

# EXECUTIVE

## Changing Perceptions About Aging Means Changing the Words We Use

**C**arol Burnett once said: “Words, once they are printed, have a life of their own.”

Words matter. Words label and define us.

In the same way that none of us would expect to hear “old folks’ home” used today, so too do we hope to retire outdated expressions that no longer define the work we do or the population we serve.

Today’s older adults are redefining life after 50 with a renewed emphasis on the things that matter most. And we all should be right alongside them on the journey to what’s next, turning ordinary moments into extraordinary ones and changing the way we talk and label things in our industry, in order to break down long-held stereotypes.

Mather is known for purposeful and unique language. As with many in this industry, you won’t hear our team saying words like *senior*, *facility*, or *unit*. We’re deliberate in how we describe things and how we market our residences and services.

The careful use of language surrounding residences—and aging in general—is about much more than spin or euphemisms. That’s why all of us at Mather have long been advocates for challenging beliefs by changing up everyday language, which, in turn, changes perceptions of aging. The senior-living lexicon with words and phrases needs to be rewritten based on clarity and heart.

### Goodbye, Merriam-Webster

Mather likes to challenge the status quo, and sometimes that means inventing our own words.

We try to make our unique terms playful but purposeful. And we help employees get to know this language and use it naturally when speaking about their work.

We started by coining the term *Repriorment*<sup>TM</sup> to replace “retirement.” It means: Discovering the joy of new directions and

having the time to focus on the things that matter most to you.

Most recently, as part of our brand refresh in late 2019, we introduced the word *Nextraordinary*<sup>TM</sup>.

The definition: To discover Ways to Age Well that transcend the ordinary.

Other terms we’ve coined: *Possibilities Team* for our senior leadership; *Experience Centers* for our departments; and *Mather Gathers* for our organization-wide meetings.

### Refreshing thinking

Coining new terms takes time and imagination. But that’s not a drawback. We’ve found that changing the language refreshes everyone’s thinking.

Our language is unique to Mather; it’s a differentiator. But we’re not the only provider changing the way we talk—there are many others creating consumer-friendly language

throughout this field.

We at Mather look forward to the continuing transformation of the language of senior living to words that are warm, creative, and exciting—and the changed perceptions to follow.

Could your social worker now be called a *listening liaison*, for instance?

We continue to look for ways to connect and stay relevant with today’s consumers and future residents, and we know you do too. We study language. We listen. We observe what is happening around us. By being constant language learners, we are able to break through the clutter and speak directly to the person in a way that is ageless. ■



**Brenda Schreiber**  
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Here are some questions to ask about the terms you use daily:

- Is the term or phrase exacerbating stereotypes? Example: Dining room or restaurant: Which would you rather go to?
- How does the word make you feel when you say it out loud in a sentence?
- What signature services do you have that are uniquely yours? Give that service a name people will remember.

As you’re thinking through these questions, if any of the answers make you uncomfortable or allow you to see new perspectives, it’s likely time to dive in and start to change your language!

**Stick to the basics:** Think about which words you can change or rename that will have the most impact on changing the perception of aging or shift thinking on a service you provide.

**Train team members:** Employees need to believe in and understand the word changes. Create useful tools that remind everyone of key words, put them in employee orientation, and continue to remind everyone often until fully adapted.

**Create a dictionary:** Your dictionary will serve as an easy tool for all employees to reference whenever needed.

**Invent new words:** Explore ideas to invent your own words, go beyond your comfort zone, and push your status quo.

—By Brenda Schreiber