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Linda Fried on the Future of Retirement

The Columbia Professor Says It's Time to Retire the 'Retirement Community'

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Over the past 100 years, we have added 30 years to the length of our lives. But "retirement," as we know it, is making poor use of this public-health dividend. Rich or poor, older Americans--counting down their days in enclaves of the elderly--are asked to contribute little of enduring value.

And that's what must change. At heart, public-health scientists are optimists. Crystal ball in hand, I see a future that retires the retirement community and fully integrates older adults into every facet of American life. We need to invest in an America where older adults are healthy and remain among us, living out important roles and responsibilities that leave a lasting legacy.

That future will begin with living arrangements that are energy-efficient, accessible and adaptable as our health and our needs change. Research demonstrates that we live longer, and healthier, in communities that bring us into the mix--whether in buildings designed for several generations to cohabitate, in dwellings where we live with spouse and friends in a group of small apartments, or in multigenerational communities or high-rises with ample space for people of all ages to socialize, to walk, sit outside with friends and exercise.

'Age-Friendly Cities'

We will make our homes in communities where we can walk to get groceries, cleaning and haircuts. The World

Health Organization calls such places "age-friendly cities." Pedestrians will enjoy safe and accessible benches, parks and playgrounds. Public transit will be fully accessible and have the potential to take us everywhere.

Healthy foods will be available and affordable, whether through green carts, grocery stores or home delivery for those who are disabled. Everyone will benefit from such communities, but none more than older people who will be less isolated and less dependent on others.

Of course, we'll still seek a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Because many will want, and need, to keep working, we will not only keep our jobs longer, we'll serve on intergenerational teams that extract the strengths and capabilities of each age group. As universities have roles for emeritus professors, other institutions will ask the most senior workers to solve complex problems that need the most mature minds, and to mentor new generations of employees. Some workplace policies will permit flexible hours and a gradual step-down in the amount of time worked in a year, while other employers will adopt flexible locations: summers in the North and winters in the South.

As ever, older adults will want and need roles that reassure them they are leaving the world, as well as their children and grandchildren, in good shape. With expanded social roles, they will address multiple unmet social needs, ensuring that children succeed in school, have the skills to get jobs and understand the critical importance of healthy behaviors that start in childhood.

Builders and Contributors

Some will mentor young entrepreneurs; others will help students, serve as first responders or counsel young people in communities of need. These roles will be carried out through national service, part-time employment or volunteer opportunities--a variety of approaches in which accumulated experience and wisdom have the potential to secure, and transform, our future with the proper investments in healthy communities and healthy populations, we can redefine retirement not as separation but as integration, a period of continuing constructive contribution with meaningful roles and responsibilities that leave the world better for next generations.

I know of no more exciting prospect than building a new life stage we never had before, and designing these 30 additional years of life so they are a win-win for all.

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