

Researcher examines benefits of supportive communities for older adults

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The number of Americans age 65 and older continues to increase as the baby boom generation ages and people are living longer. At the same time, many seniors plan to 'age in place,' or continue living in their current homes, despite needing more assistance as they get older.

One strategy for aging in place is an emerging idea known as aging in community, in which older adults depend on a community support group or [program](#) for assistance. This can consist of situations like older adults or family and friends living in the same house or close by each other in communities where they can easily assist each other.

To find out just how well the aging-in-community strategy is working, a University of Central Florida health management and informatics researcher examined three aging-in-community programs in Florida. Her study, which is among the first to examine some key variables for these programs, was recently published in the journal *Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine*.

"Given the fast approaching 'super-aged society' in the U.S., there is a critical need to identify and assess the impact of aging-in-community programs aimed at helping older adults remain independent at home while also having a sense of belonging to their community," says Su-I Hou, professor and interim chair of UCF's Department of Health Management and Informatics and author of the study.

Hou examined two [important factors](#) for successful aging in community—people's perceived ability to live independently and their perceived neighborhood social cohesiveness—in three types of aging-in-community programs in Central Florida.

These were two village programs, Thriving-in-Place, in Celebration, and Neighbors Network, in Winter Park; the Seniors First Meals on Wheels Program in Orlando, which is a county neighborhood lunch program; and a university-based lifelong learning program, LIFE at UCF.

In a village program, older residents band together to help each other out with drives to the doctor, help with errands and to vet any outside services or assistance.

Countywide neighborhood lunch programs provide meals and nutritional services to older adults in a group setting.

The university-based lifelong learning program provides education for older adults and ways to connect with other people and engage in campus services and programs.

The researcher found that for the nearly 300 total older people she surveyed in the aging-in-community programs, the higher a person's education level was, the less likely they were to perceive themselves as having the ability to live independently.

She also found that people who were married had greater perceptions of social cohesiveness, or that they lived in a neighborhood where people helped each other out.

When comparing the three programs, study data showed that older adults participating in the neighborhood lunch program perceived a higher level of confidence that they can live independently at their own home, yet a lower level of neighborhood social cohesiveness, compared with older adults participating in the village or lifelong learning programs.

"The findings suggest 'remain independent at home' and 'having a sense of belonging to their community' may impact older adults with different characteristics or community-support systems differently," Hou says. "It calls attention to examine how these key factors operate in different programs promoting aging in community, as well as a need to promote confidence in living independently at home among higher-educated older adults, and to facilitate a sense of belonging to their own community for single, [older adults](#)."

More information: Su-I Hou, Remain Independence and Neighborhood Social Cohesiveness Among Older Adults Participating in Three Community-Based Programs Promoting Aging-in-Community in the USA, *Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/2333721420960257](#)

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