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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.

**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*



### **COURAGE FOR CHANGE AND THE PATH TO CONFIDENCE: HOW OLDER UKRAINIANS FIND STRENGTH AND INSPIRATION THROUGH THEIR WORK WITH HELPAGE**

We are convinced that older people can be active, useful, and inspire others if they receive support and opportunities for self-realisation. In the Community Safe Space operating as part of the project in Kolomyia, Ivano-Frankivsk region, three visitors became our staff members and now support other older internally displaced people themselves.

75-year-old Natalia, displaced from Donetsk, is now a social worker. "For me, this is not just a job – it's a new purpose in life, a feeling of being needed, of having opportunities. Now I understand that at any age it is possible to start a new chapter and be useful," she shares.

76-year-old Tamara from Izium, Kharkiv region, is responsible for musical and vocal activities, as she is a choir director by profession. "I have been with HelpAge since the first day of my displacement. Initially, a social worker visited me and supported me during the awful days. Joining the Community Safe Space, I felt joy in life again," she recounts. When Tamara was offered to lead activities for other older visitors herself, she hesitated. "And now I can't imagine life without this – I feel reborn. The sense of financial independence gives me confidence and peace of mind."

"Even before the war, I had been practising Nordic walking for a long time. When I had to evacuate, I fell into a deep depression – I didn't know how to cope. Fortunately, HelpAge came into my life – I simply came alive when I entered our Safe Community Space. Of course, I was especially thrilled that there was a Nordic walking section," says 65-year-old Svitlana, displaced from Konotop, Sumy region. Today she shares her sporting tips with other older participants. "It has given me more confidence. I am also very grateful to HelpAge, which gave me a job despite my age. It allows me to feel secure about tomorrow."

"Engaging older people makes them stronger in facing the challenges brought by the war and displacement. It motivates them to develop, teach others, and be a role model," says specialist Nina. "I would also add: employers who refuse to hire older people lose a lot, because they are the most responsible workers!"

## "PEER TO PEER": WHEN CARE HEALS LONELINESS

Initiative groups of older people, created within HelpAge Community Safe Spaces, are becoming a powerful tool for community development and improving access to services for the older generation. Through their activity and collective efforts, older people not only implement their own ideas but also actively influence the creation of an inclusive and safe environment where every resident – regardless of age or physical ability – can feel equal and comfortable.



For example, in Stryi, Lviv region, a new inclusive community space has been created thanks to the efforts of an initiative group of older people from the HelpAge Community Safe Space in partnership with the city council. This modern recreational area allows everyone – regardless of age or physical ability – to feel comfortable, safe, and equal.

"Now in Stryi there is a place where older people, parents with prams, and people with disabilities can comfortably rest and socialise," says the head of the initiative group, 76-year-old Anatolii, displaced from Luhansk region. "It has ramps with handrails, modular benches and stools of different formats, modern lighting, and even a bike parking area." Part of the improvements was made possible with the support of HelpAge International. This is another important step towards creating an accessible and comfortable environment for older people and people with disabilities, promoting their social integration.

Additionally, this initiative group won the project competition "Library for Everyone: A Space Without Barriers," receiving a grant to install a ramp in the library. "In the summer, we held a "Poetry Vernissage", but some guests in wheelchairs could not attend due to the absence of a ramp. Now we aim to change this – and make the space accessible for everyone," adds Anatolii.

The group still has many ideas and plans to improve access to services for older people. By creating and supporting such initiative groups, HelpAge International helps older people become active participants in changes

within their communities

In Sheptytskyi, Lviv region, a new inclusive sports ground has been created, designed with the needs of older people in mind. This project is the result of collaboration between the initiative group of the HelpAge Community Safe Space and local authorities. Active older participants, displaced from different parts of Ukraine due to the war, decided to contribute to the city's development by creating a space where everyone, regardless of age or physical ability, can spend time actively.



Now, nine modern exercise machines and comfortable benches have been installed in one of the city's parks, which have already become a favourite place for both older people and young people to relax and exercise.

