

## More older adults spending 'golden years' in homelessness

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After a lifetime of working hard, Linda Boamah thought she was setting herself up for a comfortable retirement.

But the former optical-lab worker became ill with multiple chronic conditions in 2014 and in less than two years lost everything, including her house, life savings and pride.

"I couldn't work anymore because I got congestive heart failure, COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and am diabetic," said the 62-year-old East Side resident. "The money I had saved up was quickly depleted, and I was terrified."

Thankfully, a friend stepped in and offered Boamah a room to sleep in, sparing her from becoming part of the growing population of seniors living on the streets and in shelters.

About half of the homeless in the United States are people 50 or older, studies show. The number of older homeless adults is projected to increase by 33 percent in the next decade and double by 2050.

"We're at the beginning of the wave and have an opportunity to not only improve the quality of life of these homeless and formerly homeless elders, but also extend their lives," said Katrina Van Valkenburgh, central region managing director for CSH, also known as the Corporation for Supportive Housing.

The average life expectancy for a homeless older adult is 63 years, compared with 80 for someone who always has had stable housing, she said.

Leaders from across the Midwest are meeting in Columbus this week to talk about helping this aging homeless population get into and keep affordable housing. The two-day event is hosted by CSH and National Church Residences, which specializes in low-income and affordable senior housing.

It kicked off on Tuesday with a tour of two supportive housing properties owned by National Church Residences. Today, housing experts from across the country are meeting.

Aging adults who have been homeless experience chronic illnesses and geriatric conditions 15 to 20 years earlier than the general population, said Dr. Margot Kushel, a professor of medicine at the University of California-San Francisco who followed 350 homeless people in Oakland, California.

Although the median age of the participants was 58, they had more trouble bathing, dressing and eating than many in their 70s, 80s and 90s, Kushel said. They also had a harder time using transportation, taking medication, managing money, applying for benefits and arranging job interviews.

One answer is creating more affordable and supportive housing — the theme of today's gathering. Supportive housing complexes provide tenants with tailored services such as life-skills training, alcohol and drug abuse programs and case management so they can have more stable, productive lives.

After six months of living with her friend, Boamah was able to secure an apartment in June at National Church Residences' Commons at Third near Grandview Heights.

"I was so worried before about what was going to happen to me that I was making myself even more sick," she said. "I love my new home. It's peaceful and quiet."

Though supportive housing has been available for people who have been homeless or have struggled with addiction or mental illness for decades, they need to be adapted to the unique needs of older residents, Kushel said. Rooms, for instance, need good lighting and grab bars in

the bathroom. Many residents also could use personal-care attendants to help them bathe and get dressed.

Leon Williams, 63, of the North Side, said if it weren't for the supportive services at Commons at Third, he'd probably still be living in a nursing home, where he landed in 2009 after falling and dislocating his shoulder. He remained there for six years because of prostate cancer, a knee replacement and a spinal condition that forced him into a wheelchair.

"Unlike the nursing home, I can come and go when I please," he said, adding that he enjoys eating at the many restaurants near his new home.

After two bouts of homelessness, mostly recently in 2005 after a difficult divorce that led to substance-abuse problems, Jerome Johnson, 47, of the West Side, said he's glad to have found permanent supportive housing at another National Church Residences property, Commons at Buckingham, while he is still relatively young and healthy.

"It took me a lot of work and paperwork to get here, and I'm never leaving if I can help it," he said.