

The Community Care that Older New Yorkers Need

NYC Department of the Aging Commissioner
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There comes a time in an adult child's life, when his or her role is switched. No longer are you being cared for and being looked after by your parent, you are caring and looking after them. It is a sobering reality when the role you have played your entire life is reversed. Even more sobering is the uphill challenges you will face when trying to find the support your aging parent needs to live and age at home with dignity and care.

As an adult child, caring for her 92-year-old mother, I have been caught in that dizzying maze of challenges-- health insurance hurdles, never-ending referrals, and storms of paper forms that make you want to scream and give up. The odds are stacked against older adults who want to age in their home and avoid being placed in a nursing home.

Don't get me wrong. Nursing homes are sometimes necessary for adults who need special medical care. But most adults can and want to stay in their homes. An AARP survey, showed that nearly 90% of Americans want to continue living at home, where they feel more fulfilled and socially engaged. When placed in nursing homes, their mental health can suffer, from anxiety to suicidal ideation. Also, supporting a person at home is significantly less expensive and helps to decrease avoidable emergency room visits and hospitalizations.

Most recently, the ongoing COVID pandemic has highlighted the critical importance of community care. Concentrating older people in institutions was a driver of the pandemic's death toll. It has also resulted in detrimental mental health effects due to the isolation necessarily imposed upon nursing home residents. Those isolating at home have fared better in terms of physical and mental health.

So given the financial and health benefits, why aren't we providing the support older adults need to live in their homes? Simply put - the investment and future forward-thinking has not been there. The policies and companion funding structure supports the nursing home institutional care model, which was created decades ago when the older adult population was smaller and less culturally diverse.

Our older adult population is growing and local adult services, what we refer to as Community Care, has not kept pace. Providing a continuum of services and supports for older adults is not an unsurmountable feat. It can be done.

The New York City Department for the Aging already has community care elements in place that promote independence, self-reliance, and well-being for older adults. Services like case management, home delivered meals, and home

care by visiting home attendants provides the in-home support that older adults need. Expanding these services to more older adults would help offset institutionalization for many of our elders.

The Department's network also includes Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, where residents can access health and social services, wellness activities, fitness classes, case-management assistance, outings, and volunteer opportunities. We also have senior centers that provide community engagement, hot meals, and are the social hubs for many older adults. During the pandemic, these services transitioned to a system of delivery and virtual programming that helped many avoid social isolation.

We also need to keep our older adults connected, physically and virtually. Virtual programming and telehealth services have been a godsend for many older adults during the pandemic, but many still do not have the internet service and the technological equipment they need to participate. Bridging the digital divide among this population is crucial. Transportation services to important appointments, especially in neighborhoods that don't have many public transit options, are also essential to helping older adults live in their homes.

Finally, we must also provide support for caregivers, who are often family members helping older relatives. As a caregiver navigating the system, I can personally say that guidance and support is crucial. It helped me navigate the complex system and it helped our family make the appropriate decisions for my 92-year-old mother.

Together, these Community Care services provide the safety net and community network that older adults need to continue living in their homes and neighborhoods. It is wonderful to see my mom smile as she talks about the possibility of joining her painting class or playing dominoes with her friends.

People are living longer. We must act now, for our elders and ourselves. We will all eventually reach the age when we need the support to remain in our homes and live with the dignity and respect we all deserve. New York City can be the model "aging in place" city, as it is the model age-inclusive city.