

Knapp: The meaning of aging in place

By Guest Column/Marian L. Knapp

Wicked Local Newton

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Newton —

I am an older woman — 71 to be exact. Certainly, there are many people who are older than I am and a great deal more who will enter their senior years over the next few decades. But all of us who are 60 (AARP starts at 50) and older are members of the “younger,” “middle,” “old” or “oldest” older-age groups. We are different in life experiences, interests, family backgrounds, and how we choose to lead our lives. Yet, we share something regardless of our individuality. We all continue to get older and we all are “aging in place.”

The term aging in place has been around for more than 25 years but what is this notion really about? Commonly accepted definitions involve bringing in services so a person can remain at home. The implication is that we don't move and that our home is the focus of our existence, when, rationally, we know that our lives are more diverse than just our residences. Surveys by different agencies have shown that the majority of older people want to remain at home for as long as possible. Problems with these survey responses are that it is not clear what “home” is or what “as long as possible” means. There is a subtle suggestion that the “home” is a long-time dwelling and that “as long as possible” ends in a precipitating event requiring immediate action. The implied alternative to home is assisted living or long-term facility. These framings play into people's fears of dislocation and turning into that person who sits alone in an unfamiliar place.

For most people there is a long process and a great deal of older-adult living before one gets to the point where he or she needs comprehensive, long-term assistance. It is this extensive period of time — often decades — that is rich in experience, full of satisfaction and, yes, loss and sorrow. It is the time when we make decisions, confront issues, maintain relationships, experience bereavement, find new activities, and reflect on the past, present and future. We lead our lives not in our homes exclusively but in our neighborhoods and communities, with our families and friends, always facing and confronting new challenges. Sometimes we stay in houses we lived in for many years, and sometimes we move. We might have several relocations during those years but no matter where we are, or how long we have been there, we are aging in place. Aging in place is not a static event; it is a long, complicated, fluid process that happens over many years. Aging in place means “aging in a community” — however that community is defined. It can be a physical place such as a city, town, neighborhood, or apartment building. But community can also be a social place where people in similar circumstances know, trust and rely on each other for sharing both fun and difficult times.

Aging in place well means that the community — including formal resources such as government, service providers, churches and synagogues, along with informal groups, and networks — is aware of and advocates for the characteristics that make up a livable community for all citizens — including its elders. For Newton this is a place where there is opportunity for civic engagement, appropriate housing, good transportation, a way to meet new people and retain old friendships, a sense of safety and security, connection to the natural world, employment, intergenerational venues and access to arts and culture.

Newton is at the leading edge of the aging in place phenomenon. Almost 20 percent of the people who live here are age 60 and older. Newton reflects a national (and international) trend of aging populations and has a higher proportion of older adults than the U.S. average. Certainly, states in the Sun Belt have more seniors but, of older established communities, Newton is in the vanguard of the aging boom. Take a minute. Look around in our villages and neighborhoods, in the grocery stores, banks, churches, synagogues and the library, and you will see us. We are everywhere. Some of us are fortunate to have good health and loving individuals close by. Others may be dealing with difficult chronic conditions or are alone, and disconnected from family, friends, and community. Nevertheless, we are all here together representing the wide range of characteristics that make up who we are as older adults.

The city of Newton is committed to making Newton a livable community for its citizens. The Newton Department of Senior Services (617 796-1660) is an active force in making this goal a reality by being an entry-point for information and resources to guide a creative, dignified and supportive process for all who wish to age in place in Newton.

Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and caregiver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on "Aging in Place in Suburbia". She is a facilitator for community groups wishing to address and improve health and social issues at the local level. She is a Commissioner on the Newton Council on Aging.