

# Hollywood Needs to “Wise Up”

Hollywood needs to “wise up,” asserts the state of California’s leading advocate for older adults. The [California Commission on Aging](#) recently convened authorities from the entertainment industry and the field of aging to strategize how to improve the portrayal of older adults and the aging experience on film and TV.

The commission’s initiative, “[Hollywood Takes: On Aging](#),” was launched March 1 in Los Angeles with the goal to encourage Hollywood decision-makers to represent older adults with more authentic, non-stereotypic storylines and characters.

Presenters conveyed two prominent themes: 1) Hollywood needs to show older adults more often and realistically to ensure they are part of the progress being made for diversity and equality; and 2) The move for “age-appropriate” representation makes sense both socially and economically, considering older adults are the fastest growing population and viewing audience.

“There is an epidemic of invisibility,” cautioned Katherine Pieper, senior researcher with the USC [Annenberg Inclusion Initiative](#), which studies the role of aging and older people on film and TV.

To positively influence cultural change, Pieper observed, “We need to increase the quantity and quality of storytelling about older adults.” USC [research](#) reported that older adults make up about 20 percent of our population but less than 10 percent of speaking roles on film and TV. “It is so important to show younger generations what is possible,” Pieper added, underscoring the initiative’s generative potential.

[Hollywood, Health & Society](#), a program of the Norman Lear Center at USC, provides entertainment industry professionals with accurate and timely information for storylines on complex cultural concerns, such as aging. “We study and shape the impact of the entertainment industry on society,” explained Kate Folb, director of HH&S, which, between 2012-2017, has consulted on more than 1,100 storylines by advising content creators.

Still, changing cultural bias is difficult to do, Folb noted, even for Norman Lear, considered by many to be the greatest TV comedy producer of all time. She then used the platform to announce the newest venture for Lear, 95, to produce an older-adult themed TV series “Guess Who Died.”

Arielle Burstein, associate director of the [Milken Institute’s Center for the Future of Aging](#), called for storylines that more accurately present the aspirations and abilities of today’s older adults to help “normalize aging.” She referenced the Center’s 2016 report, [The Power of Purposeful Aging](#), which states “Media portrayals must transcend age as the principal defining characteristic.”

The Milken report also emphasizes the business rationale for advancing the new direction, citing Oxford Economics research that shows as a group, “the over 50s control almost 80 percent of the aggregate net worth in the United States and are responsible for a disproportionate amount of consumer spending.”

Additionally, veteran child actor and current aging advocate Paul Peterson, and former actor and current USC associate professor of gerontology George Shannon, both encouraged the entertainment industry simply to show the truth: Older adults are unique, interesting, experienced and productive.