



Older persons' aspirations to age well extend beyond just being independent to meet one's basic needs like shelter and income, say the writers. It is crucial to be able to live in comfort and dignity, in accordance with one's choice. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Ageing well begins in the neighbourhood, but doesn't end there

Home is not just where seniors reside, but extends to wider communities involving social networks and activities.

**Malcolm Ravindran
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"We want a home where we can be ourselves." That's an aspiration that 73-year-old Madam Yong holds dear when it comes to how she wants to spend her later years.

The retired teacher was one of the participants in a 2023 study conducted by Duke-NUS' Centre for Ageing Research and Education (Care) on the needs of middle- and upper-income older persons.

Madam Yong also shared her fear that her desire to age in place cannot be met as she does not have any children and does not wish to burden her young relatives. "Support is what I need," she said, as she envisions living in a caring community.

Older persons' aspirations to age well extend beyond just being independent to meet one's basic needs like shelter and income. It is crucial to be able to live in comfort and dignity, in accordance with one's choice.

In the recent National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong unveiled "Age Well Neighbourhoods", an initiative that seeks to "support our seniors where they are".

This approach to building supportive communities is underscored by a commitment to enable Singaporeans to continue living in the comfort and familiarity of their homes, instead of feeling a need to move into new and well-serviced spaces to age well.

Indeed, the vision and intent behind this initiative align well with the desires of residents and potentially support older people such as Madam Yong to achieve their aspirations.

But we must also bear in mind that where seniors are goes beyond merely being their place of residence. It also is a place where their aspirations are held and fulfilled.

KEY INGREDIENTS TO THRIVE

During the rally, PM Wong highlighted that more active ageing centres (AACs) will be built as they are essential in providing convenient access to meaningful interaction and activities in supporting older persons' health and social

well-being.

Similarly, the expansion of healthcare and home-based services aims to bring services closer to older people who may otherwise have not been able to access them.

At the heart of these efforts would be a complex yet integrated system that coordinates these services seamlessly. This comprehensive system – and the manpower behind it – shouldn't just meet the basic needs of seniors, but also appropriately match relevant activities and services to their interests and capabilities.

While we have systems in place to address basic needs, seniors in the same 2023 study said that they continued to feel like a "forgotten lot". There were few opportunities to pursue activities they found meaningful, such as learning carpentry, picking up a new language and participating in thought-provoking conversations on religion, culture or the arts.

It is only when we build our systems together with older people that we can have a community that is enabled and empowered to live out their unique aspirations for ageing well.

Service providers interviewed in a 2022 Care study also said they believe in the potential of a robustly integrated care system, and desire it.

A case manager shared: "We had to talk to colleagues from different teams to find out what kind of services they do, and this becomes an additional burden for us. The process needs to be fast enough to support us to meet the needs of our seniors."

The lack of a common platform for staff to coordinate care planning can be problematic when a senior requires multiple services such as financial assistance and home cleaning services. The senior may have to undergo separate similar assessments by different staff of the same agency, as these services are provided by separate departments, which can be both frustrating and disorienting for the person involved.

Difficult processes that require complex coordination can also create bottlenecks in service delivery, which may result in seniors' needs being unmet.

The study, which evaluated an integrated care model, found that the ideal outcome of an

efficient system is one where the older person is able to meet multiple needs through a single touchpoint, akin to a concierge service.

This tells us that the integration of services and coordination must be at the core of any expansion. Otherwise, we run the risk of creating a multiplicity of duplicated services that can be complicated to navigate.

But we also need to consider the long-term sustainability of these efforts, especially for service providers. This herculean task demands the collective commitment of many hands, including organisations and government.

Developing infrastructure is a necessary investment, but the weaving of the larger informal social networks into the communities is critical, too.

This requires building for "vital communities" – a concept where communities are resilient and thrive despite change. This would entail investing in innovative processes and collaborations that promote community attachment across generations, building community resilience through empowering residents to co-create and more.

At NTUC Health, for example, the Designing Together initiative groups youth and seniors to jointly conceptualise, implement and refine programmes in the community that promote healthier living. The co-creation process gives an opportunity to strengthen bonds between seniors and youth, and draws on their expertise to find solutions to problems in their own community.

Such approaches towards neighbourhood vitality should take centre stage and be normalised for the Age Well Neighbourhoods initiative to be effective.

AGEING IN NETWORKS BEYOND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

In further enabling residents to age with dignity, we must recognise that the idea of "home" may be grounded within a larger community.

Professor Elaine Ho and colleagues, in a recent op-ed, espoused the idea of "ageing in networks", which recognises that connections, places and activities, in which seniors find meaning and pleasure, are not bound by a single geographical space.

Their desire and efforts to remain connected and engaged may extend beyond their immediate surroundings.

In another Care study, Mr Xie, 70, shared: "I have no social activities in the neighbourhood. My friends and I seldom meet in this area, this neighbourhood. Most of the time, we would meet elsewhere."

He was interviewed for a 2023 study on walkability and life space, which found that seniors were willing to travel longer and farther, far beyond the neighbourhood, to spend time with friends and family. Access to these social networks is crucial to provide emotional and instrumental support, which are key for seniors' sense of well-being.

While enhancements to neighbourhoods may support our older persons to age in place, we must also begin to take steps to support movement between different geographical communities.

For example, programmes such as Zumba at a nearby AAC may not appeal to most men.

Programmes they may gravitate towards include DIY or repair workshops, which provide an avenue for them to tap skills honed over a long career.

Facilitating access to spaces out of the neighbourhood that offer male-focused programming would support the ability for this demographic to meet their aspirations for ageing.

Indeed, setting up regional collaborations between different organisations could enable seniors to register and participate at any community space, regardless of proximity. This supports older residents' autonomy to age together with the people they value, in the way they most desire.

Policy and processes that govern these communities must acknowledge the fluidity of physical boundaries, and consider how best to fulfil the meaningful engagement that seniors desire.

Age Well Neighbourhoods can serve as a strong starting point that supports older persons where they are, anchoring a shared neighbourhood identity within each of its residents.

But we must also dare to imagine a Singapore where older persons are further empowered to go where they wish. And where well-being is not just pegged to a "place", but rather determined by the richness of ties, wherever they might be.

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