

Optimal Health for the Elderly

Cross-sector partnerships can enable seniors to remain independent and productive. The U.S. also needs more age-friendly communities, geriatricians and equitable, accessible care.



The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation believes that everyone in America should have the opportunity to achieve the healthiest life possible, no matter where they live or work, the color of their skin, or their economic status. For older people, this goal might seem like a pipe dream, a reality only for the young, the strong, and the well.

But it is possible to build a culture of health that helps the elderly achieve optimal

health— not perfect, but the best for each individual. We can get there, I believe, by hewing to these overarching strategies:

Building a Shared Value of Healthy Aging

Too many of us think that old age equals poor health and that older people can't adopt healthier behaviors. In fact, the majority of older adults are able to manage independently until their very advanced years, even those with

chronic disabilities and illnesses. And retired people continue to play productive roles in their families and communities.

It is never too late to benefit from increased physical activity, greater social engagement, and other healthy behaviors. One way forward is through volunteering. AARP's Experience Corps uses nearly 3,000 older volunteers in 22 cities to tutor struggling elementary school children in reading. The Corps is

improving literacy rates, enriching the lives of its volunteers, and strengthening schools and communities—a triple win.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Partnerships among businesses, public agencies, community groups, health-care providers—and older adults themselves—can develop innovations that help seniors remain independent and productive for as long as possible. It's a lesson the tech sector learned after years of developing digital devices for the elderly that were too complex or hard to manipulate. Aging 2.0, a platform for connecting aging care innovators, now includes older adults on panels to evaluate concepts. It is also partnering with the AARP Foundation on the Aging in Place Challenge, which offers a \$50,000 prize for the most innovative solutions to help low-income older people continue to live in their own homes as they age.

Creating Healthier, Equitable and Age-Friendly Communities

We need more towns and cities where people of all ages and circumstances can safely go for a walk, get around without a car, enjoy public spaces, buy healthy food and find the services they need. Lawrence, Mass., one of RWJF's Culture of Health Prize winners, is such a place. This predominantly Latino, working-class city has integrated its senior center into the community, with programs ranging from citizenship classes to diabetes

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self-management training to Zumba. It welcomes residents of all races, cultures and ages. The city even moved its weekly farmers' market next to the Senior Center; business tripled as a result.

RWJF is also proud that Princeton, N.J., the foundation's hometown, was the first city in the state to be named an “age-friendly community” by the World Health Organization, thanks to its walkable downtown, access to cultural activities, safe and affordable transportation and range of housing options. There are 75 such communities in the United States, and AARP offers a toolkit to help others join the movement.

Strengthening Health Services and Systems

In a culture of health, health care must be equitable,

accessible, efficient and timely for all patients, no matter their age. To make sure that older patients get the care they need, the nation must address the severe shortage of geriatricians. There also is an overwhelming need to “gerontologize” other professionals and clinicians so the older population receives the best care across the board. Additionally, we must also come up with better supports for family members that are serving as unpaid caretakers, often at a cost to their own health.

By keeping these tenets in mind, we can better promote health for all ages. That means older adults can spend more time with their grandkids, engage with their communities, work if they want to, volunteer, travel—the possibilities are endless.



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