

Issue Brief

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Forced Relocation in an Urban Context: Supporting Older Detroiters

Summary: As Detroit gentrifies, some current low-income apartment tenants may be required to find new residences as these buildings change ownership. **The impact of these decisions affects many seniors.** This policy brief highlights relevant concerns around moving experiences in order to frame recommendations for policy and practice surrounding the involuntary relocation of older adults. Our coalition recommends **increasing awareness** of the needs of older adults and/or other vulnerable populations in the moving process, advocating that private interests consider and prepare for the costs, financial and other, of the necessary assistance for involuntary movers, and urging policy officials to **require** the provision of recommended assistance to relocating residents.

"Nobody wanted to leave. Nobody asked to leave. Now they have to make the best of it."

– Professional assisting with move

"Yeah, I cried...cried a lot. Not 'cause I had to move...

It's the way they did us. It hurt...that you would do humans like you did us."

– Eve (age 62 at move)

Introduction

As Detroit's urban core redevelops, it is expected that private ventures will have heightened interest in acquiring real estate in the city. As Detroit redefines itself, we must ask how older adults are both part of its past, and part of its repopulating and rebuilding. By examining the health-related, emotional, financial, and logistical supports needed for urban seniors making a housing transition, this research raises awareness of the issues to policy makers creating revitalization incentives in order to create urban contexts for all ages.

Relevant Literature

In Detroit, it is critical to examine relocation in an urban context and its relationship to health and well-being. Relocation in older adulthood can be fraught with future concerns of autonomy, frailty, and mortality. While predictive factors of relocation, such as health of a spouse, have been established (Wiseman, 1980; Litwak and Longino, 1987), limited attention has been paid to understanding the diversity of experiences in the process of moving in older adulthood. While moving at any age can be challenging, relocation in later life is an experience that often involves reconciling one's past and possessions, and planning for one's future needs (Marcoux, 2001; Luborsky et al., 2012, Perry, 2012).

In recent months, the Hannan Foundation convened a group of providers serving older adults in Detroit, and formed a coalition to address the needs of vulnerable seniors in Midtown and Downtown Detroit who face possible relocation. The group originally formed to help better understand the impact of forced relocation. In a collaborative effort, this coalition has come together to examine the issues and recommend ways to support older adults.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

In order to ensure that older adult involuntary movers will receive specific, needed services and to make the involuntary moving process as successful and low-risk as possible, the coalition has identified two policy needs:

1. Increase awareness of the needs of older adults and/or other vulnerable populations in the moving process.

Highlight issues to those considering purchasing buildings requiring relocation of seniors and vulnerable populations and **train** care practitioners and service providers on issues involved in relocation.

The Older Adult's Physical Health Needs:

What is the health status of the older adult (including mobility)? How might their health change due to relocation? Are there recent physical changes? Will they need relocation assistance due to their health needs?

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The Older Adult's Mental Health Needs:

What are the cognitive needs of the older adult? How will relocation affect their cognitive functioning? Is the older adult comprehending the information provided about moving, housing options, etc? Will they need relocation assistance due to their mental health needs?

The Older Adult's Emotional Needs:

What are the emotional needs of the older adult? Is there fear of change or fear of the unknown? Is there anxiety about the details of moving? How attached is the older adult to their current place of residence?

The Older Adult's Financial Needs:

How does the older adult's financial situation change with relocation? What are comparable rentals? Where are housing vouchers accepted? What are the restrictions based on income and/or assets?

The Older Adult's Logistical Needs:

What are the logistical needs of the older adult? What is their literacy level? Do they need help to fill out forms, and/or obtain documents needed for new residence? Is assistance needed to identify housing options? Do older adults need to be driven to potential residences? Will the older adult need help with packing and/or moving?

The Older Adult's Network:

Who is in the older adult's network? (Partners, family members, friends, church, others?) How will they support the older adult (emotionally, financially, logistically)? Are relationships sufficient to support the older adult through the transition, or will additional support be needed? How socially isolated is the older adult? Will the move increase or decrease social isolation?

Note: Housing options explored should reflect, at a minimum, all the above concerns.

2. Policy officials need to require that those acquiring buildings resulting in seniors and other vulnerable populations relocating provide these recommended services:

- Owners will subsidize relocation costs for existing tenants.
 - Costs of relocation (packing, moving)
 - Costs of security deposit
- Owners will subsidize voluntary mental health/clinical assessments and services.
 - Assessment of older adult's needs including health-related, emotional, financial, and logistical
 - Provision of individual and/or group sessions to process emotional concerns involved in relocation e.g., fear of the unknown, how to plan a move, how to identify places to live
- There will be **inter-agency service coordination** so that older adults will have an identifiable point of contact, as well as monitoring the status of the individual for at least one year following relocation.

Conclusion

In examining the health-related, emotional, financial, and logistical supports needed for urban seniors making a housing transition, this issue brief identifies critical considerations in the relocation of seniors, and their implications for social policy. We realize that vigilance is required to facilitate accessibility to and understanding of information as well as ease of transition for older adults who relocate.

Author Information

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