Recent studies have suggested that a greater number of older adults prefer to age in place rather than move to a retirement home (e.g., Cohen-Mansfield, Ali, Frank, 2010). One outcome of this trend is that a larger number of older adults are remaining in their neighborhoods while younger, more mobile residents are moving out. This creates neighborhoods that are Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs). NORCs are described as a community not planned or designed for senior adults but that over time becomes a community that primarily houses older adults.

With the growing number of older adults choosing to age in place, there has been an increasing interest in what is needed to successfully do that. A study conducted by Bronsteinn, Gellis, and Kenaley (2009) found that many residents felt that their needs were not being met due to the lack of funding or accessible programs. One resident stated, “although health and social services are important, the residents believe that concrete services such as snow removal, helping to change a lightbulb, and raking leaves were the determining factors for older adults living independently in the community” (Bronsteinn, Gellis, & Kenaley, 2009). Another study conducted by Greenfield (2015) suggests that relationships with neighbors are key in NORC communities. For example, that study highlighted the significance of helping among neighbors in that they are third in line to family, important contacts for an emergency situation, and typically involved in interdependency...
and reciprocity (Greenfield, 2005). These findings indicate that one important aspect of successful aging appears to be tied to social connections. However, some older adults feel that other things, such as light housekeeping and small maintenance repairs, also factor into successful aging in place.

To meet the needs of residents, NORC supportive services programs (NORC-SSPs) have been created to help provide social connections, health care, and additional services that are tailored to a resident’s specific needs. NORC programs aim to promote aging in place through a combination of community support, social service referrals, and community engagement, which are all efforts put in place to help sustain the activities of daily life for older adults. They do this by creating “partnerships among diverse stakeholders—including residents, local government, housing managers and owners, and local service providers—to coordinate services and programs for residents” that live within the NORC community (Greenfield, Scharlach, Lehning, & Davitt, 2012). First, NORC-SSPs:

…Emphasize activities and services to promote participants’ civic engagement and empowerment, such as by providing opportunities for older adults to participate in governance boards and to exchange social support among community members. Second, they emphasize social relationship building activities, such as group recreational, educational, and health promotion activities. Third, NORC programs focus on services to enhance participants’ access to resources such as by linking older adults with transportation assistance or home repair services. (Greenfield, Scharlach, Lehning & Davitt, 2012, p. 275)

In designing a NORC program for a specific community, it is important to understand the community’s needs and preferences. Although many older adults prefer aging in place, studies suggest that additional services are often required for these older adults to maintain their independence.
The purpose of the present study is to identify the relevant resources needed by the older adults living in the Palestine neighborhood of Kansas City, Missouri. The Palestine Senior Activity Center received a grant from the State of Missouri to develop a NORC program for residents living within a one-mile radius from the Center, and we worked with them to begin to identify the needed resources in their community. In order to identify Palestine residents' needs, a survey was designed to capture residents’ existing resources, needed resources, and social connectedness.

Method

Participants for our study were senior adults who attend Palestine Senior Activity Center located at 3325 Prospect Ave, Kansas City, Missouri 64128. There were a total of 55 participants (25 males and 30 females). The range of age for participants was 54 to 94 years old, and the average age of the participants was 74.5 years. 82 percent of participants reported living in a single-family home.

Materials

A multiple-choice survey was designed based on a longer survey that was originally used by the St. Louis NORC program to identify the community’s needs. We revised the survey to focus primarily on the housing issues we were interested in for the Palestine neighborhood and to keep the survey to a manageable length. The survey was designed to be completed independently or with assistance from the researchers. The topics of the survey included current living situation, everyday activities, medication use, financial management, computer usage, household income, medical insurance, social resources, and social connections. In addition, we were interested in participants' perceptions of their own aging. Thus, we created a question using a Likert scale, inquiring about how well residents felt they were aging in their community on a scale of 1 to 10, (1 being not aging successfully and 10 being aging very successfully) and added it to the survey.
Procedure

Research assistants visited the Palestine Senior Activity Center during the lunch hour when most members are at the Center. Research assistants set up a table and walked around to the lunch tables asking people if they would be interested in participating in a survey being conducted to identify the existing and needed resources in the community in addition to their social connections within the community. Those who agreed to participate were then entered into a drawing for a gift card to Walgreens. Participants were then given the choice to complete the survey with one of the assistants or by themselves. Different participants took different amounts of time to complete the survey; on average, the survey required approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Results

Individual survey responses were recorded on paper forms. Following data collection, the research assistants entered responses from the paper forms into an electronic data file for later analysis. The data were then analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software and the Descriptive Statistics subroutines. Summaries of the descriptive data for the questions of primary interest are presented below.

