

Summary

In this conversation, Natasha Howe discusses her extensive work with older adults and individuals with disabilities in Richmond, Virginia. She highlights the pressing issues of housing, homelessness, and evictions faced by these populations, emphasizing the need for education, advocacy, and community resources. Natasha shares insights on illegal evictions, the importance of planning for aging, and the collaborative efforts of various agencies to support those in need. The discussion culminates in a reflection on the positive aspects of aging and the significance of living fully as one grows older.

Takeaways

Aging for All (00:01.063)

And I'm Andrea Price. Thank you all so much for joining us today. We are joined by Natasha Howe. Natasha is an RVA transplant from North Carolina. She came to Virginia to begin a career at the VA hospital where she worked with active duty and veteran service members as a recreation therapist. In this role, she assisted service members with transitioning to civilian life after years of service in their respective branch of the military.

This included identifying resources to assist military outside of the VA system where necessary, navigating the city with a new injury such as a brain injury, spinal cord injury, or re-engaging with family. While obtaining her Master's of Business Administration, MBA, Natasha was selected as a Therapeutic Recreation Manager for the City of Richmond's Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities Department.

Natasha was tasked with starting a brand new division of Parks and Recreation, which focused on ensuring that children and adults with all types of disabilities and seniors have equal and fair access to recreation and leisure, access to buildings and recreation facilities, restaurants, sports, et cetera. She became the manager of the Office of Aging and Disability Services for the City of Richmond in 2003.

This office serves residents of Richmond that are 55 and older, and those who are 18 and older with a physical disability. Natasha has been in Virginia since 2016, and she and her husband Doug have two young children, ages two and four, who keep them active and very busy. Hello and welcome, Natasha. Thank you both very much. Thank you. We are so excited to have you today. Thank you.

Absolutely. Natasha, you are a true champion for people. Are for all of your work from the veterans to what you do now with the city of Richmond. And the work you do is very broad. So you have to be well versed in a lot of different areas. One issue Natasha and I have talked about offline through our personal conversation has conversations have been the issue has been the issue of

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Housing for older adults. So can you talk a little bit about the issues you've seen through your work with the city of Richmond and how you guys hope to address housing for older adults and those with disabilities? Absolutely, absolutely. And you're right. I mean, that's one of our major

issues. And so what I'll do is I'm also going to give you a little bit of background about our office and what we do, which I think is a great way to lead into the way that we help people.

Again, I'm with the Office of Aging and Disability Services where we serve residents that are 55 years of age and older, and those that are 18 years of age and older with a physical disability. And so we have a helpline, so folks can call our helpline, which I'll give that number in just a moment. People email, they call, however they want to reach out to us. We get contacts from city council, other departments, organizations and entities will reach out to us for assistance.

Some of our trending concerns and issues in the city are homelessness for our older adults, food insecurity for older adults, and financial assistance. We're now finding that there's an increased number of older adults who have very limited knowledge on what benefits they even qualify for, right? So we do a lot of those pieces. Now we're not social services, but those initial phases, we can help people really get set up and structured.

I structured on a really good plan to help with that. again, homelessness, evictions, those are some of our top, top calls. I think we probably get quite a few of those every single day. mean, what's happening is we're finding that number is, the age is increasing. We just had a request today by a resident who's 80 years old and she's about to be evicted, right? And so she's on her way out. so.

So what we're always looking to do is for one, connect and find out what is available for folks. And so in our office, we've got this, a small team, but we serve the entire city. But we've got an aging services coordinator, Ms. Toni Beecham, and we've got a disability services coordinator, Ms. Monica Huddleston. And so their work overlaps a lot. And so they're always looking for resources. So a lot of what we're doing is trying to find how do we connect people.

