

Opinion | Older adults are creating community alternatives for themselves

John Lord says older Canadians are building community-based alternatives to long-term care and pushing for better home and community support.

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By John Lord

The recent pandemic was devastating for older Canadians, with more than 20,000 people dying in long-term care institutions. Families across the country witnessed firsthand the poor conditions their frail loved ones endured. Many older Canadians hoped that governments would recognize the urgent need for significant change by expanding community options for older Canadians who need care and support.

Unfortunately, the response to this crisis by governments has been uneven and very disappointing. Most provincial governments have increased funding for more long-term care facilities, even though 95 per cent of older Canadians consistently say that they do not want to end up in such institutions. There has been much less focus on building a strong community-based system of care so that older people can “age in place.”

Across the country, we are seeing baby boomers, now turning 80, actively responding to the long-term care crisis by advocating, organizing, and initiating community projects that enhance their well-being. This is not surprising, since autonomy and choice have been central to the identity of the boomer generation

There are four primary ways in which older Canadians are actively creating community alternatives for themselves.

First, many communities across Canada are creating Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) initiatives. These supportive communities,

organized by older adults, are mostly in apartments and condos. NORCs occur where many older adults live in proximity, allowing them to support each other and build strong social connections. Some NORCs also offer exercise programs and a weekly meal. With more than 2,000 NORC high rises in Ontario, this creates an opportunity for more effective delivery of health and social services. The City of Waterloo has a NORC co-ordinator, who assists older adults living in NORC buildings to create supportive communities.

Second, some families are intentionally creating support circles to assist with caregiving. Widely used with people with disabilities, support circles of family and friends meet on a regular basis and provide both emotional and practical support to an older person. It also allows the primary caregiver to have breaks and to not feel so alone. People who have circles often say that asking others to be involved can be the hardest part in a society that puts such value on independence. However, we know from research that social networks and circles nurture a sense of belonging and serve as a protective buffer for well-being. This approach to caregiving will grow as the population ages.

Third, older adults have been leading the charge on Age-Friendly Community initiatives. Waterloo and Cambridge have strong age-friendly committees, whose work has positively influenced their municipalities. These groups of elders advocate for communities to provide accessible and inclusive social environments where people of all ages can participate actively and securely. There is growing awareness of how municipalities and other levels of government can design cities so older citizens feel included and have easy access to all the amenities that enhance their quality of life, including accessible housing, transportation, and parks.

Fourth, with Canadians living longer than ever, some older adults are choosing to live with others in the final decades of their lives. Mostly, it is boomer women who are deciding that there are benefits to sharing a house with two, three, or four others. With almost 30 per cent of elders living alone, these shared housing options

are appealing to those who want more sense of community in their lives. It also addresses the loneliness that some older people experience. A group in Montreal called Radical Resthomes is promoting a similar vision of where and how we live as we age.

While older adults create community alternatives for themselves, they are also actively advocating for expanded home care, small neighbourhood care homes, and programs that provide comprehensive care in community settings. This advocacy, led by groups such as Seniors for Social Action Ontario (full disclosure: I am one of its leaders), has influenced recent Ontario government decisions, including more funding for home care and a home first policy which enables people to return to their homes from hospital instead of going to a long-term care institution.

The boomer generation will significantly influence the next stage of elder care. Their voices and choices will be increasingly honoured. Their vision of a strong community-based care system along with many community options created by older adults themselves has the possibility of creating a positive future.

Dr. John Lord is a co-founder and leader of Seniors for Social Action (Ontario). He is a recipient of the Order of Canada, having devoted his life to the social inclusion of vulnerable citizens. He is founder of the Centre for Community Based Research, an independent, non-profit research and education organization that relies on the knowledge and experiences of citizens who struggle with barriers to inclusion in society. As an innovator in the Canadian disability movement, he established the New Story approach to building creative, inclusive communities through the use of individualized funding, independent facilitation, and community engagement.

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