

Aging in the *Right Place*

People need a wider range of housing options as they grow older to ensure safety and access to transportation and preserve ties to their communities.

Older adults consistently report a desire to stay in their current homes as they age, which has given rise to the phrase “aging in place.” Indeed, an AARP survey in 2014 found that 88 percent of those 65 and older agreed that they would like to stay in their homes as long as possible.

There are many reasons that staying in one’s home makes a lot of sense. Homes are full of memories and they evolve over time to take on the character of their owners. Staying in one’s home also preserves connections to family, friends and social groups, all of which

are essential for older adults to remain engaged and productive members of their communities. But there are also many reasons that aging in one’s longtime home may not be the best option.

For one, more than 60 percent of the homes occupied by people 65 and older require the use of stairs to either enter the residence or get to a bedroom or bathroom. But by the time people are in their 80s, more than 4 of 10 have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs. Staying in these homes well into old age raises the risk of falls, which are the leading cause of

injury and injury-related deaths among the elderly.

In addition, a large majority of older people live in single-family homes in suburban and rural areas and depend on cars to stay connected to their families and communities. But about a quarter of those age 80 and over are carless, while many of those over 60 who do drive limit it to certain times of the day. Aging in place thus raises the risk of isolation as one’s ability to drive declines.

Of course, people can wait to move until the time comes



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when the old homestead is no longer suitable for them. But that may not be so easy to do. The process of moving is demanding physically and emotionally, and it only gets harder at an older age.

The other challenge that arises all too often is finding a suitable new home in the same community, one that is smaller, located close to shops and other destinations and accessible by public transit. The absence of good close-by alternatives is another reason many people often don’t move late in life—or why, when a move becomes inevitable, they are forced to leave their communities behind. With the oldest baby boomers

certain steps to make it easier to “age in the right place.”

To start with, we need to get people thinking earlier about the type of housing they’ll need later. Using popular media to spread the word will go a long way. So too will getting real estate agents, contractors and architects to incorporate this way of thinking into their work advising clients.

We also should adapt local planning to accommodate a broader range of housing options. There’s a clear need for zoning to allow for higher-density housing close to town centers as well as group-living arrange-

ments, such as cohousing. Such arrangements will take on increasing importance as the number of elderly people without adult children or other relatives to care for them grows. Making these changes means overcoming NIMBY (“not in my backyard”) concerns. But there’s a strong case that expanding housing options would be good not just for seniors, but for younger households, too. Getting older households to trade in their single-family homes would free up a lot of housing for young families because nearly 7 million single people over age 65 are living in single-family detached homes, as are 5 million between 50 and 64.

But even if these efforts are successful, there will still be instances in which staying in one’s home will be the only option for aging in one’s community. So we will also need to expand state and federal financial support for home modifications to be sure that homes are safe and for local transportation systems to help older people avoid isolation.

The starting point for accomplishing all of these goals is greater awareness of the critical importance of having appropriate housing options as we age. The good news is that many baby boomers won’t have to look beyond their parents’ situation to appreciate what needs to change for boomers to age in the *right place*.

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just turning 70 and the youngest now around 50, there is still time to ensure that the growing wave of older households are in the position to make choices about where to age that anticipate their needs in the years to come. But we as a society need to take

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