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to what is available, whether it's financial, whether it's just finding another place to live, even if it's just advocating to keep them in their current place of residence. And so that's one of the big things for us. We always look at the history, right? Like, why is this even happening? We've encountered cases such as illegal evictions, which are happening. We have an upcoming session, actually, to talk about some of the predatory lending, predatory

housing practices that may be going on that people need to be made aware of. That's actually this Thursday. I'll talk about that a little bit later. we're finding that, I mean, I think most of us know a lot of our older adults live on a fixed income. And so we had someone who's not to share too much information, 99 years old, and her rent increased by \$100 and she was not able to afford it. And so we were trying to find a way to help her. had

very minimal family support and so it was our job to help find a way to help her sustain this. And so those are some of the pieces that we're always finding. We have a lot of a lot of resources which I will share so that we can maybe have this posted of places that people can contact if they want some additional assistance because with the city we don't necessarily have the

financial resources to help folks but we do have a lot of connections within the city to help people with that.

That's incredible. I know you mentioned the fixed incomes and these illegal evictions. What's behind all this? Is it what we're seeing more globally in terms of the housing issues, like prices of housing and that sort of thing going up and rentals increasing? Yes. Right now, I'll just share this.

This is just give me more context. did a, our office completed a needs assessment last year for older adults where we analyze different components of their livability, right? In city of Richmond from healthcare access, transportation, leisure activities, all the pieces. And so, and one of the things that we're finding is that with housing, you know, how can we as a city maybe incentivize builders and developers to come in and instead of

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building a very expensive community and then say, we've got some rooms for older adults, which are completely unaffordable. one can afford them, right? So we're hoping to maybe work with more of the developers. And this is just from the assessment results to help find ways to incentivize our developers to really make truly affordable housing options for our older adults. So yes, it is something that we're seeing globally.

I know that older adults, people are living longer, right? That's just, that's the beauty of our health care system though it has its flaws, people are living longer, which is a great thing. But because of that, this is a personal opinion, there is just, there's not an infrastructure for older adults to have the things that we need because so many people think that government assistance and those things are enough and they're not. There are people who are surviving on this.

close to the same amount of government assistance from 20 years ago. Well, we know prices have changed a whole lot since that time. So there's a lot of advocacy that we're really trying to bring forth locally at the state level and at the federal level. So yeah, I think that's really kind of, it's a microcosm of what's happening globally. Everything's increasing. People, I get it. If you own a property, you may wanna charge a little bit more without consideration to

maybe this person doesn't earn much more money than what they earn. And so that's where we, again, we step in and if we can advocate for them, we will. If we can find maybe some funding, we will. Sometimes we have to ask family members because that older adult is not comfortable asking for that assistance, even though the family is there to support. those are some of the pieces that we're finding. We've also found that when it comes to resources, a lot of our older adults may not even know what their resources, what's available to them.

So if you're in maybe your own home, you've lived in this home for 50 years, the city has a tax relief program. It's not a tax abatement program, but it's a tax relief program. So there are people who are receiving no tax bill at all. Then there are some that may pay a percentage

based on some of the resources and things that they have. But there are some things that the city tries to do to help with some of this and the tax relief program. is geared toward

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older adults and people with disabilities. If you're not within that criteria, then you don't qualify for it. So there are some small things. We've had people call us and say, thank you for telling me, because without this tax-free program, I cannot continue to pay my mortgage. And there we are again with someone who would be potentially on the street again. there's a lot of, there's some small things that we can do when folks contact our office to get them up to speed and maybe in a better situation than they are.

And the challenges are great, Natasha. And we in the city of Richmond or in RBA are very fortunate to even have such an office to exist because many communities don't have this opportunity. So if someone is not in Richmond, for instance, and I think this is a universal issue, what does an illegal eviction look like? So that's a great question. So we've had some, we've had people, many folks contact us and say, I've been paying rent in a home.

Apartment, I would just say a home, right? Those are the easier ones. I've been paying rent in this home for five years. My landlord has never given me a receipt. They only accept my payment in cash. When we communicate, it's very limited. I don't get to ask many questions, right? Those are some of the key pieces that we found are, wait a minute, something doesn't sound right here. Because now when we go and that we're finding I'm being evicted and we're like, well, do you have a receipt where you paid your rent?

I gave them the money and they never gave me the receipt, right? Again, lack of knowledge, lack of awareness. And so we're fighting against, that's big battle to fight. That's one case of an illegal eviction. We've had people living in a home where maybe most of us know that if you're moving into an apartment, if you're moving into a home, if there are utilities in that home, typically in most cases, those utilities are transferred into the tenant's name.

