



Belonging by Design: Purpose, Connection, and Opportunity in Senior Living

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Introduction



Belonging is an important part of living well at every age. In senior living, it is shaped by whether residents feel known and connected, whether families are welcomed as partners, whether staff feel valued and see opportunities to grow, and whether leaders create an environment where these experiences can thrive. This brief examines belonging across these four groups and identifies practical opportunities to strengthen connection, purpose, and participation throughout senior living communities.

Developed by the San Diego State University Center for Excellence in Aging & Longevity (CEAL), the brief draws on peer-reviewed research and national reports related to senior living, caregiving, workforce development, leadership, and intergenerational connection.

The brief is intended to support discussion, organizational self-assessment, and future planning rather than serve as a comprehensive literature review. It also draws on CEAL's applied work in caregiver support, workforce development, intergenerational engagement, Age-Friendly communities, and university-community partnerships to inform practical approaches to strengthening belonging.

Background

The United States is experiencing a significant demographic shift as the number and proportion of older adults continue to grow [1]. For senior living communities, this change involves more than preparing for increased demand for care and services. It also requires considering what people want and need to live well across a longer life. Purpose, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to remain connected and engaged are important dimensions of well-being across the lifespan [2, 3].

Healthy longevity is influenced by more than health care alone. The environments where people live, the relationships they maintain, and the opportunities they have to participate and contribute can shape health and well-being. The U.S. Surgeon General identifies social connection as an important contributor to individual and population health and links stronger social connection with better physical, cognitive, and mental health and greater longevity [2]. The National Academies has similarly found substantial evidence linking social isolation and loneliness among older adults with physical, cognitive, and psychological health outcomes, as well as quality of life [4].

Social connection can become particularly important during periods of transition. Older adults may experience changes in their social networks following retirement, the loss of family members or friends, changes in health or mobility, or a move from a longtime home [4]. Aging itself does not cause social isolation or loneliness, but older adults may experience life events and circumstances that increase their risk [4]. These experiences highlight the importance of environments that make it possible for people to maintain relationships, develop new connections, participate in meaningful activities, and continue contributing to their communities. Senior living communities are well positioned to support these dimensions of healthy longevity alongside traditional care and services.

The experience of senior living also extends beyond residents. Families often remain involved after a move to residential long-term care, although the nature and extent of that involvement can vary [5]. Many continue to navigate emotional, financial, and practical caregiving responsibilities while adjusting to a changing role in their family member's care. At the same time, senior living organizations face persistent workforce challenges related to recruitment, retention, professional development, and employee well-being. Staff may also have caregiving responsibilities in their own lives. Leaders must respond to these interconnected needs while creating organizations that are sustainable, responsive to changing demographics, and aligned with their mission.

Belonging offers one way to consider these experiences together. A resident's sense of connection can be influenced by relationships with staff. A family's trust can be shaped by communication and opportunities to participate. An employee's experience can be affected by organizational culture, opportunities for growth, and whether their contributions are recognized. Leadership decisions influence each of these experiences. Looking at belonging across the organization helps shift the conversation from individual programs to the relationships, practices, and environments that shape everyday life and the organization's culture of belonging.

Belonging is also a matter of equity, because personal and social status shape who has the chance to participate. Race, language, disability, income, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other dimensions of identity and experience can affect opportunities for participation and connection. Research on social participation in residential care suggests that these opportunities are not experienced equally across all resident groups [6]. Examining belonging therefore requires attention to who participates, whose perspectives help shape decisions, and who may face barriers to connection or involvement.

The sections that follow examine belonging across four interconnected groups within senior living communities, including residents, families, staff, and leadership. This framework provides a way to consider how senior living organizations can strengthen connection, purpose, participation, and opportunity across the community.



Framework for Belonging

Belonging develops through everyday relationships, organizational practices, and opportunities to participate and contribute. Within senior living, residents, families, staff, and leaders experience the community from different perspectives, but their experiences are closely connected. The framework below considers what belonging can look like for each group, opportunities to strengthen it, and challenges that may stand in the way.

