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SPOTLIGHT

HelpAge International in Ukraine

HelpAge

International

A monthly digest from HelpAge International, bringing the faces behind our work into the spotlight - those whose lives are being transformed and those who make it all possible.

DEC Ukraine Emergency Response

*Supported by Age International
and Disasters Emergency Committee*



"I AM NO LONGER AFRAID OF THE FUTURE"

Before the war, 77-year-old Volodymyr lived in his own flat in Sievierodonetsk, had family and friends. But in 2022 he and his wife were forced to leave everything behind, get on an evacuation train and head into the unknown. That is how the couple ended up in Uzhhorod, where they have since been living in a collective shelter.

The displacement took a heavy toll on Volodymyr. "After the move, in a strange dormitory, I suffered a heart attack. And after the treatment there remained a feeling of emptiness. I did not talk to anyone. Everything lost its meaning. I was convinced: my life was over."

Severe depression worsened his already poor health – Volodymyr's hands and legs began to fail, while his wife almost lost her eyesight. "Now she is my physical support, and I am her eyes," he says. "That's how we move around."

"Every day I have to take the necessary medicines so that I don't feel dizzy and can sleep properly." To support his health, Volodymyr is periodically hospitalised. But financial difficulties make it impossible to receive full treatment: "Sometimes there is not enough money to buy medicines and food," he sighs. "My pension is only 2,800 UAH (50 GBP), plus I receive IDP payments."

"When HelpAge came into my life, for the first time in a long while someone simply listened to me. Without pity, without pressure. They offered support. I admit – at first I hesitated, but my wife persuaded me. And since then HelpAge has become the only thread that keeps me connected to life."

Volodymyr first received psychosocial support and information assistance. "I am sincerely grateful to my kind and sensitive social worker Olena for such hard work, attention, care and support! Together with her I started to enjoy the small joys of life again," he admits.

Volodymyr began doing exercises recommended by a physiotherapist. He also received cash assistance, hygiene kits and essential assistive devices – a walker, a commode chair and a blood pressure monitor.

"Thanks to you I wanted to live again. No, my life has not become the same as before the war, but it has gained meaning. I help new displaced people in our dormitory with some advice, I share my personal experience. And most importantly – I am no longer afraid of the future! Thank you for bringing me back to life."

LIFE GOES ON!

In times when challenges have become a daily reality for older people, the strength of community and mutual support gain special significance. This is at the heart of the DEC-CI "SPRAVA" (Shifting Power for Resilience and Value of Local Actors) initiative, which has united international and local partners to support those most in need.

The project was implemented by HelpAge with the support of Age International and the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), in a consortium with ActionAid and Action Against Hunger, through the Charitable Foundation "Pomagaem" and sub-grantees. Behind this cooperation stand not only programmes and figures, but first and foremost human lives.



61-year-old Tofiq worked for 35 years at a factory in Krasnohorivka, Donetsk region, but in 2014 the city came under shelling. The factory was closed and jobs disappeared. Several times Tofiq travelled 75 kilometres to Volnovakha for casual work. But in 2022, when the full-scale war began, life in Donbas became unbearable for civilians.

"We kept thinking: 'Maybe it will calm down again...' But the bombing was terrible. Every day people died - bodies lay right in the streets. The city became almost empty. There was no water, and it was impossible to reach wells because of shelling. We dug boreholes just to get some water. People lived in basements," Tofiq recalls.

Tofiq was wounded several times during shelling. "The first time was in winter. It was quiet, so we decided to clear the snow. A mine fell without a sound. One friend died, another was wounded. I was lucky - concussion."

The second time he was injured when he went out onto the balcony. "There was a strike. My whole body was hit - stomach, lungs..." What followed were surgeries, months of treatment and rehabilitation. During this time, his wife and 86-year-old mother faced another shell hitting their home. Staying any longer was impossible.

Thanks to help from the NGO "Motivation to Live", one of the participants of the SPRAVA initiative, under their project "Life Goes On", Tofiq and his family received

shelter and support in the town of Pidhorodne, Dnipropetrovsk region, where he finally feels safe and can slowly recover.

"There's nowhere to return to. Our city is gone. We live here quietly. I just want this war to end - let peace come to our country!" he says.

Provision of age-inclusive humanitarian and resilience-building support to conflict-affected older people in Ukraine

Supported by Aktion Deutschland Hilft and HelpAge Germany

FILLING THE VOID CAUSED BY THE WAR

Already in March 2022, just a few weeks after the start of the war, 75-year-old Vira was forced to leave her native Zaporizhzhia and, together with her daughter and three grandchildren, seek a safe place. Today they live in a rented apartment in Lviv.

