

Aging in place in Chinatown

Empowering Chinese American seniors to age at home in Chinatown, a front-line team helps break language and cultural barriers.



Xing Mo, left, meets with social worker Wai Kiu Man in Chinatown, New York.

Mary Chao, May 30, 2023

For the past 15 years, Xing Mo has called New York's Chinatown his home. He enjoys being near his friends and all the neighborhood has to offer.

"We are elderly now," Mo said in Mandarin. "Chinatown is very convenient. To live and to dine, it's very convenient for us elders."

As a retiree, Mo, 66, faced major financial pressures due to Manhattan's skyrocketing rents. He sought help from the Chinatown Community Center operated by the nonprofit VNS Health. Social worker Wai Kiu Man worked tirelessly to get Mo new housing, and mental health care, as he was worried about paying his rent.

"The main purpose of our center here is to try to empower our members, empower our seniors, to help them to live independently so they can overcome their issues by themselves," Man said.

According to the [2023 Senior Report from America's Health Rankings](#), socially isolated older adults are left further vulnerable as they go through stressful life events common to aging, such as losing a close friend or family member, without the assistance of social support.

The Chinatown Neighborhood Naturally Occurring Retirement Community operated by [VNS Health](#) helps residents 60 and older living in and around lower Manhattan to age safely at home. It brings social workers, nurses, volunteers and other caregivers to senior citizens.

The program spans 24 blocks in Chinatown with the community center as its home base. The community center is open to everyone. There are events such as language classes and crafting socials, with a display of beaded flowers and animals made by seniors at the center.

VNS Health is one of the nation's largest nonprofit home and community-based health care organizations. In 2006, it received a grant to extend services to help Chinatown's seniors. "The main purpose is aging in place," said Helen Sit, VNS Health manager of the Chinatown center. "The seniors, they grew up here or they are immigrants here, when they get old, they need a lot of social service and health service help in order to live independently."

According to a [2022 AARP survey](#), 77% of adults 50 and older want to remain in their homes for the long term — a number that has been consistent for more than a decade. More than 2,000 seniors in the Lower East Side qualify for assistance from VNS Health. The program now helps more than 600 people.

Today, Mo is much more relaxed, as his rent is now \$1,200 for a one-bedroom apartment instead of the \$1,600 he was paying before. And he gets to stay in Chinatown.

To show his appreciation, his wife created a giant card with a pink heart for Man, his social worker.

"They have been very warm-hearted in helping us," Mo said in Mandarin.

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