

How Does Cohousing Support Livable Communities?

AARP National Livable Communities Conference

Session Highlights

Charlotte, NC, November 12-14, 2018

Summary prepared by Anne P. Glass, Ph.D., University of North Carolina Wilmington

Other presenters:

- Nancy Francis, Coordinator, The Center for Volunteer Caregiving, Raleigh, NC
- Suzanne LaFollette-Black, Associate State Director, AARP North Carolina
- With commentary by Gordon Walker

Plan for Session:

- Introduction to cohousing
- Elder cohousing highlights, drawn from 12 years of research by Anne Glass
- Intergenerational cohousing highlights
- Comparison/research project, based on research by Nancy Francis, conducted in 2017, while a graduate student in the UNCW *MS in Applied Gerontology* program
- How cohousing relates to AARP livability domains, Suzanne LaFollette-Black
- Questions and answers

Introduction

First: cohousing is NOT the same as “shared housing.” Shared housing is more like the “Golden Girls,” who actually shared a house – each having a bedroom, and sharing the kitchen and living room within the house.

The cohousing model can be thought of as a neighborhood in which people each have their own homes, and these homes are built around a shared common space. There is also usually a common house where people can come together for shared meals and other activities. A resident would typically know all 25-35 neighbors soon after moving in, but the design allows for a mix of privacy and community.

Common Features in Cohousing

- Private homes
- Common green space
- Common indoor space
 - Kitchen

- Great room/dining room
- Common meals
- Resident management – residents manage the community and make the policy and management decisions themselves as a group, usually by consensus

To varying degrees, cohousing communities also have:

- Guest rooms
- Community laundry
- Storage space
- Workshops and arts/crafts space
- Peripheral parking

They are sometimes called *intentional neighborhoods*

The model originated in Europe and is garnering increasing interest worldwide

Elder Cohousing in the USA – Highlights

About a dozen senior cohousing communities currently exist, with another 12-14 in various stages of development.

Why Elder Cohousing?

- More individuals with few or no children
- Social contact design
- Antidote to social isolation
- Desire to take active role
- Potential for communal coping
- Potential for mutual support

There is a lack of research in how older adults can help each other, yet most older people are quite competent and most of what people need is simple neighboring help

Data from five elder cohousing communities –

Community	Location	Opened	# Units	# Residents
A	West	2005	8	12
B	Southeast	2006	29+	36
C	West	2007	16	25
D	Southwest	2009	28	31
E	Southwest	2012	24	31

Summary of demographics:

- Move in around age 70
- Predominantly white and female
- Overall, well educated, with 70% to 87% reporting at least some graduate school

But wide variation across sites:

- One site: 80% currently married and 80% have children
- Another site: 50% are divorced and 46% have no children
- Two communities have nearly 2/3 with incomes < \$35K, while another has 2/3 with incomes > \$75K
- Variation in self-reported physical health, but overall, 70% say “excellent” or “very good”
- Variation in self-reported mental health, but overall, 78% say “excellent” or “very good”

Top reasons for moving to these communities:

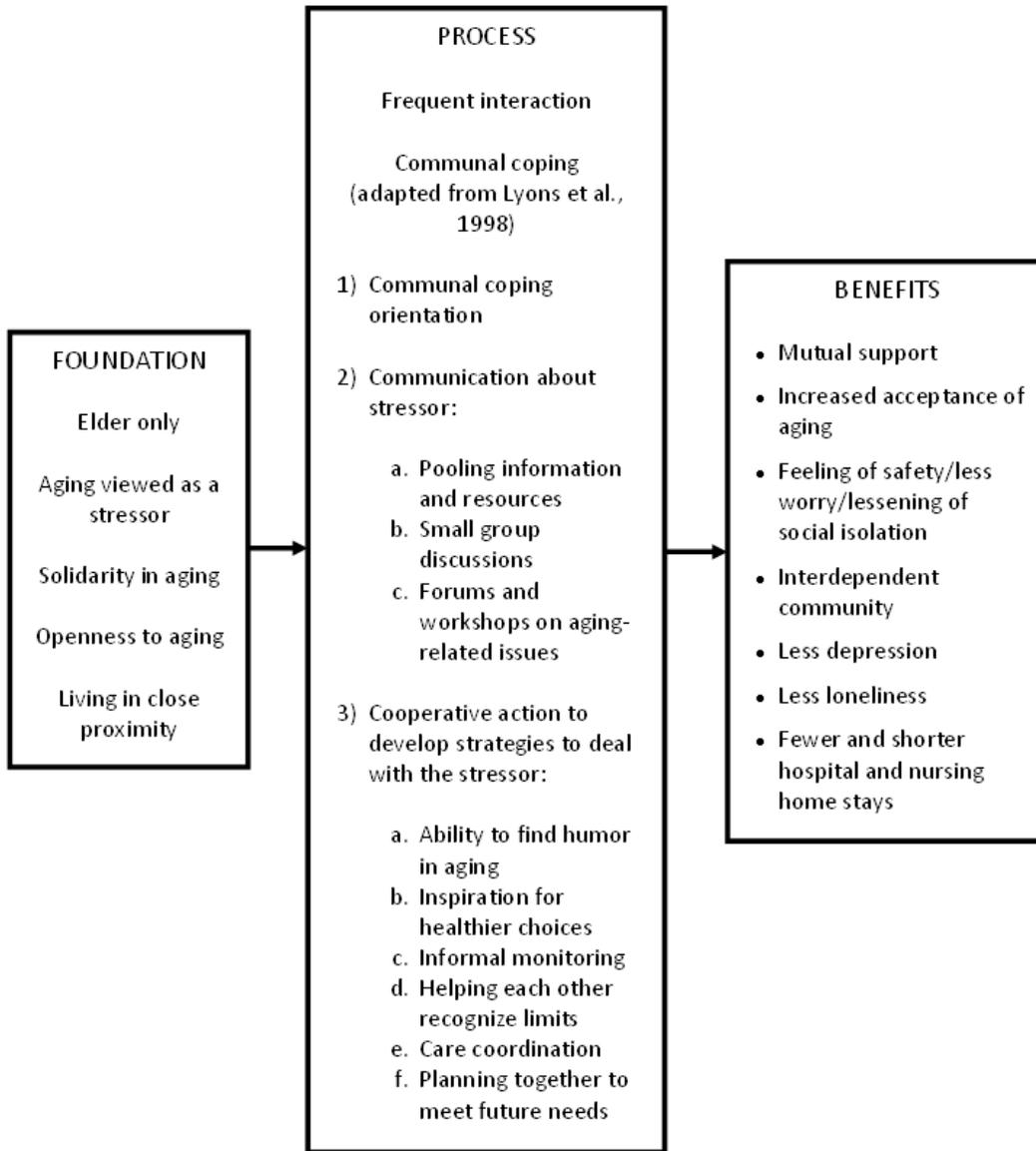
- **Sense of community**
- The town/surroundings
- Liked idea of this type of housing
- Idea of **mutual support**
- Liked location within town

While cohousing has typically drawn residents with higher incomes, at least one elder cohousing community specifically targeted those with moderate to low income. It includes both owned homes and comparably sized income-subsidized apartments.

Challenges

- Living in community
- Financial
- Some people do not participate
- Future-proofing
- Care when conditions advance

Conceptual Model of Aging Better Together Intentionally (Glass & Vander Plaats, 2013).



Foundation

- Elder only
- Aging viewed as a stressor
- Solidarity in aging
- Openness to aging
- Living in close proximity

Process

Frequent interaction

Communal coping (adapted from Lyons et al, 1998)

- Communal coping orientation
- Communication about the stressor
- Cooperative action to develop strategies to deal with the stressor

Cooperative Action

- Humor
- Inspiration for healthier choices
- Informal monitoring
- Helping others recognize/respect limitations
- Neighborly helping
- Planning together to meet future

Potential Benefits

- Mutual support
- Less depression
- Less loneliness
- Increased acceptance of aging
- Interdependent community
- Feeling of safety/less worry/lessening of social isolation
- Fewer and shorter hospital and nursing home stays

Aging Literacy!

Another research finding: There is a need to facilitate more opportunities for older adults to discuss aging in more depth and share experiences, resources, and insights

At Community B, where the majority say they *do* talk about aging, almost all would like to talk the same amount (62%) or more (35%)!

EACH COHOUSING COMMUNITY IS UNIQUE!!

Intergenerational Cohousing – Nancy Francis

All cohousing communities (n = 147) share basic characteristics but each is unique, and each has its own community culture. There are cohousing communities devoted to farming, the arts, the environment, family life, aging, and more.

Aging in Cohousing?

Many people who began cohousing communities in the 1980s and 1990s still live there

This was the 1st nationwide survey about aging in intergenerational cohousing and comparing to elder-only cohousing

Her 2017 web-based survey was conducted in coordination with the Cohousing Research Network, which is connected with the Cohousing Association of the United States

Study Demographics

	Intergenerational	Elder-only
Mean age	61	71
Age range	28–89	60–94
% white	95	94
% female	77	85
% married/living with partner	49	42
% with children	76	50
Education:		
% graduate level	71	58

Attitudes Toward Aging Vary Widely in Cohousing

Each community has its own culture, which may be more or less focused on aging issues

Some communities have aging-related approaches, policies and plans in place

Some communities think aging is not relevant to the community at this time

Benefits for Elders in Cohousing (*drawn from intergenerational comments*)