"Problems with my eyesight, stress and an overwhelming longing for home," - this is how Vira describes the most pressing issue that worries her the most right now.



Her pension and IDP support are Vira's only sources of income, which are enough only to cover basic needs. Vira requires ongoing management of age-related health issues and periodic check-ups with an ophthalmologist. She buys all her medication herself. However, her mental well-being has deteriorated due to the war and displacement: stress, anxiety and sleep disturbances have become her constant companions.

She tries to cope with these challenges by attending the HelpAge Community Safe Space in Lviv. "Sessions with a psychologist, engaging handicraft workshops, health support lectures, excursions - all of this fills the void caused by the war. I have formed a new circle of acquaintances, warm meetings, enjoyable and meaningful communication, learning and discovery. I feel that life goes on."

In addition, Vira has received humanitarian assistance – a hygiene kit with everything needed for home and personal care, as well as specialised supplies for her health condition.

The project allows people like Vira to feel support and social inclusion, which significantly improves the well-being and emotional state of older displaced people. Beyond meeting physical needs, the assistance has helped reduce loneliness and restore a sense of community and security.

"EVERY YEAR IT GETS HARDER TO HOLD ON"

In July, a presentation of the new HelpAge report "Every year it gets harder to hold on: Older people in Ukraine want to be seen and heard" took place in Kyiv. The event was attended by representatives of international and national non-governmental organisations, the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine, representatives of embassies and the media.

The new report is based on a representative nationwide survey and continues the HelpAge 2022 study. The data show a significant deterioration in the living conditions of older people in Ukraine in the context of the war.



- 33% of older people receive assistance from humanitarian organisations;
- 62% struggle to meet their basic needs;
- 65% live in inadequate housing conditions;
- 51% of people over the age of 70 live alone;
- 68% of older women cannot cover their basic needs;
- The number of those without safe housing has increased by 11% compared to 2022.

"The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly worsened the situation of older people. Poverty, isolation and the loss of loved ones and homes have become the reality for many," said Matthias Schmale, UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Ukraine. "I often travel across Ukraine and see older people who remain in dangerous areas. It is not that they do not understand the risks – they simply cannot evacuate because of their health condition or the absence of help. Many live without basic necessities – water, heating or electricity."

"Every day, older people tell us how it is becoming harder and harder for them. They speak of poverty, loneliness and the destruction of their homes. This report gives them a strong voice and gives us a clear task to act. To truly help, we need to listen to them, involve them, and ensure they influence the policies and programmes that affect their lives," noted Victoriia Panchenko, acting director of the HelpAge International Representation in Ukraine.

Today, HelpAge International reaches more than 18,000 older people across Ukraine. Over 13,000 of the most vulnerable receive home visits from HelpAge social workers. Meanwhile, older people who remain active and mobile attend one of the 17 HelpAge Community Safe Spaces, where they can access psychosocial support, take part in training and benefit from services such as hairdressing or psychological counselling. "But behind these numbers stand individual people and their life stories – that is what matters most. Every person, regardless of age, deserves dignity, support and the opportunity to live a meaningful life," added Victoriia Panchenko.

The research revealed significant challenges facing older people in Ukraine. Particularly vulnerable are older women, people over the age of 70 and those with disabilities. Targeted support programmes and the involvement of older people in decision-making processes are essential. Strengthening the visibility of older people in humanitarian policy and ensuring access to basic services is vital.

"Older people need to become more visible in the humanitarian response. It is necessary to work with the government on long-term solutions – both during the war and after it ends," added Matthias Schmale.

Multisectoral humanitarian assistance to vulnerable groups of people affected by the Ukraine war, in Ukraine and surrounding countries

Supported by German Federal Foreign Office, Aktion Deutschland Hilft and HelpAge Germany

AGAINST LONELINESS, POVERTY AND DESPAIR

77-year-old Nataliia was born in Kazakhstan, but in her youth she moved to Ukraine – to the city of Bakhmut in Donetsk region. That is where much of her life passed – her home, memories, and close people. But after the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, she had to leave everything behind and evacuate to Dnipro.

"I lost my home, all my belongings were left in Bakhmut. Volunteers helped me to leave, and kind people helped me to find a room for a low rent," she recalls. "But even so, it is difficult for me to maintain a decent standard of living. My small income – pension and social benefits – is not enough to cover rent, medicine and food. I have to save on everything – there is no other way."

After displacement, Nataliia's health deteriorated sharply. And recently she also suffered a serious injury – she broke her collarbone and is now in a cast.

Nataliia learned about the HelpAge project by chance – through acquaintances. And this support became timely assistance: she received hygiene kits, incontinence pads, a blanket, a pillow, torches, winter clothing and cash assistance.

