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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*



A COMMUNITY THAT FEELS LIKE FAMILY

In the town of Samar, Dnipropetrovsk region, 71-year-old Liudmyla has become a cornerstone of the HelpAge Community Safe Space. From the very first day, she embraced the space with open arms, finding purpose and connection through creative activities like singing, knitting, painting, and embroidery.

But Liudmyla is more than a participant - she's a leader. Known for her warm heart and boundless energy, she organises celebrations and creative workshops, often guiding others in floral design. "This space has become a close family to me," she says.

For Liudmyla, giving back is a way of life. With seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, she takes pride in passing down her knowledge and values.

"Every day is an opportunity to give something to others," she says.

Liudmyla also joins the daily Nordic walking sessions. For her and many others, these walks offer more than physical exercise have become a vital part of HelpAge's psychosocial support, helping older people feel active and engaged.

Through her presence and passion, Liudmyla embodies the spirit of the Community Safe Space - a place where older people can feel valued, supported, and at home.



IMPROVING LIVING CONDITIONS FOR DISPLACED OLDER PEOPLE

In Kryvyi Rih, 78-year-old Valentyna is rebuilding a life interrupted by war. A former law enforcement officer and active community member, she once dreamed of a peaceful retirement in her hometown of Bakhmut. But conflict forced her to leave not once, but twice - first in 2014, and again as the full-scale war devastated eastern Ukraine. "It was very difficult to leave our home," she recalls. "But our family's safety was the priority. Today, Bakhmut is completely destroyed. We have nowhere to return to."

Valentyna now lives in a dormitory for displaced people. A hip fracture has confined her to a wheelchair, but not to despair. She continues to do exercises, advocate for her neighbours, and speak up for better conditions for displaced people. "The old balconies don't open, so we can't

even get some fresh air. The water heater in the shared facilities is broken, and the plumbing needs repairs,” she explains. “People like us deserve dignity, even in displacement.”

Thanks to the SPRAVA initiative - Shifting Power for Resilience and Value of Local Actors - some improvements have been made. Through HelpAge’s partner, the charitable foundation Pomahaem, five civil society organisations in the Dnipropetrovsk region received sub-grants as part of the DEC Collective Initiative project, delivered in consortium with ActionAid and Action Against Hunger. One of these organisations, the Inhulets District Veterans’ Organisation, has supported small but meaningful upgrades at Valentyna’s dormitory: new windows in the showers and functioning balcony doors in shared corridors.

These changes have brought some comfort, but more is needed. “The kitchen, the corridors, the showers - everything needs renovation. The taps, the electric stoves, the windows... none of it really works,” says Valentyna. Yet she remains hopeful.

“We really want people who have lost their homes and belongings to have more comfort and warmth,” she says. “It will help us hold on while we wait for peace.”

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

Supported by Aktion Deutschland Hilft and HelpAge Germany

“IT HAS TRULY BECOME A SECOND HOME”

When 69-year-old Yaroslava and 70-year-old Anatolii fled their hometown of Kakhovka in August 2022, they left behind not just a city, but a lifetime. Occupied from the very first day of the full-scale invasion, Kakhovka became a place of fear and loss. After seven harrowing months, the couple made the painful decision to leave everything familiar behind.

Now living in Lviv, the couple face the daily challenges of

displacement - budgeting carefully on pensions and IDP benefits, managing health concerns, and adapting to a new life in a city far from their roots. Yaroslava, once an accountant, and Anatolii, a former construction foreman, find their new reality far removed from the lives they once led.

But in the heart of their new city, they found something unexpected: connection.

The HelpAge Community Safe Space in Lviv has become more than a service - it’s become a lifeline. “We don’t know what we would do without this place,” says Yaroslava. “It has truly become a second home for people our age from all over Ukraine who lost their homes due to the war. For many, it’s the only place today where they feel needed.”

At the Safe Space, Yaroslava immerses herself in painting, crafts, and fitness classes - small acts that have rekindled her joy. Anatolii, who lives with a vision problems, finds solace in playing chess and engaging in conversations with others who understand the trauma of displacement.

This story is a powerful reminder that older people are not passive recipients of aid, but active community members who still seek purpose, connection, and dignity. HelpAge’s safe spaces are designed to recognise their rights and rebuild the community bonds that war has fractured.

“We’ve made friends here, we laugh again,” Yaroslava says. “It gives us strength to carry on.”

