

An age-friendly goal

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OPINION

There are some places in the world where people live extraordinarily long lives. They've come to be known as "Blue Zones" and one of the most important aspects of these places is how they treat their elderly.

Sadly, none of them exist in Manitoba. In fact, the average life expectancy in Manitoba fell to 79.88 years old in 2020, which is the lowest it's been since 2011 and over two years lower than the national average. That's partly because our communities are not very age friendly —at least not yet.

Blue Zones are a hot topic these days because of a Netflix documentary series (*Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones*) that examines what makes them different from other communities. It begs the question: why do people who live in these places have higher life expectancies?

And why aren't we learning from those places here?

It's not like they're remarkably different from Manitoba — many of the principles that have made these places Blue Zones align with the commitments behind the Age Friendly Manitoba initiative. More than 90 Manitoba municipalities have committed to becoming age friendly, which is a great number, but it doesn't explain why the life expectancy in our province has fallen in recent years.

There are ways we can help delay the effects of aging, such as through consistent exercise, social interaction and healthy diets. Unfortunately, our society is putting up barriers to those lifestyle choices for too many older people.

It's difficult for people to get around, for example. Take a look at your neighbourhood. Are the sidewalks cleared in winter? Is there a bus route nearby or some other means of transportation? If you have someone in your life with restricted mobility, then you'll know it's a major issue everywhere in Manitoba. With over 44 per cent of Canadians aged 65 and older having a

disability, poor transportation options are one way older people feel isolated in their communities.

We need to do more to reduce social isolation for older adults. We all saw the toll the pandemic took on our social connections. We all became a little more isolated and many people became dangerously lonely.

This is a common experience for a lot of older adults, and it shouldn't be. One in three adults aged 50-80 reported feeling isolated in 2023, and social isolation is shown to have negative effects that rival those of smoking and obesity. The pandemic taught us to not take those social connections for granted, yet we clearly have work to do.

One of the common factors found in Blue Zones is how they treat older people differently. They put more importance on the ties of family and friendship, and they make a point of connecting socially while encouraging older adults to continue to contribute to their communities as much as possible.

Can Manitoba become a Blue Zone?

This is an issue that starts at the municipal level, but the province has a large role to play here as it oversees our public health-care system. We aren't getting any younger, so now is the time for governments to stand up and recommit to making healthy, active lifestyles an easier option for older people. We need to get building active transport paths, improve busing and encourage socialization.

After all, has there ever been a clearer core purpose for governments than to foster places where we can all grow as old as possible; where we can lead healthier, happier, more fulfilling lives together? Shouldn't that be our collective goal? Why don't you ask a politician next time you speak to one?

If it helps, you might remind them that we can save billions of dollars and extend countless lives (while reducing suffering) by doing something about this. More than 17 per cent of our province is aged 65 or older, and that number is projected to grow. It is only going to become more important for us to embrace age friendly attitudes in all aspects of both public policy and private life.

None of us is getting any younger, which means all of us will one day have to live the systems we put in place today. We have the means to be a Blue Zone — we just need the will to make it a priority. Call your MLA, mayor or reeve, and your councillors and ask them to recommit your community to being an age friendly one.

And maybe, just maybe, we can one day boast that Manitoba is a Blue Zone.

Connie Newman is the executive director for Age Friendly Manitoba, and the Manitoba Association of Senior Communities.