitudes and implicit bias against older people. To encourage more positive ways of thinking about aging, use this analogy to talk about both the opportunities presented by an aging population and the risk to society of losing out on this potential.

- **Use a _Justice_ value to frame communications about challenges or problems related to aging.** This theme casts topics like discrimination, isolation, abuse, and disparities as threats to America's commitment to fully include all members of society as equal participants.

- **Use a three-step approach to build understanding of ageism: Define it, give a well-chosen example, and explain its roots in implicit bias.** The field needs to talk more often about ageism but in specific ways so that this new public conversation does not go awry. FrameWorks research found that this careful, step-by-step approach builds public understanding.

  - Begin with a definition that leaves room for structural ageism.

  - Follow up with a concrete example that is easily appreciated as a serious problem that requires a public response. The example of workplace discrimination is readily understood and highly effective in prompting people to think about ageism as a public issue; health care discrimination also works well.

  - Finally, explain implicit bias to show the public that there is a place for intervention: ageism arises from a common process that works automatically, but it can be disrupted.

- **Include concrete examples of what society can do differently.** Always include examples that illustrate the kinds of approaches the public can support, expect, and demand. These can include ways that society can support greater health and wellbeing as we age; ways to better include older people in civic, economic, or community life; or steps we can take to prevent or reduce the risk of frailty or abuse. In testing, the _Intergenerational Community Centers_ example was more effective than the _Senior Corps_ or _Encore Careers_ examples.

Themes for a New Frame on Aging

These frame elements, or themes, were demonstrably effective in boosting knowledge, attitudes, and policy preferences on aging issues.

Ingenuity: Americans are problem-solvers. When we see an opportunity, we figure out how to seize it—and when we see that something isn't working, we rethink our approach. Replacing outdated practices with new, smarter ways of doing things is the key to our nation's ingenuity.

Building Momentum: As we get older, we gain momentum, with the force of built-up experience and wisdom pushing us forward. Experience and insight add energy and possibility—the ability to contribute to our society's vitality. With more Americans living longer, this force could power our society to move ahead in new ways. But right now, we're losing out on this incredible dynamism. Although we all age, and although people on average are living longer and healthier lives, our society hasn't yet figured out how to make the most of this change. Our current employment practices, public transportation systems, and housing policies are not well-suited to today's reality—in fact, they make it hard for us to stay involved and contribute when we get older.

Justice: Right now, our society is not treating older people as equals—in fact, we are marginalizing their participation and minimizing their contributions. To live up to our ideals, we must confront the injustice of ageism.

Name & Define Ageism: Ageism is discrimination based on prejudices about age. When ageism is directed at older people, it often involves the assumptions that older people are less competent than younger people. Ageism has a huge negative impact on older people, throughout all areas of life.

Offer Examples of Ageism: Ageism's effects are built into the institutions and systems that shape Americans' lives. One example is common workplace policies and practices that discriminate against older people. Because people hold negative and inaccurate stereotypes about older workers, this limits older people's ability to find employment. Because of ageism, capable people who could contribute are left out of the workforce.

Explain Implicit Bias: Prejudice is often implicit—meaning, people aren't even aware of their own prejudices. We are all exposed to negative messages about older people, so our brains are wired to form judgments about people based on their age. For example, because of years of exposure to the news and common movie characters, many people subconsciously assume that older people are forgetful, grouchy, or frail. These stereotypes lead to discrimination against older people in many areas of life, from health care to the workplace.

Inventive Solutions: There are many things we can do to harness the energy of older people's ability to contribute to their communities. One example is programs that bring together older people and preschool children in community centers. By providing opportunities for older people to participate in and contribute to their communities, intergenerational community centers provide benefits for older people and strengthen the whole community.

Some themes and frames have unintended negative consequences.

FrameWorks' careful analysis of public thinking compared with the aging field's current messaging pinpoint a set of existing communications practices that have unproductive effects, and thus, should be avoided.

- **Don't lead with the story of demographic shifts.** Avoid statistics, imagery, and analogies that suggest that society will be overwhelmed by older people (e.g., silver tsunami, gray wave, or even rapidly increasing older population).

- **Don't talk about aging as a "civil rights issue."** This phrasing led to two unproductive effects with the public. First, it prompted people to compare ageism to racism or sexism, and then conclude that age discrimination couldn't possibly be as bad. Second, the phrasing "civil rights issue" led people to narrow their definition of ageism to incidents and actions that could be addressed through litigation.

- **Don't use language that refers to older people as "other" or reinforces paternalistic attitudes toward older people.** Terms to avoid include *aging population, elderly, senior citizens, seniors,* and *vulnerable.* Pay attention to pronouns: find ways to replace *they* or *them* with *we* and *us*. Instead of using phrasing that implies that aging happens to someone else (*what older people need),* look for more inclusive wording (*what we need when we're older*).

- **Don't overdo the positivity.** Portraits of extraordinary older people are understood not as proof that aging need not equal decline but as the exceptions that prove the rule. There is a need for storytelling that promotes positive images of aging but in a balanced and careful way that includes reminders that social contexts and environments matter to wellbeing as we age.

- **Don't cross-contaminate efforts to build public will with "news you can use."** To change the policy climate, the aging field needs to advance the idea that aging issues require a public response. When the goal of the communication is to boost understanding and support for the general cause or a specific policy, avoid using individual-level examples or highlighting steps that individuals can take themselves. Focus on changes to the decision-making context, rather than guiding personal decisions.

Framing is a group activity. Please join the reframing effort.

Sharing—telling a common story—is part of what it takes for a movement to drive major and meaningful social change. The careful, extensive research summarized here offers the aging field an important asset in defining, elevating, and advancing aging issues. We invite you to begin to

use these frames in your work, learn more about them, and share them with others working to create a more equal, more inclusive society.

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> **Finding the Frame: An Empirical Approach to Reframing Aging and Ageism**
> This research report provides a deep analysis of the research behind reframing recommendations.
>
> **Gaining Momentum: A Communications Toolkit**
> This collection of resources models how to apply framing recommendations to messaging.
>
> **FrameWorks Research Topic: Elder Abuse**
> Resources on framing elder abuse are also available.

For more information, go to www.frameworksinstitute.org/reframing-aging.html