

Tennessean.

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Older adults are valuable contributors to a vibrant community | Opinion

Private philanthropy and public funding sources must place a higher priority on our growing older adult population.

Dianne Oliver Guest columnist

Published 4:00 a.m. CT Dec. 19, 2020

Story Highlights

Dianne Oliver is the executive director of the West End Home Foundation, a charitable foundation dedicated to enriching the lives of older adults through grantmaking, advocacy and community collaboration in Middle Tennessee.

Every day 10,000 Americans turn 65. By the year 2030, one in five Americans will be 65 or older, outnumbering children for the first time in the history of our country. Population projections in Davidson County predict a 29% increase in the 65-plus population between now and 2030.

At the same time, ageism, or negative stereotyping based on age, has become increasingly prevalent but largely ignored. We've all heard of the "graying of America" and the "silver tsunami," phrases that cultivate an attitude of doom and destruction. A University of Michigan study found that 80% of adults surveyed between the ages of 50 and 80 experience ageism almost daily through materials they read or watch or through personal experiences. AARP reports that two out of three employees indicate they have experienced or observed ageism in their workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored our acceptance of ageism with the attitude that it's just affecting old people and the hashtag #boomerremover.

Philanthropic giving inadequate

Ageism is evident in philanthropic giving patterns. Only 2% of philanthropic dollars nationally are dedicated to aging-specific initiatives. A mere 2% to support 20% of the population is not acceptable. We have an incredible network of nonprofit agencies in Nashville that provide

valuable services to our older citizens, but they struggle with funding because older adults are not valued in our society.

While old age is often considered synonymous with frailty and vulnerability, the vast majority of people age well, remain physically active and want to be engaged in their communities. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 27% of those 65 to 75 and 8% of those 75 and older remain gainfully employed either full or part time. Those numbers will increase as more people delay retirement out of choice or financial necessity.

Volunteer workforce has taken a hit

Older adults also make up a large percentage of our volunteer workforce, a vital component of our communities. Many local nonprofit agencies that serve older adults report that 60-75% of their volunteers are 60 and older. The tremendous value of this unpaid workforce has been magnified during the pandemic as nonprofits have furloughed older volunteers due to health risks. Agencies are struggling to fill the gap as the pandemic lingers.

Hear more Tennessee voices: Get the weekly opinion newsletter for insightful and thought-provoking columns.

As our society addresses diversity, equity and inclusion, ageism must be part of the conversation. We cannot forget the valuable wisdom and rich diversity older adults bring to the table. We need to create communities that are age-friendly — in the workplace, in outdoor and recreational spaces, in our health care systems and in our transportation systems — and allow people to be engaged in meaningful ways. Barriers to full participation, regardless of age, can be reduced if we act collectively and deliberately.

Private philanthropy and public funding sources must place a higher priority on our growing older adult population to make sure that those who need support have access to high-quality services. We all want to live in a world where we are valued, have opportunities to thrive and can find a helping hand if we need it.

Dianne Oliver is the executive director of the West End Home Foundation, a charitable foundation dedicated to enriching the lives of older adults through grantmaking, advocacy and community collaboration in Middle Tennessee.