By creating and supporting such initiative groups, HelpAge International helps older people amplify their voices, implement their own ideas, and become active creators of positive change in their communities.

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

*Supported by Aktion Deutschland Hilft and HelpAge Germany*

### CONSIDERING THE NEEDS OF OLDER PEOPLE IN STATE AND HUMANITARIAN POLICY

Within the project, a large-scale forum entitled "Psychosocial Services and Support for Vulnerable Population Groups: Challenges, Solutions, Partnerships" took place in Lviv in October. HelpAge International acted as a co-organiser of the event.

The forum brought together representatives of five ministries (the Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine; the Ministry of Education and Science; the Ministry of Youth and Sports; the Ministry of Health; and the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs), authorities at all levels, local communities, 50 speakers and more than 700 participants both in person and online.

Victoria Panchenko, Head of HelpAge International's



Country Office in Ukraine, took part in the panel discussion “The Role of Civil Society Organisations and International Partners in Strengthening Support Systems at National and Regional Levels”, dedicated to the role of civil society in enhancing support systems for older people, developing resilient communities, and ensuring that the voices of older people are heard in the deinstitutionalisation reform process.

“The role of civil society has undoubtedly become more significant during the war – international and local civil society organisations have become key partners for the authorities in addressing systemic challenges in these crisis conditions,” noted Victoriia Panchenko during her speech. “Today, HelpAge International is a strong international partner for developing local services, providing humanitarian and psychosocial support to older men and women in Ukraine, helping meet basic needs and access medical and social services, supporting a network of Community Safe Spaces for older people, amplifying their voices and advocating for their rights, and helping communities build capacity.”



“In particular, through cooperation with communities and the training of social workers, HelpAge is building the capacity needed to support communities and ensure the sustainable development of social services at the local level. HelpAge also establishes initiative groups of older people, providing training and helping them implement their own projects, as well as “Peer-to-peer” support groups, creating an environment where older people can support one another,” added Viktoriia Panchenko.

HelpAge International also provides evidence and statistics to influence policies and improve services for older people. In particular, the Forum featured data from the latest 2025 report “Every Year It Gets Harder to Hold On: Older People in Ukraine Want to Be Seen and Heard”, which offered important insights into the situation of older people in Ukraine. The forum served as an important platform for uniting efforts and setting coordination priorities among government bodies, communities, civil society and international organisations to support vulnerable population groups during the war and ensure that social services are high-quality and accessible. HelpAge’s participation contributed to strengthening cross-sector cooperation and ensuring that the needs of older people are considered in state and humanitarian policy.

## MONTH OF OLDER PEOPLE IN UKRAINE: SUPPORT, ACTIVITY AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

In October, the world marks the International Day of Older Persons. To mark the occasion, HelpAge International, together with 30 local and international organisations in Lviv, held the Month of Older People – a series of events aimed at supporting, activating and informing the community about the work of organisations supporting the development of people aged 60+.

At the HelpAge Community Safe Space operating within the project, an Opportunities Fair for older people was held. Throughout the month, workshops, cultural, social and sporting events took place to offer people aged 60+ space for development, communication and creativity.



As part of the Month, Lviv also hosted the Forum “The Present, Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities for Older People”. Participants discussed demographic shifts, wartime challenges, integration and active participation of older people in community life, as well as ways to ensure a decent quality of life at any age.

“HelpAge International has a unique mandate – to support older people around the world. During the war in Ukraine, we support the most vulnerable: those who remain in dangerous areas, those who are isolated, without access to social or medical services, as well as those whom the war has forced to seek refuge across Ukraine. We aim to draw attention to their needs and protect their rights,” said Victoriia Panchenko, Head of HelpAge International’s Country Office in Ukraine. During the forum, a decision was made to develop a Strategy for Supporting and Developing Older People and to establish a working group for its implementation.

Various celebratory events were also held in other Community Safe Spaces within the project. For example, in Novoyavorivsk, participants shared heartfelt words of gratitude and memories, and thanks to modern technologies even created poems together with artificial intelligence.