“HEALTHY AGEING IS NOT A MYTH”

Older people have the right to live healthy, active, and dignified lives - but that can only happen when they have access to the knowledge and care they need. That’s why HelpAge continues to provide essential training sessions in Community Safe Spaces across Ukraine, helping older people take charge of their health and well-being.

In Lviv, Novoyavorivsk, Sambir, and Drohobych, older people gathered for a series of sessions titled “Dementia: How to Protect Your Brain.” These workshops tackled one



of the most pressing concerns among older people - cognitive health. Participants explored what dementia is, how to recognise early symptoms, risk factors to be aware of, and practical ways to maintain brain health. Crucially, they also discussed how to respond if they or a loved one begins to experience signs of cognitive decline.

"Before this, I thought memory loss was just a normal part of ageing," said one participant in Drohobych. "Now I understand how to take care of my brain and when to seek help."

Further strengthening this initiative, HelpAge partnered with the Ivan Franko Drohobych State Pedagogical University to offer comprehensive health assessments at the university's Ergotherapy and Physical Therapy laboratory. Older people from the Drohobych Safe Space were invited to assess their functional and physical condition - measuring endurance, identifying mobility challenges, and receiving personalised advice on how to stay active and well.

Participants ranged in age from 60 to 85, many managing chronic conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. These sessions are more than medical check-ups - they are opportunities to raise awareness and build confidence.

"Helping people understand their bodies and minds is just as important as any medicine," said one of the health specialists involved. "It empowers them to live with independence and dignity."

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

FINDING SOLACE IN THE MIDST OF LOSS

For 70-year-old Tetiana from Lysychansk, war is not a new experience. "During the shelling in 2014, the windows and doors in our home were blown out. We repaired them - and then it all happened again," she says quietly.

Tetiana spent years caring for her adult daughter with a disability, making exhausting monthly journeys to another region for treatment. It took a toll on her health, but she never wavered. Then, in February 2022, just days before the full-scale invasion began, tragedy struck - her daughter passed away at just 33 years old.

"We only managed to visit her grave once," Tetiana says. "Then the shelling started. We lived for weeks without electricity, heat, or water, sleeping fully dressed in the corridor." The unbearable grief of loss was compounded by the terror of war.

Eventually, Tetiana and her husband fled to Kamianske. It was there, in a dormitory for displaced people, that they learned their home in Lysychansk had been destroyed - nothing left but bare walls.



"Now we live with only one dream," Tetiana says. "When the war ends, we want to return home and lay flowers on our daughter's grave. That thought keeps us going. I still cry every day. But thanks to the HelpAge social worker who visits us, I can talk about my pain. It brings relief. It means so much."

As part of the project, Tetiana has received essential support - hygiene kits, incontinence pads, a commode chair, financial assistance, and a warm winter set including a coat, blanket, pillow, and torch. These small but vital supplies offer a sense of dignity and care to those who have lost everything.

SMALL CELEBRATIONS, LASTING CONNECTIONS

At HelpAge Community Safe Spaces, supporting older people goes beyond psychosocial care, art therapy, or physical activity. We also nurture something just as vital - their cultural roots. Traditions, after all, are a source of strength, identity, and connection, especially in times of displacement and uncertainty.

In February, while the weather outside was bitterly cold, our centres were filled with warmth, laughter, and shared memories. In Liubotyn, Kharkiv region, older people cel-



celebrated Valentine's Day by crafting handmade cards, exchanging heartfelt wishes, and sharing stories of love that had endured for decades. Their memories reminded us all that kindness and connection have no age limit.

Shrovetide was another highlight - a joyful celebration marking the end of winter and the arrival of spring. In Kolomyia, Pavlohrad, and Liubotyn, older people baked fragrant pancakes together, sang folk songs, performed traditional dances, and took part in the symbolic burning of an effigy - a centuries-old ritual of cleansing and renewal. These gatherings offered a sense of continuity and comfort, bringing together older people from different regions through shared cultural touchstones.

Creativity flourished, too. In Luzhany, a pottery workshop became a space for self-expression and healing. "I felt happy, just like in my childhood!" said 67-year-old Olena, who was displaced from Kharkiv. Alongside others, she shaped small fairy-tale houses - symbols of the home she lost and dreams of rebuilding.