And if they're not, needs to be written, something written and something documented. This is just, again, not an attorney, not a lawyer here, there needs to be something written to say, this will not be, this is how this situation will pan out. And with that case, this particular family, the landlord had the power disconnected from the home. And these were residents, I believe they were both over the age of 75. And so now they're in a home in June.

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June at least I know until July was the last contact I believe they've been it's been restored But there was no power in the home, which means there's no food in the home. There's no There's just no way there's not even cold water to drink so So that those are some of the other pieces that would drive someone out without anywhere to go and out any proof that you have been At least making payments to pay for so that you can now maybe get another apartment or something of those nature But that those are some of the pieces that

some of the ideas of an illegal eviction that we've seen. There's many others, but that's a snapshot. That's incredibly sad. mean, it's making me feel lots of angry emotions, right? And you know, something else that, you know, I think, you know, this is kind of like the back end of when you're living somewhere, right, is the way out. But coming in, do they have lease agreements?

Or are you seeing these types of situations where there's no lease that they even signed or that what they did sign, maybe there's just so much in there that's maybe very restrictive and easy to violate in their case? There's a little bit of both. There's a little bit of all of that really. So sometimes there are leases. When we're dealing with working folks who are in a home, an actual standalone home, that's where we see our bigger issues because apartment complexes or

those type of rental properties for their own protection, they've got the paperwork and documentation in place. But typically when we're working with folks who are in some sort of standalone home, those types of residences, sometimes there's not, because there may be folks who are being preyed upon because they're lower income, or maybe there's a thought or belief that their literacy may be lower than the landlord.

Those are some of the earlier pieces and you know what, I'll get it to you. I'll get it to you next month. I'll get it to you even next week. And next week never comes. You get busy, you're doing things, you're just trying to live, you get settled and you move on about your day to day. And so the person may be nice, right? But without knowing that you've got to have something in place, then you end up in a really sticky situation. So yes, a lot of these things do happen on the front end. And I think it's important that, and this is something that we are trying to do in our office.

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is really bring about more education, more knowledge of these types of things because it's always bad when we're at the end of it and we're trying to help on some of that. But if we can help you at the beginning and help you navigate the water, it'll make that process so much easier for you. So yeah, that's a part of our, we work with the Department of Social Services, their adult services unit, and we do a monthly older adult learning series. We have one this Thursday at the Bird Park Roundhouse.

where we have speakers coming in to actually, because we're not the experts in this, but we have the experts coming in to talk about some of these things. And even just something as simple as law, legal documents. Do you have a will? Do you have a trust? Do you have power of attorney? All these things in place in the event something happens, because there's so many little nuance things that will put you in a really bad situation if something happens, if your health fades or, because which can happen at the drop of a dime.

So yeah, there's a lot of education pieces that we're always trying to bring each month just so that folks are aware, but we just cannot reach the entire population of people who need it. So we do what we can. Yes. And I think you just mentioned one way you have been able to

effectively work and that's through partnerships, not just internally with the city, but partnerships outside of the city of Richmond. What

Other agencies within the city of Richmond, you briefly touched on one there. Have you guys been able to work with and help ease some of this angst and reality that you face when it comes to evictions? Yes. So I'll tell you, a city of Richmond, as an employer, one of our, man, we love this office. We use them so often, but the Office of Community Wealth Building, that's a fantastic office.

their work is structured for this specific reason. is as they have a workforce component, they've got a wealth building component, they've got all the pieces where if you're someone who's an older adult and maybe you want to utilize the Higher Education Act for seniors of 1976, if you wanna utilize that where you can return and gain college credits at no cost, they will help you through that process, get you enrolled at.