Community	What Belonging Can Mean	Opportunities to Strengthen Belonging	Persistent Challenges
Residents	Purpose, choice, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to contribute	Resident voice and participation, intergenerational connection, meaningful social engagement, continued connection to the broader community	Ageism and age segregation, social isolation, limited opportunities for meaningful participation, balancing safety with autonomy and choice
Families	Trusted partnership, clear communication, recognition of their caregiving role, and support throughout transitions	Meaningful involvement in care planning, peer support, caregiver resources, transparent communication, connection to community supports	Financial strain, caregiving demands, changing family roles, uncertainty navigating care and services
Staff	Meaningful work, recognition, supportive relationships, and opportunities to learn and grow	Training and professional development, mentorship, peer support, career pathways, opportunities to contribute to organizational decisions	Burnout, compensation pressures, turnover, limited advancement, inconsistent supervision, and workplace culture challenges
Leadership	Responsibility for creating the policies, practices, and culture that allow belonging to extend across the organization	Shared decision-making, attention to demographic change, accountability for organizational culture, alignment of mission with policies and practices	Short-term operational pressures, competing priorities, inconsistent accountability, gaps between stated values and everyday practice

The sections that follow explore each part of the framework in greater detail and consider how senior living organizations can strengthen belonging across the community.

Residents

Supporting Purpose & Connection



Senior living communities can provide safety, services, and opportunities for connection while also supporting independence, identity, and continued participation in community life. The presence of amenities and activities alone does not necessarily create belonging. What matters is whether residents have meaningful choices, opportunities to contribute, and ways to maintain and discover the relationships, interests, and roles that give their lives purpose.

Evidence suggests that residential settings can strengthen some forms of social participation while potentially limiting others. A nationally representative study of 606 older adults found that participation in all five activities examined declined in the years before a move, and that after entry into assisted living or nursing home care, participation in clubs and religious services increased while going out for enjoyment decreased [6].

The gains were also not experienced equally. In exploratory analyses, nursing home residents were less likely than assisted living residents to go out for enjoyment or to continue attending religious services, and residents who were Black, Hispanic, or of another race or ethnicity were less likely than White residents to begin going out for enjoyment. Women were more likely than men to maintain visits with family and friends and to begin attending religious services [6]. The authors describe these differences as exploratory and in need of confirmation by further research.

Belonging also involves opportunities to maintain connections beyond the senior living community. Social prescribing offers one approach by connecting people with nonmedical community activities and resources that reflect their interests and social needs. Research focused on older adults suggests that person-centered assessment, matching people with relevant activities, and individualized support are important components of these approaches [7]. Intergenerational initiatives offer another opportunity to build relationships across age groups. A systematic review of 44 studies found evidence of positive effects of intergenerational engagement across social, health, and some cognitive outcomes, although findings varied across studies [8]. CEAL's Age-Friendly University work reflects this approach through programs and partnerships that bring older adults and students together through shared activities, learning, and community engagement [9].

Purpose and contribution are equally important. Research on purposeful activity among older adults suggests that opportunities to take on meaningful roles, including volunteering and mentoring, can support well-being and quality of life [10]. Senior living communities can create opportunities for residents to mentor others, volunteer, participate in decision-making, share knowledge and skills, pursue existing interests, and develop new ones. These opportunities recognize older adults as contributors to community life rather than primarily as recipients of care and services.

For senior living organizations, the challenge is to support safety and care without unnecessarily limiting autonomy, identity, or purpose. Everyday language, expectations, policies, and practices matter as well. Ageism can shape how older adults' abilities, preferences, and contributions are perceived and can be embedded in institutions as well as interpersonal interactions [11]. A belonging-oriented approach begins by asking what matters to each resident and how the community can support continued choice, contribution, relationships, and connection to the broader world.

***"It started feeling like home when people noticed whether I was there. I remember the first time someone saved me a seat. It feels good to know people are glad to see me."
— Jerry R., resident***



Families

Strengthening Partnership & Support

Families often serve as care coordinators, advocates, decision-making partners, and sources of emotional support long before a move to senior living, and many remain involved afterward. Research on family involvement in residential long-term care shows that family members continue to play varied roles after a move, including maintaining relationships, supporting residents, monitoring and participating in care, communicating with staff, and advocating for residents [5, 12]. Family members may also bring years of knowledge about a person's preferences, routines, relationships, culture, and care needs. Recognizing that knowledge can help senior living communities build trust and support continuity during what may be a significant transition for residents and their families.



Caregiving responsibilities can carry substantial personal, financial, and employment demands. National data show that family caregiving has grown significantly in the United States, with 63 million adults providing ongoing care to an adult or child with a complex medical condition or disability in 2025 [13]. Nearly half of family caregivers reported at least one negative financial impact from caregiving, and among caregivers who were employed, half

reported experiencing work disruptions related to their caregiving responsibilities [13]. These experiences are relevant to senior living in two ways. They affect the families of residents, and they may also affect employees who are providing care at work while supporting family members in their own lives.

Family Caregiving at a Glance

63 million

U.S. adults provided ongoing family care in 2025 [13].

Nearly half



of family caregivers experienced at least one negative financial impact related to caregiving [13].

7 in 10



family caregivers were employed, and half reported work disruptions related to caregiving [13].

About 3 in 5



family caregivers are women, who continue to represent most family caregivers [13].

Families may also be navigating difficult decisions about where and how care should be provided. Most adults age 50 and older report wanting to remain in their homes and communities as they age, although preferences and needs may change over time. In AARP's 2024 national survey, 75 percent of adults age 50 and older said they wanted to remain in their current homes and 73 percent wanted to remain in their communities for as long as possible [14]. These preferences reinforce the importance of understanding individual goals, providing clear information about available options, and helping older adults and families make informed decisions as needs and circumstances change.

“When I visit Mom, people know our names, the grandkids feel welcome, and we’re invited to join in. Mom feels at home here, and we feel like part of the community.”
***— Jeana C.,
Daughter of a Resident***



A move to senior living can change the role of a family caregiver without necessarily ending it. Family involvement after a move can include maintaining contact and emotional connection, participating in or monitoring care, communicating with staff, advocating for the resident, and contributing to decisions [5, 12]. Research also highlights the importance of family-staff relationships in shaping family involvement and the experience of residential care [12, 15]. Senior living communities can support this transition by clarifying roles and expectations, creating consistent channels for communication, and recognizing that residents and families may experience the transition differently.

A belonging-oriented approach recognizes families as part of the community while respecting the resident's preferences, autonomy, and desired level of family involvement. This can include meaningful opportunities to participate in care planning, clear communication about care and services, connections to peer and community resources, recognition of caregiver strain, and opportunities to remain involved in ways that reflect the resident's wishes. Evidence on family-oriented interventions in residential care suggests that communication, staff education, shared decision-making, and attention to staff-family relationships can support family involvement and partnership, although the evidence on specific interventions remains varied [15, 16]. The goal is not to prescribe a single role for families, but to create conditions for trust, partnership, and continued connection.

Staff

Building Pathways, Purpose & Retention



“When I’m given time to learn new skills and encouraged to take the next step in my career, I feel valued.”

— Rachel S., Caregiver

Senior living's workforce challenge extends beyond recruitment. Demand for workers who provide long-term services and supports is expected to remain substantial as the older population grows. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects particularly strong growth for home health and personal care aides, reflecting both the increasing demand for older adult services and for people with disabilities [17]. For senior living organizations, responding to workforce demand requires attention to the full employment experience, including recruitment, training, working conditions, retention, and opportunities for continued development.

Retention is shaped by more than any single workplace factor. A systematic review of 49 studies examining aged-care workers identified both individual and organizational influences on retention, including job satisfaction, work environment, organizational support, relationships, recognition, training, and career opportunities [18]. Together, this evidence suggests that workforce stability should be considered an organizational responsibility rather than addressed primarily through recruitment efforts or stand-alone employee wellness initiatives.

Belonging at work also involves having a voice. Employees who provide daily care and services have valuable insight into residents' preferences, organizational practices, and opportunities for improvement. Creating meaningful ways for staff to share ideas, participate in problem-solving, and see how their perspectives inform organizational decisions can strengthen their connection to the organization. Supportive relationships with supervisors and colleagues are also important, particularly in work that can be physically and emotionally demanding. Evidence from long-term care settings reinforces the importance of organizational support and workplace relationships in shaping employees' experiences of their work [18].

Workforce pathways can further support belonging by helping employees see opportunities for continued growth. Continuing professional development and peer-led training have been shown to improve staff knowledge and competencies and, in some studies, job satisfaction and turnover outcomes [19]. Mentorship, work-based learning, professional development, and opportunities for advancement can help employees build skills while strengthening pathways into and through the field. Research on care-worker retention similarly identifies career development, recognition, and opportunities to build skills as important components of workforce strategy [18].

Many employees may also be balancing paid work with caregiving responsibilities in their own lives. National caregiving data show that seven in ten family caregivers are employed and that many experience work disruptions related to caregiving [13]. These findings suggest that flexible and caregiver-supportive workplace practices may also be relevant when organizations consider employee well-being and retention.

Training can build competence, but a strong workforce strategy goes further. Employees need opportunities to grow, contribute, develop supportive relationships, and understand how their work connects to the organization's mission. When staff can see their value to the organization and opportunities for continued growth within the field, workforce development becomes part of building a culture of belonging.

"I know their favorite songs and who they're hoping will visit. They ask about my dad and notice when I've been away. Those everyday conversations make me feel part of this community, too."

***— Maya T.,
Activities Director***



Leadership

Creating the Conditions for Belonging

Leaders play an important role in creating the conditions for belonging across a senior living community. Organizational culture is shaped through everyday decisions, relationships, expectations, and practices, including how people communicate, whose perspectives are included, where resources are invested, and how organizational values are put into practice. Research consistently identifies leadership and organizational support as important conditions for creating and sustaining person-centered cultures [20, 21].

For senior living organizations, this means belonging cannot rest solely with an activities team, human resources department, or individual champion. Residents' experiences of autonomy and connection, families' experiences of communication and partnership, and employees' experiences of support and opportunity are influenced by organizational policies and practices. Recent research on leadership emphasizes the importance of a shared vision, staff empowerment, consistent organizational approaches, and leaders who model person-centered values [21]. Research also identifies resident and family participation in decision-making, recognition of staff contributions, positive workplace culture, and staff involvement in organizational change as leadership practices that can support person-centered care [22].

Leadership also requires responding to changing expectations among residents, families, and the workforce. Older adults entering senior living bring varied preferences related to autonomy, relationships, technology, amenities, community connection, and how they want to spend their time. Employees likewise bring different experiences, needs, and expectations to the workplace. Rather than assuming that preferences are determined by age or generation, leaders can create structures that allow residents, families, and staff to express what matters to them and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their experiences.

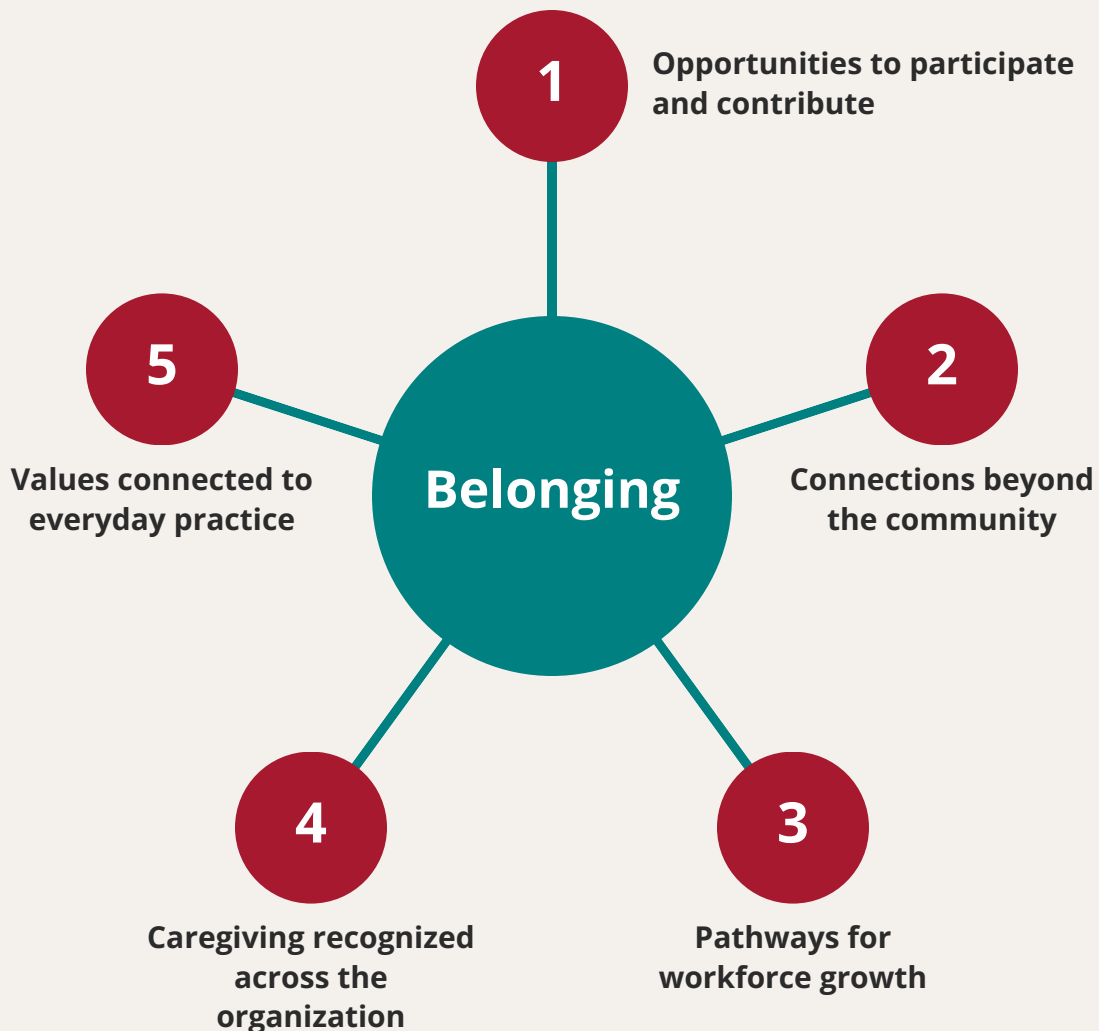
A useful leadership test is alignment. Would residents, families, frontline staff, and leaders describe the community's culture in similar ways? Do the organization's policies, investments, and measures of success reflect what it says it values? Differences between stated values and people's everyday experiences can help identify where change is needed. Creating a culture of belonging requires leaders to listen to those experiences and use what they learn to shape organizational decisions.

Would residents, families, frontline staff, and leaders describe the community's culture in similar ways?

From Evidence to Practice

The evidence reviewed for this brief points to several ways senior living organizations can strengthen belonging. While the approaches will vary based on each organization's population, resources, and priorities, they share an emphasis on creating meaningful opportunities for people to participate, contribute, build relationships, and remain connected to the broader community.

Five ways to strengthen belonging



1**Create meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute.**

Residents, families, and staff should have opportunities to share their perspectives, contribute their knowledge and skills, and participate in decisions that affect their experiences. For residents, this can include meaningful roles, volunteering, mentoring, and opportunities to shape community life [10]. For families and staff, participation can include involvement in care planning, organizational decision-making, and opportunities to share knowledge and ideas [12, 21, 22]. These approaches move engagement beyond scheduled activities or periodic feedback toward more meaningful involvement in community life.

2**Strengthen connections beyond the senior living community.**

Partnerships with universities, schools, community organizations, faith communities, and other local groups can expand opportunities for relationships, learning, volunteering, and intergenerational connection. Social prescribing and other community-based approaches can help connect older adults with activities and resources that reflect their interests and goals [7]. Intergenerational initiatives can create additional opportunities for social connection and engagement across age groups [8, 9].

3**Create pathways for workforce growth.**

Training is most valuable when it is part of a broader workforce strategy. Continuing professional development, mentorship, peer learning, and opportunities for advancement can help employees build skills while creating clearer pathways into and through the field [18, 19]. Workforce development can also strengthen belonging when employees have opportunities to contribute their expertise, build supportive relationships, and see possibilities for continued growth within the organization.

4**Recognize caregiving across the organization.**

Family members and employees may both have significant caregiving responsibilities. National caregiving data demonstrate that caregiving can affect finances, employment, and well-being, while research in residential care shows that family involvement often continues after a move [5, 12, 13]. Clear communication, flexibility, education, peer support, and connections to community resources can help organizations respond to caregivers in ways that recognize their different roles, needs, and experiences.

5**Connect organizational values to everyday practice.**

Belonging becomes part of organizational culture when stated values are reflected in decisions, policies, resource allocation, leadership expectations, and opportunities for participation. Research on person-centered leadership in long-term care emphasizes shared vision, staff empowerment, family and resident participation, organizational support, and leaders who model the values they expect to see in practice [20–22]. Examining whether everyday experiences align with an organization's mission can help identify where additional attention or change may be needed.

Where to Begin

Creating a culture of belonging does not necessarily require a new stand-alone program. It begins with examining how existing policies, environments, relationships, and organizational practices shape people's everyday experiences. Three considerations can help organizations begin.

Start with assessment and listening. Engage residents, families, staff, and leaders in identifying where belonging is already strong, where barriers remain, and whose perspectives may be missing from current decision-making. Looking at differences across groups can help organizations understand where experiences may not align with stated values and where additional attention may be needed.

