

Chicago Tribune

Growing old alone: More seniors at risk of becoming elder orphans



December 24, 2016

By: Marwa Eltagouri

It's the holiday season, the time of year when every red-and-green light display and jingling bell reminds Janyce Boss that she is, for the most part, alone.

She's almost 65. She's divorced with no children. She spent years caring for her father, who died after struggling with heart complications, and then her ailing mother, who died in 2013. Her brother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and died last year.

Boss is what researchers call an elder orphan — an older person who is socially or physically isolated, without an available family member or caregiver to help them manage aging. Based on the number of people older than 65 who are unmarried, widowed and childless and who have no nearby family, experts estimate as many as 22.6 percent of the older population nationwide is at risk of aging alone, or already is. In Chicago, about 27 percent of seniors are widowed, 15 percent are divorced and 14 percent never married, according to 2015 U.S. Census Bureau data.

"When the holidays come, when your doctor asks for your emergency contact, those things make you aware there's no one there for you," Boss said. "In some ways, it doesn't bother me. There are ways I can get involved ... but I'm concerned about health issues. Am I going to know when I need to go to a nursing home?"

An estimated 49 percent of people older than 65 in Chicago who owned a house were living there alone in 2015, according to census data, and experts say that number is expected to increase in the coming years. Fewer people are getting married, couples are having fewer children and parents are living farther away from those children, experts say.

The numbers are similar in other big cities like New York City, where 49 percent of seniors who owned a house lived by themselves, and Los Angeles where the figure is 44 percent, according to 2015 census data.

The term "elder orphans" was coined in part by Dr. Maria Torroella Carney, chief of geriatrics and palliative medicine at Northwell Health in New Hyde Park, N.Y., who co-wrote a July analysis on adults increasingly aging alone, with multiple chronic illnesses and geographically distant family and friends. By referring to these seniors as orphans, Carney hopes to bring awareness to their loneliness and isolation, which correlates with increased risk of heart disease and mortality.

Last month, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging and AARP launched a national education campaign to address the growing problem of loneliness, estimating that 1 in 5 people older than 50 are affected by isolation, which is associated with higher rates of chronic disease, depression, [dementia](#) and death. Research finds prolonged isolation to have an equal effect on health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, AARP President Lisa Marsh Ryerson said in a news release.

In addition to these long-term complications, day-to-day life presents challenges for seniors living alone. Sticking with treatment plans, filling medications, visiting the doctor — it can all be daunting, especially tagged onto daily chores that get harder with each day, like paying bills and accessing groceries.

For Boss, who lives in Downers Grove, looking after her family members was demanding and emotional work. She recalls the blur of doctor appointments and errands, which gave her little time to process the gravity of their illnesses. The long hours spent looking after her family members left her too tired to foster her other relationships, and, once her brother died, she found herself isolated.

An estimated 49 percent of people older than 65 in Chicago who owned a house were living there alone in 2015, according to census data.

"Most of the time I can deal with it, and it doesn't bother me. I'm a pretty independent person," she said, citing her involvement with her church and a mural she's helping paint. "But at this time of year, at the holidays, I think I'm a little more vulnerable right at this moment than I'd normally be."

Joyce Aldawood, 68, a divorced woman with no children and almost no family, considers herself an elder orphan. The key to her happiness, she said, is having a circle of friends of all ages, so that she can lean on the younger ones if challenges arise.

"Some of my friends are 10 years younger than me," she said. "And you try to be as good a friend to them as you can. You treat them like what they are — solid gold."

Aldawood suffers from balance problems, which have made her aware of her aging, and she's installed safety measures in her Hoffman Estates home as a result. While she loves Middle Eastern-style rugs, she's thrown them out, recognizing they're a tripping hazard. She's now a big fan of motion sensor night lights, so much so that the trunk of her car has a neat stack of night lights she plans to distribute to her friends.

While researchers and senior advocates have few solutions to offer to those aging alone, they agree that elderly isolation can best be addressed on a community level. Those living alone need to be in cities that are safe, with affordable housing and convenient transportation systems, as well as social opportunities to meet new people. Experts also encourage those approaching the second halves of their lives to be proactive in planning for their later years by choosing to settle near family or friends and by finding someone to legally assist them with difficult health care decisions.

Local organizer Ben Handy has a fix for the elder orphans living in his neighborhood of Calumet Heights. A few years back, he decided to revive his street's block club, which has since turned into the Ridgeland Block Club Association, covering six blocks. The neighborhood has plenty of seniors aging alone, some of whom are part of a group of families that moved into Calumet Heights in the mid-1960s. Their children, Handy said, have grown older and moved to different, sunnier parts of the country, like Georgia or California.

As president of the block club, Handy finds himself dealing with tasks other block club leaders might not: shoveling older neighbors' driveways, taking them to the grocery store and helping them sign up for Meals on Wheels.

Handy, 51, is single with no kids and said he's "certainly moving" toward elder orphan status. He has a brother and two nephews, but he said he assumes his nephews' priority will be caring for their own father in his old age rather than caring for Handy. In a way, by creating opportunities for seniors in his community, Handy is building a safety net for when he reaches that age himself.

He threw a holiday party recently, catered in part to the older neighbors who might find themselves feeling lonely around Christmas. The Family Den Lounge, a Calumet Heights establishment, was dressed up with candles and white tablecloths. A live band jazzed up the room with songs more suited for dancing than for talking, and Handy was particularly excited about a special cocktail menu.

"The holidays can be a really tough time for people because they remember loved ones they used to spend the holidays with who passed away, and you know, just hearing the same Christmas carol they used to love to sing with their husband," he said.

During the party, two 78-year-old widows, Marge Matute and Jackie Mitchell, who've been friends for decades, sat at the bar and sipped their drinks, swaying to an Aretha Franklin cover song.

Mitchell, who has a son temporarily living with her but who usually lives by herself, is generally healthy and is not anticipating many health problems outside of the natural aging process. But she said she has a "multitude of aches and pains, every morning something different."

Her hope is that she can fend for herself for as long as possible and avoid moving out of her Avalon Park home.

While she doesn't live on one of the Ridgeland blocks, her sister and nephew do, and introduced Mitchell to the club. She said she admired how the club tried to involve older residents in its activities. Maybe, she said, she could set up something similar in her own neighborhood.

"I think it's very beneficial," she said. "I'm sorry other blocks don't have one."