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maybe Reynolds or one of the local community colleges so that you can begin to earn some sort of income, right? If you've maybe you've lost your job, we've had a lot of people who lost their employment after the age of, after the COVID era, that initial COVID era, they've not been able to get back to work. And some of that is related to ageism, right? A little bit older, we don't want you in the workforce right now. so, but this is a great way to gain new skills, gain certification so that they can.

begin to earn some level of income. But that's one great way these are when they're working with the Office of Community Wealth Building, help build, help them structure a great way to look at your finances, look at if you want to purchase a home, if you want to rent a home, an apartment, whatever it is that you want to do, they will help people with that process. Again, I mentioned the tax relief program, that's a great way that folks can help with some of these eviction pieces.

When it comes to the legal side of things, do, when we step outside of the city, we will, we will reach out to, have some attorneys that will help us from a pro bono perspective, but we will always step in. There's a lot of elder, elder care attorneys, elder care lawyers. We have one on our aging and disability advisory board, but we will always try to consult and find out what are, what is, what are these persons, are their rights? What can they do? What should they do? And in some cases we've had some.

positive results from that. And positive being they were able to stay in their home for an extended amount of time and not have any difficulties there. So we try to reach out to our number one case often is reaching out to an attorney if they're at that eviction stage. But if they're approaching and maybe, I'm falling behind, I need some help, we'll go. have things like the, there's some funding sources, some groups and agencies that will provide maybe temporary or one-time funding that we can use.

that folks can use for whatever they need it for. So there's some different, there's a lot of different little pieces that we can put together. And I feel awkward saying it because there's so many resources and it's like, I don't say everyone, I'm sure I'm leave some people out, but there's a lot of folks that, lot of groups and organizations that we reach out to, especially if we can catch it early enough for Yeah, it's funny. I was just thinking, was like, it's kind of like an awards show. You're accepting an award and you're thanking everybody. Cause there are.

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so many resources out there. And I think, well, on one hand, that's amazing. On the other hand, that's what makes it complicated, right? Because me as an individual, I'm trying to navigate resources on my own and you get to a point where you're just throwing your hands up and you're like, I don't know where to start. So, you know, what would you tell somebody if they're in this situation and they're like, I don't know how to get started. That is very common.

So it's one of my favorite things to say, I wish I didn't have to say it, is that when you're in the storm, it is so hard to see your way out. But when you're looking at it, you're like, just go this way and you'll be fine. You can see exactly what people should do. I've been there, right? So again, with our office, we are 55 and up, 18 and up with a physical disability. But we are working to bring in, so we work with caregivers a lot. We do a lot of caregiver programming. That's also a part of our Thursday program.

But what we're also working to do is pull in that 45, 50 year old group just before you start hitting that 55, 60, 65, that retirement age so that you're already prepared for what you need to know. Now, for us, have a, a small office and we've never truly marketed our office and the work that we do. And so that's one of the things that's on our agenda is how do we better market ourselves so that people are aware that, this office exists. When I'm in a crisis,

Which we prefer before the crisis I can call them and just say hey, I need a little bit of help Or can you help me out? What should I do? For example, we did have someone just walk in we don't have much foot traffic in our office But someone just walked in and said listen my husband is In some early stages of dementia He was just diagnosed and we were like, okay And she said I need to know what I want it what I need to do because I need to create a plan

And it was so much easier to work with and say, okay, here are some resources. Let's get on the phone, call some folks, send some emails. Let's create a profile. Let's get all the things in place so that as you progress through this, you know exactly what you're up against, right? And I think it's made her life a lot easier because now she's got additional support and she's able to step away because we're able to provide her respite caring, do all the things that she needs to get done. she can maintain some sort of

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her personal life without having to constantly be concerned with her husband. And so I think it's a nice thing. Of course she will always be, but it's just, nice for her to be able to step away because the rate of caregiver fatigue and caregiver decline is actually higher than those that

they're caring for. So lots of folks who have dementia, Alzheimer's, their caregivers are passing sooner than they are just because of the strain that's associated with it.

So yeah, mean, we just want to, for us, want to market more so that folks are aware of what we're doing. And so that's one of our big, big pieces. Any chance we get to get in front of people and make them aware, that's been our big push for the last year. Thank you for sharing that, Natasha. The process of planning is so crucial, but we often overlook this stage. And you mentioned earlier that we are an aging country.

