

August 7, 2023, Marin Voice: Novato's mobile-home community checks many 'blue zone' boxes. by Meg Jordan

Did the state ask how you're doing?

Last week, I found a survey in my mailbox from the California Department of Aging inquiring about whether I was securely housed or feeling lonely or getting adequate nutrition. It was a comfort to me that my state was pursuing all the right questions, whether or not this particular agency had any solutions at hand.

I have a great deal of familiarity defining those solutions, as a medical anthropologist teaching behavioral and integrative health. I've lectured at national conferences and published peer-reviewed journal articles about the value of social connections and ways to harness the social determinants of health for enhanced wellbeing for all people.

It occurred to me that 90% of the questions in this four-page survey were satisfied by my local community, Marin Valley Mobile Home Country Club (MVMCC). It is a close-knit mobile home park of over 400 residents, owned by the city of Novato since 1997, with competent oversight from an elected group of residents.

Novato doesn't provide these healthy living activities, such as yoga or book clubs, as recommended in the survey, but the residents themselves provide them through volunteer commitments.

However, the city has provided security and stability by serving as a nonprofit entity-owner, with reasonable, affordable rents. A defined 40% of the lots are reserved for low-income residents.

This financial stability is an endangered aspect of community wellbeing in much of California, as we witness cries of unaffordability echo everywhere, along with a private equity mad dash to purchase mobile home parks, resulting in exorbitant rents for retirees and vulnerable elderly.

In examining the social conditions that promote people living well into their 90s and reaching centenarian status (so-called "blue zones"), I've traveled around the world from Okinawa to Sardinia. I have consulted with hospital groups centered in Loma Linda, an official blue zone site in Southern California.

As researchers, we report on the unique conditions in these zones. They tend to vary widely around diet and activity, but the one factor that seems to rise above the rest is that they feature socially engaged elders, securely housed and actively participating at the center of civic life, not the periphery.

Connection and centeredness appear to be critical to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health as we age.

Wellbeing with an environment that fosters health and happiness for people of every age — this vision for population health from the National Institutes of Health is seldom manifested in the U.S. Escalating rates of the “diseases of despair” — loneliness, addiction and suicide — are generating a tidal wave of concern among municipalities nationwide.

All age groups are affected. Social isolation during the pandemic is linked to staggering increases in teen suicide. Health care professionals are now rethinking risk factors for chronic disease, as we encounter new findings that the lack of social connection now outpaces the traditional risk factors of smoking, inactivity and poor diet or obesity in some populations.

Evidence mounts that people with more social connectedness have better health and longevity. Once older adults know the deep joy of belonging, they will fight with their limited resources to retain it.

In the last two months of Novato City Council meetings, the mayor, city manager and councilmembers were met with about 140 older adult protesters, advocating for their beloved community, MVMCC, to not be sold by the city to a private company.

Someday, I might apply for blue zone status for MVMCC, and then not only would the Department of Aging have its exemplar, but Novato’s cherished mobile home park would be listed with the likes of Okinawa and Sardinia, and might just qualify as the happiest blue zone of all.

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