

Aspirations for Older Age

Older Adults' Needs

To feel secure as older adults, Americans need to prepare for older age starting earlier in life. When they're older adults, they need to believe in their own agency and have a sense of purpose and social value to prosper.

Insight for Action

Societal ageism diminishes many individuals' desire and capacity to proactively prepare for older age or to see it as a life stage to anticipate.

Policy Perspectives

Existing policies and programs treat older age as a condition to address, rather than an achievement (e.g., total autonomy, earned wisdom) to celebrate. This approach reinforces ageist stereotypes and, worse, discrimination against older people, including lost opportunities for organizations to employ experienced workers in pursuit of purpose. Internalization of this attitude contributes to people's avoidance of preparations for older age. Lack of preparation can result in unanticipated or exacerbated financial burdens for older adults.

Policies and systems would benefit from acknowledging and promoting capabilities of older adults, recognizing their creative and social engagement as contributors to health and well-being, and incentivizing intergenerational programs that benefit individuals of all ages. Together, these changes have the opportunity to transform aging into a period of life that is planned for and celebrated.

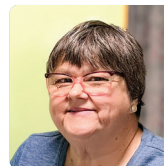
Hear from Older Adults

THEMES

- Many feel society and systems do not respect older adults.
- Some older adults have internalized ageism that enables low expectations for themselves and others.
- Many don't 'feel their age,' because they feel energetic and don't associate energy with being older.
- Many never thought about getting older and are surprised to be their current age.
- There are costs to being unprepared for older age.
- Many named sense of purpose as essential to aging well, but some were still struggling to define it, especially post-retirement.

“ Once you retire, you get to pick and choose what you wanna do with your day. But you gotta have a sense of purpose. If you don't, you give up. ”

Theme: Many named sense of purpose as essential to aging well, but some were still struggling to define it, especially post-retirement.



Genevieve

65-70, Woman, Rural Pennsylvania,
Below 138% FPL, Traditional Medicare

↗ [Video](#) ↗ [Profile](#)



Harriet

71-75, Woman, Urban Alabama, Below 138% FPL, Medicaid & Medicare (Dual Eligible)

"You know, you hear some people say if I need to get 100, I want to live no longer. I said I will stay long if God let me and just keep on doing what I feel like that's required of me. I really do. The thing that I do to help the seniors and give them something to look forward to... I feel like it's required of me. For some unknown reason, I do.... I be saying, Lord, I'm so tired. But I must go on."

Theme: What helps?

- [Video](#)
- [Profile](#)



Kwan

65-70, Man, Urban New York, 138-400% FPL, Traditional Medicare

"[My thoughts on my current age] is quite a helpless one. Because it felt like the pandemic forced me to retire. Sometimes I feel a bit uncomfortable about it, but also feel I have to settle for it. When you [retire], it feels like you have no choice in your life. [Coming to the senior center] seems helpless, but necessary. You have to do it, otherwise, where will you go during the second half of your life?"

Theme: Many named sense of purpose as essential to aging well, but some were still struggling to define it, especially post-retirement.

- [Video](#)
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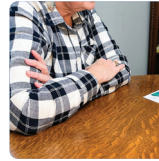
Aimee

65-70, Woman, Suburban Texas, Below 138% FPL, Traditional Medicare

"As I saw myself growing older, I saw myself as dying, and then I had to ask myself, do I want to die miserable? And I had decided then that no, I'm going to come out and start living my life authentically. So that saved my life. Coming out. I have experienced a level of self-love that, I would say some people would consider like a spiritual event in their life. I know it was an uplifting part of my life. I found out what it means to carry joy within yourself and to be able to express honestly that kind of joy among other people and do it freely."

Theme: What helps?

- [Video](#)
- [Profile](#)



Darcy

65-70, Woman, Rural Ohio, 138-400% FPL, Medicare Advantage

Her reflections on aging when she was younger: "I'm trying to think what I was doing at 43... You're too busy being my mom to think about what your age is, what you're going to be like later. When you have kids, you're not thinking that far in the future. That would probably be a good thing to tell yourself. Prepare yourself for... when you're older. I mean, right now everything's beautiful. You know, it's great. No problems. Think about it, it's not always going to be that way. You know, things do change.... [Preparing myself for] retirement would have been very wise. But, [I] didn't, and I was in a small business. The practice, they didn't give retirement. Didn't have to. Small enough practice didn't have to do that. So, that was kind of wise. Playing catch-up on that. Would have been wise to know that ahead of time to kind of prepare for that. That would have been good."

Theme: There are costs to being unprepared for older age.

- [Video](#)
- [Profile](#)

RELATED RESEARCH

Kang, Hyun, and Hansol Kim. "Ageism and Psychological Well-Being among Older Adults: A Systematic Review." *Gerontology & geriatric medicine*, April 11, 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9008869>.

Velaithan, Vithya, Min-Min Tan, Ting-Fai Yu, Andrien Liem, and Pei-Lee Tei. "The Association of Self-Perception of Aging and Quality of Life in Older Adults: A Systematic Review." *The Gerontologist*, April 1, 2024. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37029753>.

Irving, Justine. "Just Get up and Get on.' Purpose in Later Life." *Activities, Adaptation & Aging*, February 15, 2024, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924788.2024.2317013>.

Levy, Becca. "How America's Ageism Hurts, Shortens Lives of Elderly." *Harvard Gazette*, August 10, 2022. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/08/how-americas-ageism-hurts-shortens-lives-of-elderly>.

➤ Visit thepeoplesay.org to watch videos of older adults sharing their aspirations for later life firsthand.

The People Say is a qualitative database designed to help policymakers hear the voices of the public when shaping policy. The database features first-hand insights from a diverse group of older adults and caregivers, as well as feedback from experts on policies affecting older adults. This initiative is a collaboration between the Public Policy Lab and The SCAN Foundation.