- Being part of community
- Help is available
- Active
- “Keeps you young”
- Friendship, connections
- Interaction
- Avoid isolation

Challenges for Elders in Cohousing *(drawn from intergenerational comments)*

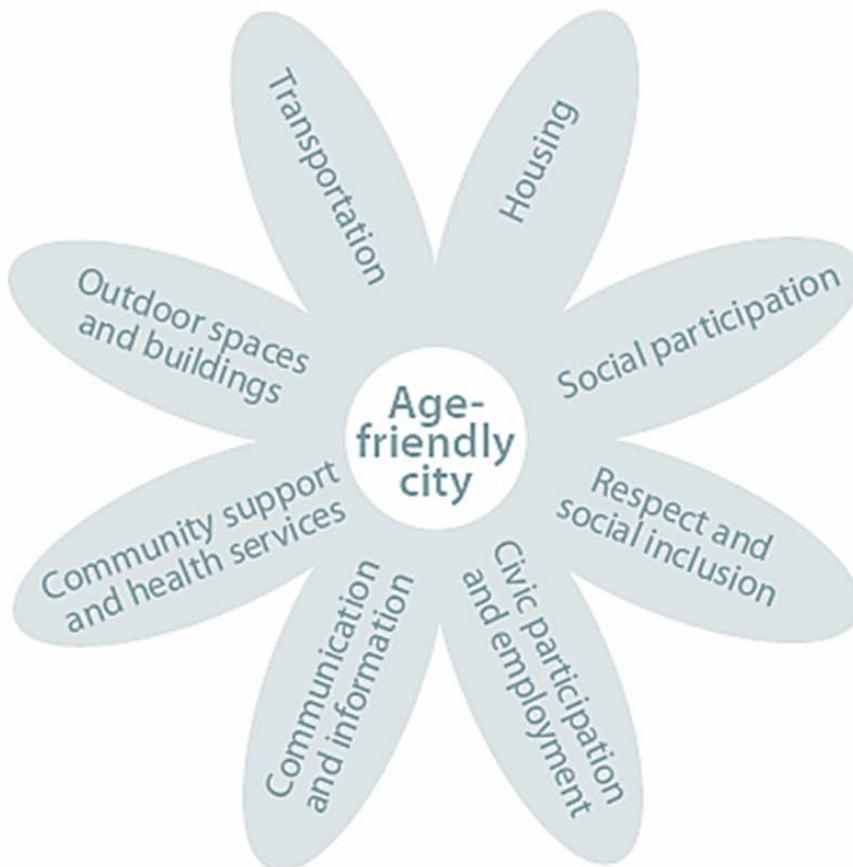
- “Can’t help like they used to”
- Need more help (too much!)
- Isolation
- Trouble asking for help
- Accessibility issues

While either setting can support aging in place, there were some significant differences between elder and intergenerational communities. For example, the percentage who strongly agreed with the statement, “We have forums to discuss aging issues,” varied from 94% in elder-only communities to 53% in intergenerational communities.

Need for all Communities:

Cohousing's supportive structure could be augmented by resources for aging from the larger community

How cohousing applies to AARP Livability domains – discussion by Suzanne LaFollette-Black



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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Website Resource: www.eldercohousing.info

Articles (contact glassa@uncw.edu to request a copy of any of these articles):

Glass, A. P. (2016). Resident-managed elder intentional neighborhoods: Do they promote social resources for older adults? *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 59(7-8), 554-571. DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2016.1246501.

Glass, A. P. (2014). Innovative seniors housing and care models: What we can learn from the Netherlands. *Seniors Housing & Care Journal*, 22, 74-81.

Glass, A. P. (2014, Feb. 6) Elder cohousing: The epitome of aging in community. *American Society on Aging AgeBlog*. <https://www.asaging.org/blog/elder-cohousing-epitome-aging-community>

Glass, A. P., & Vander Plaats, R. S. (2013). [A conceptual model for aging better together intentionally](#). *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27(4), 428-442. doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2013.10.001.

Glass, A. P. (2013). Lessons learned from a new elder cohousing community. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, 27(4), 348-368. doi:10.1080/02763893.2013.813426.

Glass, A. P. (2012). Elder cohousing in the United States: Three case studies. *Built Environment*, 38(3), 345-363.

Glass, A. P. (2009). Aging in a community of mutual support: The emergence of an elder intentional cohousing community in the United States. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, 23, 283-303.

Recent radio Interview:

WBUR *On Point* NPR show, "For Rent: Senior Citizens Turn to Roommates for Companionship, Cost-Cutting" (11/6/18), with Anne Glass and Rodney Harrell, AARP Director of Livability Thought Leadership. Accessible at <http://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2018/11/06/senior-citizen-roommates-rent-companions>