"This aid allowed me to meet my most essential needs. It was significant and very timely support. And I am also extremely grateful for the psychosocial support from the HelpAge social worker – it helped me to cope with feelings of loneliness and despair," says Nataliia.



Despite all the challenges, she tries to remain optimistic. She is convinced: thanks to this support she can once again feel independent in these difficult circumstances. "For older people it is very important to have long-term support. It makes it possible not to feel abandoned and alone in the difficult circumstances older people have found themselves in because of the war."

A SENSE OF HOME FOR THOSE WHO HAVE LOST IT

To help older people overcome the challenges of war and displacement, a network of HelpAge Community Safe Spaces offers a variety of activities that bring joy, support, and a sense of togetherness for displaced older people.

One such activity took place in the city of Stryi: using air clay, each participant created their own special hero. These were not just bright figurines – each hero had their own story: about loneliness and the search for friends, about fear and hope, about being lost and the journey back home. Older people talked about what it means to be strong when times are hard, and why it is so important to share warmth.

Losing one's home is one of the most painful experiences for older Ukrainians who have been forced to leave their native towns because of the war. To help live through this loss, in the village of Kelmentsi in Bukovina, older people went on a virtual journey across Ukraine – recognising architectural landmarks, recalling where they were located, and then creating a "lost street" from paper models of houses.

Each little house became a symbol of someone's home left in the past. Such activities create a space where memory does not hurt, but heals.

"For me this was very special. I remembered my native home, our old yard, the bench by the gate... It felt as if everything came alive again. And when I glued together the paper house – it was as if I had returned a piece of that memory. Thank you for these warm moments," shares 68-year-old Halyna, displaced from Luhansk region.



We also reach out to those older people who, for various reasons, cannot visit our spaces. The HelpAge team carried out a mobile visit to Morshyn City, where about one hundred project participants live. Social workers showed them exercises using the Shishonin method, followed by a creative workshop in shopper bag painting – bright colours, imagination and a good mood turned ordinary bags into unique works of art. There was also an engaging Ukrainian language lesson – together, older people practised how to greet properly and how to address each other politely.

Such visits take place every month: a team of social workers, hairdressers, and psychologists comes to meet older people. Workshops are held, as well as simply warm conversations over tea, allowing older people to feel part of a big family.

These meetings are more than just activities. They are spaces where everyone feels: I am important, I am heard, I am not alone. By supporting older people in Ukraine, HelpAge not only provides humanitarian assistance, but also offers care for emotional wellbeing – something that protects against loneliness and restores a sense of life.

Multisectoral humanitarian assistance to most vulnerable older people affected by the conflict in Eastern Ukraine

Supported by Government of Canada and HelpAge Canada

RECOVERY AFTER LOSS

76-year-old Volodymyr – a farmer at heart, a devoted husband and father – faced the horrors of war back in 2015, when life in the city of Lyman in Donbas became dangerous.

Together with his beloved Motrona (both having lost their previous partners), they tried to create an oasis of peace amid the war – sowing their yard with flowers and enjoying the beauty around them. “The flowers were her main source of joy. From early spring to late autumn, the yard shimmered with all the colours of the rainbow. She put her whole soul into the soil and the plants,” he recalls.



But 2022 brought a new disaster – the full-scale war. In May, Lyman fell under occupation. Volodymyr and Motrona refused to evacuate until February 2023, when their house came under shelling. “The glass shattered, night turned into day, and the thought in my mind was: ‘This is the end!’” remembers Volodymyr. After that, they had no choice but to leave their homes.

Today, they live in the village of Petrykivka in Dnipropetrovsk region: Volodymyr is staying with his nephews, while Motrona settled just across the street. Despite their losses, they share a common dream – to receive compensation for their lost home, buy a small house, and once again create beauty on this land by growing flowers and grapes.

Surviving on a pension and IDP allowances, they face their daily challenges but do not lose hope. They learned about the HelpAge project from Motrona’s daughter and have already received a hygiene kit and one-off financial assistance. “Both the money and the hygiene supplies, and especially the attention of the social worker, are a very tangible support for us. It helps us keep our faith and move towards our shared dream,” they say.

Their story proves that even after the greatest losses, it is possible to find the strength to dream, rebuild, and create life anew.

SURVIVING A CRISIS WITHOUT LOSING DIGNITY

The project is implemented by HelpAge in collaboration with partners – the Charitable Foundation “Right to Protection” (R2P) and the Humanitarian Aid Center “Volunteer-68” – and reaches 5,000 older people and their caregivers, providing them with personalized support.