In Dnipro, an exhibition of works created by participants of the HelpAge Community Safe Space took place, while the centre's choir organised a vibrant concert for their peers.

In Drohobych, participants of the HelpAge Community Safe Space prepared a unique dance performance with Nordic walking poles, as well as choreographic and vocal performances. Guests could also visit an exhibition of handmade items created during project workshops.

Older people are leaders, caregivers, activists and bearers of wisdom. We honour their role in shaping our families and communities and call for action to ensure their voices are always heard.

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

*Supported by Government of Canada and HelpAge Canada*

#### **"SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE I HAVE NO STRENGTH LEFT..."**

67-year-old Nataliia was born far from Ukraine - on Sakhalin Island - but from the age of nine her life has been tied to Ukrainian soil. She grew up in Zaporizhzhia, finished school there, obtained her higher education, worked as an economist for more than thirty years, and raised two daughters. "I had a simple but good life... We worked, made plans, raised our children," she recalls.



In 2021, she experienced a heavy blow - the death of her husband. And just a year later, the war came dangerously close. One of her daughters and her daughter's family were forced to flee their home due to daily shelling and moved in with Nataliia. And in the spring of 2023, they all had to flee again - the family moved to the village of Petrykivka in Dnipropetrovsk region, where they were sheltered by an acquaintance. But recently the woman passed away, and now the family lives in constant anxiety: the acquaintance's relatives may ask them to leave the house at any moment.

"It's already hard for me to walk... My blood pressure rises every day, and I can only go outside with the help of my

children or grandchildren. And the thought that we may end up without a roof over our heads keeps me awake at night," Nataliia shares.

Her pension is 5,300 UAH (176 CAD). Even with the IDP assistance - 2,000 UAH (66 CAD) - it is barely enough for medicines and basic necessities.

Constant stress caused by the war, uncertainty about housing, and health problems have become a profound challenge for her. She often feels exhausted, anxious, depressed. "Sometimes it feels like I have no strength left... But I hold on for my children and grandchildren," she says.

In this very difficult situation, the HelpAge project became a lifeline. Nataliia received a hygiene kit and cash assistance, which she immediately used to purchase essential medicines and food. "You gave me a sense of stability, and this gives me the strength to get through this incredibly difficult time," she says.

Nataliia is one of thousands of older people who lost their familiar lives and found themselves in extremely vulnerable circumstances because of the war. "Your support is exactly what a person who lives with daily uncertainty needs," Nataliia says. "Thank you for not forgetting about people like me."

#### **"I AM ALONE, BUT NOT LONELY"**

75-year-old Liudmyla spent most of her life in Druzhkivka in Donetsk region - a city that today lies dangerously close to the frontline. Together with her husband, they built their home, raised children and dreamed of a peaceful old age. But the war drastically changed their lives.



"The shelling was daily. We lived just twenty kilometres from the frontline," Liudmyla recalls. When a school near their house was bombed, it became clear they could no longer stay. But this was not the only ordeal for Liudmyla. Her husband suffered from dementia, which worsened due to the war, and he required constant care - something extremely difficult to provide in a frontline town. A year and a half after the full-scale invasion began, he passed away.



"That was the moment I felt the ground fall from beneath my feet," she shares. With a heavy heart and deep anxiety about the future, she was forced to leave the home where she had lived for many years - alone and uncertain.

Today Liudmyla lives in the "Bez Mez" ("Without Limits") shelter in Kharkiv, where she is supported by HelpAge's partner, the Volonter-68 Humanitarian Assistance Centre. Here she is gradually regaining her strength thanks to the attentive care of the medical team and the community of people who have also experienced loss. "I feel that I once again belong to a world where there is humanity and care. I am alone, but not lonely!" she says.

Within the project, Liudmyla received a hygiene kit, which eases her daily challenges and helps her save money.