Perceived Needs

Table 1 shows the response to survey questions about resource needs. The three most frequently identified resources needed by the older adults living in the Palestine community were home maintenance, more grocery stores, and lawn services.
Table 1. Products and services identified by participants as important to remaining independent in their own home. Numbers show percentage of participants who indicated that product or service was needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home Repairs</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Grocery Stores</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawn Service</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Police Patrols</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weatherization</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utility Assistance</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise opportunities</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning Services</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Pharmacies</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help making or preparing meals</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Activity programs</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
Social Connections
Figures 1 and 2 show the distribution of responses related to social environment. Figure 1 shows that two-thirds of the participants have at least three good friends; Figure 2 shows that 81% of participants visit with friends at least once a week.

Figure 1. Participants report the number of good friends they have.

Figure 1 (N/R means No Response)
Self-rated Successful Aging

Participants were also asked to rate themselves on how successfully they felt they were aging based on a scale of 1 (not aging successfully) to 10 (aging very successfully). Figure 3 shows the distribution of scores indicating that most participants rated themselves very highly.
Discussion

There is a consensus that aging in place is preferable for older adults and a belief that a NORC program can support this effort by providing residents access to reliable, trustworthy services for health care, light housekeeping, maintenance repairs, and much more. Having this type of support in place allows residents to stay in their home under most circumstances. However, residents also need to develop informal systems such as friends and neighbors for social support and emergency contacts.

This research broadens the scope of aging in place by focusing on burdens that affect independent living for older adults. Many of the resources listed were identified by older adults in the community as being necessary to maintain their homes. This study’s findings indicate that although many older adults feel that they are aging well within their community, other resources such as home repairs, lawn services, and social connections have

Figure 3. Participants’ rating of how successfully they thought they were aging on a scale of 1 (not aging successfully) to 10 (aging very successfully).

Two participants did not respond to this question.
been identified to help maintain their independent living. These additional resources need to be considered alongside characteristics of the individual, including a person’s perceived need for support, in order to promote independent living.

Results from the study show that the top three needed resources reported by the older adults living in the Palestine community were home maintenance, more grocery stores, and lawn service.

We found it interesting that even with these needs presented, the majority of the participants rated themselves as aging very successfully in place and felt they were independent in their daily living activities. These high ratings may be a result of the rich social connectedness apparent in this community. Participants frequently noted that their friends assisted them with particular tasks such as shopping, cooking, and transportation. In addition to visiting with friends, about half of our participants reported that they use computers for Facebook to stay in touch with friends and family. Based on our study, we can infer that neighbors, friends, and social resources in the community are important to aging in place and assisting senior adults to maintain their independence.

Much is beginning to be done to address the growing needs for community-based care for older adults, and we need to learn from these efforts and build on successful initiatives. For example, nursing students and healthcare assistants are receiving “collaborative education that prepares...[them] in supportive care for older adults living at home...” (Pesut, et al. 2015). New legislation has been passed and, as a result of the trend of aging in place, “...congressional grants have been awarded to nonprofit agencies in 42 different localities (located in 25 states) for NORC program development” (Norcs, 2013). Building and supporting programs such as NORCs requires knowledge, skills, advocacy, community building, and a broad collaboration with community resources. NORC programs represent a potentially promising approach for supporting aging in place among older adults. However, according to a study done by Greenfield, Scharlach, Lehning, & Davitt (2012), more research needs to be done to better understand how best to design and implement NORC programs. These researchers
identified five questions that need to be answered in order for research to “inform theory, policy and practice” related to NORC programs. These are:

1. How are the models actually implemented ‘on the ground’?
2. To what extent do NORC programs...achieve important initial, intermediate, and long-term outcomes and goals?
3. What internal and external resources contribute to NORC programs’...effectiveness and sustainability?
4. Are NORC programs...effective at meeting the needs of the diverse range of older adults who might benefit as participants?
5. To what extent are...NORC programs cost-effective for participants as well as other stakeholders? (Greenfield, et al.)

The project described here represents an initial contribution to the development of a NORC program in our local community. Additional work will be required to assess whether this model for providing resources to older adults accomplishes its goal of supporting aging in place.
References