We're actually one of the oldest countries in the world. It's fantastic. the planning has to be a part of who we are as people, just to prepare. So thank you for sharing that. Is there anything else that you would like to share with our listeners about the work you all do and the importance of just making sure that as we age, we have a good housing plan period? Yeah. What I'll say, let me about if, can I share, I'd like to share our helpline.

Okay, so our helpline is 804-646-1082. And that is the number, if you call that number, someone's always answering that. So it's an 825 number, we're not a crisis office, but someone's always answering that number. And if it's after hours, we are calling you back within 24 hours of the next business day, we're calling you back. And so four people can also contact

RBA 311. That's just a that's a city service. There's always call that's a call center that folks can call to get assistance for our office. But overall, we host monthly education sessions. We have a lot of great relationships in the community. And so the biggest piece I want people to take away is that before if you're experiencing a crisis, surely call us and we'll get you over to people that can help you more immediately. But

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If you see that things are starting to happen, things are starting to decline, whatever it might be, just give our office a call because we've got so many resources that we can get people connected to early on and really stop the bleed and get them on a positive path as opposed to just we've helped them and then we move on, but we've helped you. But now we're going to give you additional support so that you can really navigate some of these waters. The city has an aging and disabilities advisory board.

that meets on the second Thursday of every month. Starting in September, we end in June. We're actually meeting September 12th from 10 until 1130 at the Bird Park Roundhouse, which is 621 Westover Road. 621 Westover Road. And so that's a great way to come out, listen to some of the things that are happening in the community regarding older adults and those with physical disabilities.

But it's also a great way for the community because we open it up to the community to come out and share information, share what may be happening in those respective districts or just, hey, I cannot pull you aside after the meeting. I need some, I have some additional questions. I've had that happen. I had someone pull me aside and say, I've got this tax bill. I need some help with it.

And we were able to get her some support and she was able to get exactly what she needed. So.

Those are probably the top pieces. I just want to make people aware. Just reach out to our office. If you don't think you need us, just give us a call anyway, because typically we get a call for one thing. And when we do a formal assessment, we find other things as well that we can support you through. love that. Thank you for sharing all that. And it just really, for me, highlights the importance of just getting involved now and whether you need it or not, right? And knowledge is cumulative.

The more you know, the better you'll be. knowing that there's so many people out there who can help is, you know, is huge. And, you know, I really appreciate everything that you shared with us today. I mean, I, my brain is just working over time now thinking of everything. You know, it's just the tip. That's right.

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Wow. Thank you. So before we leave, do have one last question. I think we have enough time. Through your work, what have you experienced in terms of your thoughts about aging? Well, so that's it. That is it. my gosh. That is such a good question. OK, so I gotta hurry up and say this because I have so much I want to say about that, Ms. Price. So thoughts about aging.

I've always had this feeling of, if you're fortunate enough, you'll live to have old age, right? But there is such a spectrum. There's such a spectrum. And aging is such, it's, you know, this thought in my mind, when people think of aging, we think of, this is the end of the road, it's all over now. But the reality is, this is a very multilayered answer, but aging is living. Aging is living. You don't get to age if you're not living, right?

It's like, my gosh, aging is living. And so there are so many things that we can do as we age. I there's so many experiences. There's so much rich, everything about aging. And I'm really getting to see it from a different level. Just quickly, in September, we've got our centenarian celebration coming up where this is our 11th year doing it. We honor residents of Richmond who have lived to be 100 years and more.

and we have a quick ceremony for them. come out, get an award ceremony. The mayor is there. There's all sorts of dignitaries that come out and speak. And so there's just, and these are such vites. mean, there's, these centenarians are, they're showing up ready to go. These are, you know, these are, it's an exciting time. And so Aging is Living is where I will leave you all today to answer your question. But that is one of my biggest takeaways is, wow, this is where it is. I love this quote to end on. Aging is living. Absolutely.

I want to thank you so much, Natasha, for joining us today. I want to thank our listeners for tuning in. This has been incredible.

Aging for All (27:58.455)

Yeah, thank you all. Thank you both so much for that. This is great. Thank you, Natasha. And please join us next time for another amazing episode of Aging for All.