77-year-old Oleh has lived all his life in Chasiv Yar in the Donetsk region. In 2023, due to the escalation of hostilities and the destruction of his home, he was evacuated first to a boarding school in Kostiantynivka, and after a missile strike – a second time. Seeking shelter, Oleh even travelled abroad to Poland, but later returned to Ukraine, settling in Iloviansk with an acquaintance.



Displacement and the stress caused by the war have left their mark: Oleh suffered a heart attack. He also has a disability, hypertension, diabetes, hearing problems after shelling, and requires dental prosthetics.

Due to the war, he has no close relatives left in Ukraine, as they have all gone abroad, and with a small income – a pension of 5,000 UAH (170 CAD) and a payment for IDPs of 3,000 UAH (102 CAD) – he could not meet even his basic needs, often having to skip essential medication that must be taken daily.

“I couldn’t even go outside – I had no shoes,” he sighs. Thanks to the support of the HelpAge project through the partner Charitable Foundation “Right to Protection” (R2P), Oleh received not only trainers, but also clothes, kitchenware, and psychological support. During a visit, it was found that Oleh was living in unsatisfactory conditions: windows without glass, no electricity, heating, or running water. HelpAge specialists, together with staff from temporary accommodation centres, quickly arranged a place for him in a dormitory. Having safe housing is one of the most important steps at the initial stage, laying the foundation for further adaptation and stabilisation of life.

Now, with basic resources secured, Oleh can recover from trauma and loss. “It feels like a new start. I finally feel that I can plan the next steps in my life,” he shares.

This story demonstrates how project support helps the most vulnerable older people survive a crisis without losing their dignity.

Protecting and supporting at-risk communities in Eastern Ukraine: multisectoral humanitarian assistance and preparedness

With the support of ActionAid and financial assistance from the European Union

PROTECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE

The project, funded under the European Union's humanitarian aid, aims to protect and support older people in the Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhia regions. In total, 2,798 older people are expected to be reached, receiving home care services, hygiene kits, urinary pads, adult diapers, and assistive devices to ensure their dignity, comfort, and safety.



To promote adherence to inclusion standards in humanitarian activities for older people and people with disabilities, HelpAge conducted a two-day training for partner organisations in July. During the training, participants gained deeper knowledge of key inclusion standards; practised using tools, including Washington Group questions for data collection; discussed barriers faced by older people and people with disabilities; identified ways to overcome these barriers; and developed action plans to strengthen inclusivity within their organisations.

Older people are among the most vulnerable groups in conflict zones, as they often remain on the frontline without adequate care, medication, or the possibility of safe evacuation. This is why targeted support for them is critically important and life-saving.

VOICE OF CARE

The project is implemented by HelpAge together with local partners – the Pomagaem Charitable Foundation, the Humanitarian Aid Centre Volunteer-68, and the Memori 86 Charitable Foundation. HelpAge provides home care services, hygiene kits, urological pads and adult diapers, as well as assistive devices in Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia.

A partner in Kharkiv region organises the evacuation of older people from areas of active hostilities, provides them with hygiene kits in transit centres, and ensures transport with social accompaniment. Partners in Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk regions distribute hygiene kits, urological supplies, assistive devices and adult diapers, and also run psychosocial support activities.

Within the project, the Volunteer-68 hotline is operating. "These are not just phone calls. This is a living heartbeat, beating every day in the rhythm of care for people," says Dariia Derkach, project coordinator. The call centre team constantly monitors distribution to ensure hygiene kits reach people in an organised and timely way. But their work goes far beyond that: they listen with care, offer advice, provide encouragement and warmth in the hardest moments. Behind each call there is a human story, pain, but also the reassurance that no one is left alone. Even one kind word can be powerful support, and timely information can be lifesaving.



Iryna, 65, is one of the call centre operators supporting the most vulnerable. When she joined in 2022, she herself did not know if she could stay long. First, she had to face her own fears and anxieties before supporting others. And she did. Now her voice is heard by dozens of people every day. They have one thing in common: they are vulnerable. People with disabilities. People with dementia. All those whose pain is invisible and often unheard. Sometimes what comes through the line is anger, despair, hopelessness.

"I listen, making sure every voice, every story, every need is valued. I try to speak when words can support, and stay silent when silence matters more than words," Iryna says. Her colleagues share that she can "put out fires without water", never raising her voice. People listen to her, because she truly listens to them.

"This is what keeps me going. It makes me feel needed," Iryna says. "And being surrounded by volunteers, young men and women, I feel 20 years younger myself," she smiles. There is no fear left in her voice. Only experience, warmth and care that she gives to others.

NOTE:

All photos and stories featured have been obtained with the consent of the individuals involved and are approved for public sharing. Full-quality images can be found [here](#)

Supporting older people in Ukraine:

