

Q & A Profile



Helping Older Americans with Limited Income 'Age in Place'

Bright Ideas editor Vincent Swanson interviews Robert H. McNulty, founder and president of Partners for Livable Communities

“Aging in place” supports the notion that older persons should be able to maintain a desirable lifestyle by participating in their communities; remaining independent as their health allows, having access to educational, cultural and recreational facilities; feeling safe; and living in an intergenerational environment. This is especially true of low- to moderate-income older persons whose financial constraints limit their choices.

Q Please give us an idea of how people can “age in place.”

A Aging in place is about rethinking how we retrofit, repair or replan some of the communities that become inaccessible for older persons. It’s about removing the barriers so people can stay in their community as long as they want to.

Q Has anything, any one event, helped move senior issues to center stage?

A As the older Baby Boomers reach retirement age, there’s been more talk about quality-of-life issues. There’s a growing desire among some retirees of not wanting to move to Florida, not wanting to go to a retirement community, and wanting to live in historic central cities where you don’t need a car, where you can walk to work and culture and food. What’s still left out in almost all of this thinking is the impact on low-income, particularly minority, inner city people as they grow older.

Q What are the obstacles in low-income communities for older people to stay in their own homes and have access to the services they require?

A Aging-in-place programs must have a comprehensive agenda rather than just creating elderly housing for low-income people. It's basically an urban strategy, not just a housing strategy. It takes transportation, economic development, social service, public/private partnership, the role of libraries, the role of museums; all have to be reimagined in serving an older population. And the type of advocacy is different than primarily affordable housing for low-income people. It's not just Meals on Wheels, but volunteers, drivers, people that can take you to dialysis, people that can take you to church service and people to bring in and socialize with you.

Q Can you name a person who is making an impact on aging-in-place issues, particularly as they affect people in low-income communities?

A There is a remarkable woman named Conchy Bretos, from Florida, who recently won one of the Purpose Prizes [sponsored by Civic Ventures] that is awarded to four people over 60 that are doing their part to make America a better place. Conchy partners with public housing authorities to provide a support system that allows older people to stay in their homes, people vulnerable because they can not afford in-home care or assisted-living facilities. She has helped 40 public housing projects in a dozen states bring assisted living services to their residents.

Q How do you suggest dealing with predatory lending practices that target low-income seniors?

A Most financial products geared toward seniors are for rehab of the property—small repairs. So, we're working with lenders and housing practitioners to make sure predatory lending doesn't happen during a repair. A number of lenders led by Wells Fargo are creating a "good housekeeping seal of approval," along with the National Association of Homebuilders. Wells Fargo has taken the lead in their mortgage division, and has established a code of conduct for contractors and designers who work on the retrofitting of homes for wheelchair accessibility for aging in place, the ramps, the grab bars, the kitchen rangers that are adjustable in height.

Q Your thoughts on cohousing as a way for people to age in place?

A Cohousing's a great thing, and cohousing affects all income groups. For example, in Silver Spring, Maryland, they developed a new intergenerational living facility in the downtown arts district. This component is important, because there are people of all ages, 19 through 90, living next to each other using common facilities. It was sold as an inter-generational facility where children, retirees, artists could live and enjoy the common rooms and the large kitchens where people's meals could be prepared together. ■

Robert H. McNulty is the founder and president of Partners for Livable Communities, in Washington, D.C. For more information, go to www.livable.com