For many older people, preserving and sharing cultural traditions is more than a pastime - it's a way of staying connected to who they are, and of passing on wisdom to future generations. These gatherings don't just honour the past - they help older people remain active, engaged, and rooted in community life, even amidst profound change.

CREATING A MORE CARING WORLD

Improving the wellbeing of the most at risk older people through the provision of community and homebased support in Ukraine

Supported by WHO/WHO Ukraine in partnership with Age International and with the financial support of FCDO

At HelpAge Community Safe Spaces across eastern and western Ukraine, older people are finding ways to stay active, connected, and cared for - despite the challenges of displacement and ageing.

In Vasylkivka, Dnipropetrovsk region, Nordic walking has become a favourite activity. Come rain or shine, older participants head to the local stadium with walking poles in hand. "Movement is life," they say—and the smiles, energy, and friendships they build along the way are proof that staying active supports both physical and emotional well-being.



HelpAge has also partnered with Premiere Urgence Internationale to offer free medical consultations, check-ups, and essential medication. For those in remote areas, HelpAge provides transport, ensuring that no one is left behind when it comes to healthcare.

Participants have also taken part in training sessions on managing hypertension - learning how to protect their heart health and respond to signs of health deterioration with confidence and care.

Meanwhile, in Vynohradiv, Zakarpattia region, art therapy sessions are helping older people process the trauma of war through creativity. Painting, crafting, and candle-making offer more than distraction - they bring comfort, connection, and healing.

Together, these small but powerful acts of support show what it means to build a more caring world - one where older people are valued, visible, and empowered to live with dignity and purpose.

STRENGTH TO KEEP GOING

Oleksandra, 74, was forced to flee her hometown of Selydove in Donetsk when the shelling became unbearable. Alongside her son and daughter-in-law, she found refuge in the village of Vasylkivka in the Dnipropetrovsk region. "It was so hard to leave everything I had worked for all my life," she says. "But we were forced to do it."

Life in displacement brought new challenges - limited mobility, serious health issues following cancer, and an overwhelming sense of loneliness. "Every movement is a struggle," she shares. "I try to clean or cook, but it just doesn't work anymore. I feel like my body is no longer mine."

Sleepless nights and persistent emotional exhaustion only added to her hardship. "I wake up with my heart pounding, thinking about all I've lost. Fear, pain, and grief have become part of me."

After joining the project, Oleksandra received a hygiene kit and a warm winter set. But for her, it was about more than material aid. "This is not just support - it's proof that I still matter, that someone cares. Every kind word from the social worker, every visit... it gives me the strength to keep going."



Provision of assistive products to older people with disabilities in Chernivtsi region

Supported by HelpAge Canada



SUPPORT THAT EMPOWERS

In August 2022, 57-year-old Ihor fled Sievierodonetsk with his 82-year-old mother, who had recently suffered a stroke and lost much of her mobility and speech. A former Chernobyl liquidator, Ihor lives with a disability himself - struggling with chronic leg pain, weakness, and dizziness - yet he continues to care for his mother full-time in a supported residence provided by a local church.

Essential items provided through the project, including a bathing chair, have brought relief. "Now I can help my mother without risking a fall or injuring myself," he shares. "It's made everyday life a bit easier."

Still, the emotional and physical toll is heavy. Ihor needs psychological support and household aids like a raised toilet seat, bedside table, glasses, and medication. Despite his own health challenges, he remains a dedicated carer, reminding us that support is not just about meeting needs - it's about restoring dignity, resilience, and hope.

COMFORT AND DIGNITY

52-year-old Serhii was once an active man, but cardiovascular disease and complications from a leg fracture have left him with limited mobility and chronic pain. After evacuating from Kramatorsk in 2022, he found refuge in a Supported Living Centre in the Chernivtsi region, where he began adjusting to a life shaped by physical limitations and a loss of independence.

Daily hygiene became one of his biggest challenges - impacting not just his physical health, but also his sense of self. A medical urinal provided through the project helped ease this burden. "It's not just about convenience," Serhii says. "It gives me a bit more confidence." The device has reduced discomfort and the risk of further health issues, offering some practical relief in his daily routine.

Serhii also hopes to receive a walking cane to improve his mobility and a blood pressure monitor to help manage his condition. His story reflects the quiet strength it takes to adapt to new realities - and how even small, thoughtful support can make daily life more manageable for older people facing displacement and disability.



NOTE:

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Supporting older people in Ukraine:

