

## THREE COMMON AGEIST IDEAS

by Mary Ablan  
Area Agencies on Aging Association of Michigan

I'm sitting in the conference room of a charitable foundation. My boss is making a presentation to the grants officer about the benefits of managing the health care of older adults who have a lot of chronic conditions – we're asking for a grant to pilot the concept. My boss finishes and the grants officer thanks us for coming, but says that the foundation will not be able to help us. "Why is that?" I ask. He answers quickly, "Because older people are not one of our priorities. We prefer to target children, because, after all, children are the future."

Of course, it was disappointing to be turned down for our grant request. And of course, the foundation has the right to spend its money on anything it chooses. But the grant officer's comment that "Children are the future," bothered me. What bothered me was what was unstated, yet implied, by those four simple words.

Children are the future.....and older people are the past?  
Children are the future.....and older people have no significant role in the future?  
Children are the future...and are more deserving of funding support than the elderly?  
Children are the future.....and it is wise for us to invest in them, but not in the elderly?

There is no question that programs for children, whether education, health care, social services, protective services, foster care, TANF, etc., are a great investment and deserve public support.

But it is "ageist" to imply that spending on older people is inherently less worthy and of lesser value than spending on other age groups.

The term "ageism" was coined in 1969 by Dr. Robert Butler, M.D., a gerontologist, teacher, author and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his 1975 book, Why Survive: Being Old in America. Dr. Butler recognized that our society worships youth, but derides old age. Daily we are bombarded with public images on TV, in newspapers, magazines and billboards of young people who are beautiful, healthy and physically fit, while images of older people are either absent, or primarily negative. Butler defines ageism as the systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old. He compares ageism to other forms of bigotry including racism and sexism.

It is certainly true that young people will play an important role in our collective future – BUT SO WILL OLDER PEOPLE. Census data show that the older generation is the fastest growing age group in our state. Consider this—within the next few years, the number of older people in our state will surpass the number of children—for the first time in Michigan's history! (This is also true nationwide and worldwide.) Demographers are predicting an especially large bump in the older population starting 2011, when the first baby boomers born in 1946 will turn 65 years old.

True to their history, futurists predict that the baby boom turned senior boom generation will do things differently than the generations coming before. For one thing, many baby boomers will continue working after they start collecting Social Security. They will choose to work because more of them went to college and selected occupations that they enjoy and feel committed to, they will enjoy better health and live longer, and the Social Security earnings penalty has been eliminated starting at age 65. And it's a good thing that the baby boomers will continue working; demographers predict that there will not be enough younger people to fill all of the jobs available. Older workers will be a significant segment of our future economy.

This is also cause for celebration for those concerned about the future of Social Security. For predictions of insolvency are based on the assumption that most people will retire at age 65 or earlier, which is the current pattern. That doesn't take into account the improved health and longer life spans of the baby boomers (the average baby boomer will live well past 90!), and the likelihood that they will work well past 65. When baby boomers continue working, they will also continue to pay FICA taxes and add even more revenues to the Social Security coffers. It's very possible that the 'crisis' in Social Security is not quite as dire as some would have you believe!

So the next time someone says to you, "Children are the future," don't hesitate to say right back, "And older adults are the future, too!"

Another common ageist idea was publicly unveiled in 1988, in a magazine called the New Republic. The author of the article "Talkin 'Bout My Generation," said that public spending on older people was excessive and unnecessary, and coined the term "greedy geezer" to make his point – evoking the unsavory image of a wicked looking older person with hands outstretched grabbing as much as possible – Social Security, Medicare, housing subsidies, senior citizen discounts, etc. The article warned that older adults were already getting more than their fair share of the public 'pie,' and predicted a backlash from younger generations once they realized the scam being perpetrated by mostly well-off oldsters.

The concept of "greedy geezer" is ageism at its height. It is ageist because it inaccurately portrays the older generation as a group of selfish people who are intent on getting as much as possible. It also implies that most of the elderly are well-off. While the economic status of older adults has improved greatly since the passage of Social Security, there are still 25% of the elderly who live in or near poverty.

Think about the older adults you know. Are most of them greedy geezers? In my experience, the vast majority of older adults have no desire to monopolize public resources or bankrupt the treasury to the detriment of their children and grandchildren. Proponents of the greedy geezer image like to point out that many more federal tax dollars are spent on the elderly (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, etc.), compared with children. But what that fails to recognize is that federal spending on the elderly is counterbalanced by state and local spending, which is spent on children much more than

older adults, primarily for education. (By the way, it is a myth that the majority of older voters routinely reject school millages.)

Retirees are very concerned about their Social Security and Medicare benefits, and they have every right to be. Without these programs, the majority of the elderly would live in or near poverty.

But the greedy geezer concept is objectionable not only because it unfairly portrays the motives of older adults, but also because it is a perverse attempt to ignite the outrage of younger taxpayers. Thank goodness, it has been unsuccessful. Public opinion polls have consistently shown that the vast majority of younger adults support Social Security and Medicare. This result should not be surprising. Young people do not view the elderly as some faceless, nameless group. The elderly are people they know and love--great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, etc. Most young people don't resent their grandmother because she gets a Social Security check. After all, if she didn't get a Social Security check, the young person would face the responsibility of supporting her!

The greedy geezer mentality is related to a third common ageist idea – that public spending on health care is a “drain” on federal and state budgets, while public spending on other programs (pick one – homeland security, defense, education, tax breaks for businesses, prisons, etc) is an “investment.” It's no coincidence that the programs the elderly rely on the most for health care and long term care – Medicare and Medicaid – are often described in terms analogous to a cancerous growth. As a society, we discriminate against programs benefiting the elderly just as we discriminate against the elderly themselves. While proposals to cap expenditures for Medicare and Medicaid have received serious consideration (and some actually adopted) in recent years, there have been no proposals to cap spending on homeland security, defense, education, etc. Have you ever heard a proposal for a defense block grant? Large inflationary increases in Medicare and Medicaid are viewed with alarm by state budget officers and elected officials. And with good reason – such increases are unsustainable over the long haul unless tax revenues increase dramatically. But aren't large annual increases in any sizable program also unsustainable? Shouldn't they also be a cause for concern?

There's no question that spending on homeland security, defense, education, tax breaks for businesses, prisons, etc. can be a good investment. But isn't spending to improve the health and well-being of our citizenry—including older people—also a good investment?

Mary Ablan, M.A., M.S.W., directs advocacy efforts on behalf of the 16 Area Agencies on Aging that serve older adults in Michigan. She has done this work since 1985.