

A better deal for older carers in South Africa

How an organisation from the Durban townships adapted its role to tackle the impact of HIV and AIDS



The task of caring for South Africa's 1.1 million children affected by HIV and AIDS has fallen largely to older women in many communities.

Summary

Families affected by HIV and AIDS face huge financial pressures but many miss out on their entitlement to state benefits. Awareness of these benefits is low, problems with identity papers are frequent and eligibility requirements deter people from applying.

In South Africa, Muthande Society for the Aged (MUSA) has shown how the social and economic wellbeing of older carers and their dependants can be improved. It raises awareness of entitlements and helps individuals

make claims, while fostering personal responsibility and mutual support.

Background

At the end of 2003 more than 5 million South African adults were living with HIV and 370,000 people died of AIDS that year alone. The task of caring for the nation's 1.1 million AIDS orphans has fallen largely to older people. More than 60 per cent of these orphans live with their grandparents. Households often face rising expenses and falling income. Medical, transport and food costs are all likely to increase, and older people caring for orphaned children face school fees.

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Leila Amanpour/HelpAge International

MUSA volunteers provide home visits to frail and bedridden older people.

Untapped benefits

South Africa has a wide package of means-tested social protection measures that can ease this burden. They include:

- Old age pension
– up to R780 (US\$116) a month
- Child support grant
– R180 (US\$27) a month
- Foster care grant
– R530 (US\$79) a month
- Disability grant
– R780 (US\$115) a month
- School fee exemptions
– about R150 (US\$22) a year for primary and R300 (US\$44) for secondary
- Free antiretroviral therapy (ART) at government hospitals.

The number of people receiving these benefits has risen dramatically since apartheid ended in the mid-1990s. But almost one in five of those eligible for a social pension fail to get it, as do three in 10 of those eligible for child support.

‘My daughter’s disability grant helped a lot. There is more of my pension left to help support everyone else.’

Fikile, a woman in her seventies caring for five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

The foster care grant is much bigger than the child support grant but is not accessed as much as it should be. The older carer has to establish legal guardianship through the children’s court, which takes at least two years, whereas the child care grant can go through within weeks. Any carer can apply for child support.

Most older black South Africans have no birth certificate, so they have to rely on their identity papers for proof of age. But these are often inaccurate, so the person has to obtain new papers before applying for a pension.

History of help

MUSA helps HIV-affected families access entitlements. Formed in the early 1970s by women in the Durban townships,

it became a member of HelpAge International in 1994, and that year extended its work to HIV and AIDS after finding that older people in need of support were themselves caring for sick sons and daughters.

The society operates in six areas of the eThekwinini municipality. MUSA has strong links with government at all levels and works with institutions of higher learning, health providers, community development structures, schools and churches.

MUSA has learnt that a range of interventions is needed to help people access entitlements. These include:

- General awareness-raising
- Advocacy
- Casework with individual families
- Practical measures such as protecting vulnerable older people at pension pay points and providing transport to hospital.

Paralegals

MUSA referred complex benefit cases to a legal advice centre but they were often processed very slowly, so it decided to train staff as paralegals. They check entitlements, help complete forms and ensure documentation is in order. This has sped up grant applications and reduced the number of cases referred to the legal advice centre. MUSA paralegals dealt with 98 pension and 419 social grant claims over a 13-month period.

Soon after the paralegal team was created, an internal forum was set up so that paralegals could provide regular feedback to section heads and senior home-based care staff about progress on each case. The forum has strengthened monitoring and improved understanding of the difficulties of resolving different cases.

To deal better with entitlement claims, MUSA recognised the need for closer links with government. A forum was set up to monitor referrals to government social workers. This includes representatives from the police, school teachers and service providers such as MUSA. It has the potential to increase accountability and responsiveness in the same way that MUSA's own paralegal forum has.

Committed to caring

MUSA runs four service centres where older people have meals and engage in activities such as crafts, cooking, physical exercises and educational talks. MUSA has 60 staff, and 60 volunteers who help at pension pay points and at the service centres.

Another key element is home visits to frail and bedridden older people. Carers provide bed baths, dress sores, prepare meals and so on. They also train family members to give more effective care themselves. Others are trained as peer counsellors.

'I've trained as a peer educator and counsellor. When I see the children of my neighbours are sick, I try to help.'

Dudu Chilli, a widow who cares for her orphaned grandchildren.

MUSA also:

- raises awareness of HIV and AIDS and the benefits of testing and treatment
- provides transport for those unable to attend clinics
- provides nutritional advice.

Children

The poorest households are exempt from school fees but there is little awareness of this. The foster care grant of R530 (US\$78) per month would mean an orphan's school expenses, including uniform and books, could be met with relative ease. However, many grandparents try to meet these costs from their pension.

MUSA has been working with schools and older carers so that more people know about exemptions. One new project supplies two township schools with school uniforms. For every 13 sold, one can be given away.

The society has launched two more schemes: a joint programme with schools to monitor the academic performance of orphans, and another which provides peer support for children over 11. This includes a forum where children can talk and express their concerns in a supportive environment.

Conclusion

The family provides the first and most intensive level of support for those affected by HIV and AIDS. In South Africa 60 per cent of families are headed by older people. Older carers must be included systematically at every level of community intervention. They need financial support for basic needs and legal support to access entitlements for themselves and dependants. HelpAge International is advocating for transparent and responsive services for all citizens and targeted support for older people.

HelpAge International is a global network of not-for-profit organisations with a mission to work with and for disadvantaged older people worldwide to achieve a lasting improvement in the quality of their lives.

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