Thanks to the joint work of HelpAge International and its partners - the NGO "Right to Protection" and the Volonter-68 Humanitarian Assistance Centre - the project supports more than 5,000 older people in Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Kharkiv regions. They receive personalised support: humanitarian, psychosocial, legal, social assistance, help with mobility and access to services. Assistance is provided not only to older people, but also to their caregivers, creating a sense of safety and support in difficult times.

### **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*

#### **SUPPORT THAT BECOMES A LIFELINE**

Despite losing her home city and living with severe chronic illnesses, 71-year-old Nadiia tries to hold on to each new day. Due to the shelling, she was forced to flee Bakhmut together with her daughter and granddaughter, and they now live in a rented flat in Dnipro.

Nadiia admits that she often feels lonely - her daughter is constantly at work, and her granddaughter spends most of her time with friends: "I often find myself alone with my pain and my thoughts."



Her main sources of income are a pension of 5,000 UAH (€102) and the allowance for internally displaced persons - 2,000 UAH (€41). She is forced to carefully divide her funds between rent, utilities, food and medicines. "I critically lack money - the cost of my medicines often exceeds my pension, so I have to buy only the cheapest drugs and shorten the treatment course..."

Due to severe chronic illnesses and a past surgery, Nadiia finds it difficult to move, and everyday tasks come with intense pain. This physical exhaustion is compounded by emotional strain: "I put so much of my soul into our house in Bakhmut... I dreamed of spending my old age there. You cannot imagine how painful it is that it no longer exists..."

Nadiia learnt about the project supporting older people from Telegram channels. Feeling desperate, she reached out for help. "I received not only humanitarian support but also a sense of stability," she admits. "It is very important to me that someone cares about my life and my needs. It gives me strength and support that I lacked so much."

"I am sincerely grateful for every kind word, for every moment of attention. In the hardest times, it is so important to know that we are not forgotten."

#### **STARTING LIFE FROM SCRATCH...**

After two months of continuous shelling, 61-year-old Olena, together with her husband and daughter, was forced to leave her native Bohoyavlenka in Donetsk region a year ago. "We lived in the cellar, and our street was literally wiped off the face of the earth. Only one basement was left. Drones flew into the house..." she recalls, describing how their large family home, inherited from her in-laws, was destroyed by guided aerial bombs.

After the tragic deaths of neighbours and yet another attack, the family, along with other people from their street, left - first for Pavlohrad, and later for Dnipro. Now Olena and her loved ones are starting their lives from scratch, living in a single room in the "Nepokynuti" ("The Unabandoned") shelter.



Trying to make their life a little more comfortable, Olena knits rugs – the walls of their small room are covered with them. “This is how I try to make this new life a bit warmer and cosier,” she says. Their only stable income consists of the couple’s pensions (3,000 UAH (€61) each), the daughter’s salary, the IDP allowance and her husband’s disability payment. But this is not enough to cover even the most basic needs.

Olena has several serious health issues: diabetes, declining hearing and vision, and severe pain in her legs which makes walking difficult. During air raids, she is even afraid to go down to the basement.

Olena learned about the possibility of receiving assistance under the project from the shelter administration. Through our partners, the “Pomahaem” Charitable Foundation, she received a hygiene kit. During the assessment, additional needs were identified - a glucometer with test strips, assistive devices, and a toilet seat riser - all of which were purchased within the project.

For a family that has lost everything - their home, stability and sense of security - even such items become a tremendous source of support. The assistance has enabled Olena to better manage her health and reduced everyday difficulties, easing life while displaced.

Together with local organisations - the Pomagaem Charitable Foundation, the Volunteer-68 Humanitarian Assistance Centre and the Memory 86 Charitable Foundation - this HelpAge project reaches around 3,000 older people who receive home-based care services, hygiene kits, urological pads, adult diapers, assistive devices, as well as support during evacuation.

Older people are among the most vulnerable groups in conflict zones. We continue working alongside communities to ensure that every older person has access to the support they need and is not left alone to face the challenges of war.

**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:**

