With a strong professional background in long-term care and working with older adults for more than 20 years before entering public service, I learned not to make assumptions about how people age.

We all age differently. We live different lifestyles and make different choices at all points along life’s timeline, including through our 70s, 80s, 90s and beyond.

It is imperative to recognize the individuality of our older constituents and not generalize or assume—you know the adage about when we assume—that their needs are the same or even similar.

We can best serve our older constituents by recognizing that many are still working well into their 70s and 80s. We should also recognize that some younger folks in their 50s or 60s may have serious health and living challenges as they grow older as a result of a variety of circumstances—less education, lack of access to fresh and nutritious food, poor paying employment opportunities, and a lack of timely healthcare.

“Older” is often defined as age 65 and up—an arbitrary number established in the 1930s when Social Security was established. Federally, it is defined as 60 and up for purposes of funding that emanates from the Administration on Aging.
It is interesting how we view life from our own personal lens. Having turned 60 this year, I can assure you I don’t relate to the term “older” and certainly not “elderly.”

My Aunt Bonnie, who passed away two years ago at the age of 89, was barely interested in reading the paper or any type of newsletter but had many opinions on what policy should be in place to make our communities’ better places to live, work and play. Before retiring she owned a women’s boutique and once worked as a garment factory worker. She was informed by a lifetime of her experiences and had a high expectation that in my role as a state elected official I would try to correct the “ills of the world.” We discussed policy and the gaps in the system regularly and she was not shy in advocating for systems and services that were easier for the everyday person to navigate. She was clear that government made life too difficult on many days.

Sylvia, a lively and active nonagenarian, is everywhere in the community—the senior center, a park where she volunteers, at the local historical society, as a caregiver for a family member who lives outside her community, and in her church. She has more energy than most people 20 years her junior. Sylvia receives my email communications that are sent twice a month, but she does not have her own computer. Rather, she uses the computer at her senior center, so she may not receive information that is time sensitive in a timely manner depending on when she is able to visit the center.

My Aunt Em, 97, has been an email user for more than a decade—a somewhat late adopter, but an adopter none the less. She is signed up for updates from her local, state and federal elected officials and the political party with which she is registered. She is also now on Facebook. A few months ago I was startled to see her comment on one of my posts and find her continuing comments to be insightful and encouraging; she is after all my aunt. She also Skypes and has participated in my telephone town hall events.

Likewise, my father, in his late 70s in the mid-2000s, was fascinated by search engines and the ability to reconnect electronically with long-lost friends. Initially reluctant to use an email device—a gift from his children—it wasn’t long until he requested a desktop computer.

I share these stories to ensure that we understand the range of older constituents whom we serve and how we can reach them in many different ways. Stereotypes do not always hold true.

We all absorb information in different ways. Some of us are visual learners, others auditory, and literacy levels vary, all of which should be considered as we endeavor to keep our older adult constituents engaged.

Engaged citizens will indeed be the result when we recognize that we, as state officials, should use multiple methods of delivering our message; this will better ensure that they will all “Hear Us Now,” and more importantly, we will hear them.
About the Author

Pennsylvania state Rep. Pamela A. DeLissio has served in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives since 2010, where she chairs the Aging and Older Adult Services, Care and Services Subcommittee. Prior to her election to the General Assembly, she had nearly 30 years of experience in the fields of long-term care and small business ownership. DeLissio is a 2013 graduate of the CSG Henry Toll Fellowship program.

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