

Proud to be a Senior Citizen

In the course of a recent discussion about our goal of making Rhode Island a “Senior-Friendly State,” someone wrote admonishing me that “there is a trend not to use the term ‘senior’ based on research findings that many persons 65+ do not label themselves as seniors.” The comment suggested that we needed to define our goal differently, and perhaps implied that since our organization’s name includes “senior”, we



should rethink our entire name brand and marketing approach.

Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, seemed to agree. She once said, “‘senior citizen’ is a euphemism which I reject as insulting and demeaning. I prefer to be called by my name, or, if not, I’d

like to be identified as an ‘old person’ or an ‘elder’.” AARP seems to have banned “senior” from its website and publications, preferring “older people”, “older adults” and “retired persons.” Interestingly, at the same time AARP’s age range for its membership starts at 50. So it’s just the word, not the condition, that’s troubling them. Good for marketing I guess. Other common alternatives to “senior” include elders, golden-agers, and retirees, not to mention a host of downright nasty terms like geezer, biddy, old codger and so on.

Some terms that people and groups employ to avoid using “senior” include “baby boomer,” defined by experts as someone born between 1946 and 1964--who just began hitting

age 65 in 2011. At least “baby” connotes youth. A favorite of mine is “highly experienced person.” For veterans, there are “Korean

us helpless, incompetent and pretty useless. Therefore ageism says we need to hedge our bets by avoiding the word senior, which

senior senator from Rhode Island. Since many legislative and judicial bodies confer power based on seniority, incumbents seeking

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War veteran” (really old) and “Vietnam-Era veteran” (mostly seniors by now).

I don’t dispute the research findings, and I hate to disagree with Maggie Kuhn, but I still get a nagging feeling that there’s some serious ageism going on behind attaching negativity to the term senior. Doing so seems to fit Ashton Applewhite’s definition of ageism as “a prejudice against our future selves.” Ageist thinking looks at old age not as a continuum but as some kind of boundary that once crossed, makes

would mean we were giving up.

I also agree that we should determine on a personal basis whether we want to be called a senior. But I think “senior” is a perfectly reasonable description of who we are. As a community organizer I like “senior citizen”, because as a term it recognizes us as a growing political constituency. Does anyone feel demeaned by asking for a “senior discount”? I sure don’t. I doubt that Senator Jack Reed feels insulted to be described as the

re-election often brag about their “seniority.”

So for the time being, here we will press onward with our present moniker--the Senior Agenda Coalition, seeking to build Senior Power to make Rhode Island a “more senior-friendly state.”

William F. Flynn Jr. is executive director of the Senior Agenda Coalition. Contact him at senioragenda@yahoo.com.