Create opportunities for agency and contribution. Consider whether residents have meaningful choices and opportunities to contribute, families are welcomed as partners while respecting resident preferences, staff have a voice in their work and opportunities to grow, and leaders are accountable for creating the conditions that support belonging.

Consider residents, families, staff, and leadership as an interconnected system. Resident experience, family trust, workforce stability, and organizational culture influence one another. Policies or practices intended to address one area may affect the others, making it important to consider belonging across the organization rather than through individual programs or departments.

A Belonging Self-Assessment

1. Who appears to experience belonging easily in our community, and who may encounter barriers to participation, connection, or having their voice heard?
2. Whose perspectives may be missing from our programs, policies, and decision-making? Are there differences related to race, language, disability, income, gender, sexual orientation, age, or other factors that we need to better understand?
3. Do residents, families, and frontline staff have meaningful opportunities to shape decisions that affect them, not only respond after decisions have been made?
4. Do our policies support safety while preserving autonomy, choice, dignity, and opportunities for purpose and contribution?
5. Can employees identify realistic opportunities for learning, professional growth, advancement, and continued contribution within the organization?
6. When residents, families, or staff raise concerns or ideas, how consistently do leaders respond, communicate what happens next, and follow through?
7. If a resident, family member, frontline employee, and leader were each asked what it takes to belong here, how similar would their answers be?

CEAL in Practice

Building Belonging Across the Lifespan

At San Diego State University, belonging is reflected across research, workforce development, community engagement, and Age-Friendly initiatives. CEAL's work is grounded in the understanding that healthy longevity is shaped by opportunities for connection, purpose, participation, and meaningful roles throughout the lifespan. The approaches in this brief are ones CEAL puts into practice with community partners, and they can be adapted for senior living communities.

CEAL's intergenerational initiatives create opportunities for older adults, students, and community members to build relationships across generations. Programs such as the Intergenerational Coffee Club and Reel Connections Cinema Club use shared experiences and conversation to create opportunities for connection. SDSU's Age-Friendly University work extends this approach by creating opportunities for older adults to participate in campus life through learning, community programming, and intergenerational engagement [9].





CEAL's work with family and paid caregivers connects education with peer support, workforce development, and opportunities for continued growth. Caregiver Connections recognizes that caregivers need more than information and skills. Opportunities to connect with others who understand the caregiving experience, build confidence, and continue learning can support caregivers while strengthening the workforce that serves older adults.

Workforce partnerships with employers and community organizations further explore how training and professional development can support longer-term career pathways. These partnerships position training as an ongoing opportunity for learning, peer connection, and professional growth throughout employment.

CEAL's Age-Friendly community work provides another example of belonging in practice by engaging older adults and community partners in identifying local strengths, barriers, and priorities. These efforts emphasize working with older adults in shaping communities where people can remain engaged, connected, and able to contribute as they age.

Across these initiatives, belonging is not treated as a stand-alone program. It is supported through the relationships, opportunities, and environments that allow people to participate, contribute, connect with others, and continue to find purpose throughout their lives. This approach reflects CEAL's vision to inform, involve, and inspire. Belonging is central to this vision because living longer is not simply about adding years to life. It is also about having opportunities to remain connected, contribute in meaningful ways, and be part of the communities around us throughout the lifespan.

CEAL welcomes the opportunity to work with senior living communities on workforce training, caregiver support, and intergenerational programming.

Conclusion

Moving From Engagement to Belonging



Belonging provides senior living organizations with a practical lens for connecting resident experience, family partnership, workforce development, and organizational leadership. Each group experiences the organization differently, but their experiences are interconnected. Resident autonomy can be influenced by staffing and organizational practices. Family trust can be shaped by communication and opportunities for partnership. Employees' experiences can reflect whether they feel valued, supported, and able to grow. Leadership decisions and organizational culture influence each of these experiences.

Creating belonging does not require every person to have the same experience or every senior living community to follow the same model. It requires attention to whether people feel known and heard, have meaningful choices, can build relationships, and have opportunities to participate and contribute. These experiences are shaped through everyday interactions as well as the policies, practices, and environments that surround them.

As senior living communities prepare for a growing and increasingly diverse older population, belonging offers a way to think beyond the services an organization provides and consider the kind of community it creates. Supporting connection, purpose, participation, and opportunity can help create environments where residents, families, and staff can thrive and where longer lives are supported with health, opportunity, and purpose.

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