

Improving Unsafe Environments to Support Aging Independence with Limited Resources

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KEYWORDS

• Function • Older adults • Disability • Interprofessional

KEY POINTS

- Aging with independence benefits individuals, family, and society but can be hard to achieve.
- Function is determined by both the person and the environment in which they maneuver.
- This article describes a promising program that intervenes with both older adults and their home environments to improve function.
- This program, called CAPABLE (Community Aging in Place, Advancing Better Living for Elders), is funded through the Affordable Care Act and can be scaled up nationally if determined to be a success.

Aging with independence is important to older adults for multiple reasons: it affords better quality of life for older individuals and their families,¹ and is a foundational American value that, when achieved, saves resources for society to use in other ways. The number of older adults in the United States is projected to continue growing,² making it increasingly urgent to identify ways to support aging with independence. For many older adults, the challenges are socioeconomic.³ However, for almost everyone, at every income level, aging brings functional challenges that can compromise independence. These functional challenges result from interactions between an individual's health and the surrounding environment. Low-income older adults face even greater challenges to independence because they have more comorbidities³; experience more functional limitations as a result^{4,5}; and, by definition, have fewer resources to modify their home environments. This combination places them at even greater risk

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for reduced activity levels, social isolation, falls, and other adverse events. This article explains how unsafe environments affect older adults with functional limitations, and describes an interprofessional model of care, called CAPABLE (Community Aging in Place, Advancing Better Living for Elders), which addresses both individual and environmental aspects of aging with independence. This article also provides tools and lessons for use while implementing this innovative model of care within a community of urban-dwelling, low-income older adults with multiple functional limitations.

UNSAFE EXTERIOR ENVIRONMENTS POSE BARRIERS TO AGING WITH INDEPENDENCE

Every level of the environment supports or inhibits function and health.⁶ From the neighborhood surrounding an older adult's home, to the steps leading up to their front doors, to the interior of the house and each room; all of these environments affect an older adult's ability to function well enough to age in place.

Neighborhood

The neighborhood of residence can affect health and safety in later life, particularly in urban settings where factors such as broken or littered sidewalks and busy streets, a lack of safe spaces to exercise, or the geography of gun violence and other threats^{7–10} pose risks that keep some older adults indoors. Some neighborhoods also contain food deserts, meaning places lacking markets with ready supplies of produce and other options essential to a healthy diet. Unsafe neighborhoods not only prevent older adults from engaging in the types of activities associated with sustaining an independent living situation (eg, shopping, medical appointments, outdoor exercise), they can also interfere with older adults' ability to visit the places many associate with a high quality of life (eg, green spaces, houses of worship, senior centers, the homes of family and friends). Other barriers that may be more common to suburban and rural environments, such as the absence of sidewalks and other walkways, adequate lighting, and public transportation; geographic features such as steep inclines; or natural features such as mud and brush, can render older adults homebound.

House Exterior

On opening their front doors, many older adults are stuck at the top of their own front steps because of broken stairs, a lack of adequate railings, or stairs that are too steep or slippery for increasingly weak leg muscles to navigate. Each time they descend or ascend these steps, these individuals face the risk of falling, which can lead to serious injury or even death. Unsafe stairs pose a threat when older adults must go out (for example, to attend a medical appointment) and also bar exiting the home for optional activities such as volunteer work, socializing with friends and family, or participating in religious services. These disparities in housing conditions can lead to health disparities because community-dwelling older adults derive benefits from social engagement outside their homes, such as caregiving for friends or neighbors,^{11,12} working part time,¹³ or attending church and family activities.¹⁴ Onset of functional decline, which can put older adults at risk when entering or exiting their homes if proper safety measures are not in place, has been linked to cessation of these types of potentially beneficial activities.¹⁵

UNSAFE HOME INTERIORS CAN POSE EVEN GREATER THREATS TO AGING WITH INDEPENDENCE

Although unsafe exterior environments, such as communities with neighborhood violence and broken sidewalks, pose some of the most visibly obvious threats to the health and well-being of older persons, often the most dangerous place for these

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