

Letter from the ESU President on the occasion of the 1st of October: The International Day of Older Persons



Dear Friends,

This year, on 1st of October, we are celebrating the International Day of Older Persons for the 30th time worldwide. The role of older people in our society is appreciated more and everyone is invited to enjoy and prepare for a society of longevity. During recent decades life expectancy has increased in all European member states, demographic change became an integrated aspect in policy making, the ageing population became more visible and older persons played an active role in all areas of society, as carers, senior experts, as volunteers in social, cultural activities. As President of the European Seniors' Union (ESU) it is my pleasure to express the involvement and hopes of seniors and call for safeguarding the basic European values of human dignity, democracy and solidarity to create well-being for all generations, so that nobody is left behind.

This year, the celebration is overshadowed by an unprecedented health crisis, posing grave challenges for societies in Europe and all around the world. The 2020 theme is therefore in line with these events: *"Pandemics: Do They Change How We Address Age and Ageing?"* It is an invitation to reflect on the way older persons were treated, looked at and represented during the recent crisis. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, which started as a health crisis and evolved into an economic and social crisis, affected almost every aspect of our daily lives in the European Union. Very soon a clear common trend emerged: a much higher infection and death rate among older persons. In particular, older persons and their relatives living in long-term care facilities went through a dramatic process of loss and pain, and risks to their fundamental rights. The recent sense of relief associated with the gradual reopening of economies, schools, tourism and cultural and social events cannot mask the continuing impact of the pandemic. In addition, governments need to implement recovery processes, and lessons need to be learned to respond to the challenges ahead.

Dear friends, we as the European Seniors' Union (ESU) have repeatedly called for our future societies to be more resilient and fairer and to give European citizens the rights and opportunities they deserve. This call is more urgent now than ever. It's about the kind of society we want to live in and that we want to pass on to our children and grandchildren, to all future generations.

On the road to that society we want to place four 'signposts', inspired by sometimes heart-warming, but often also painful experiences of and with seniors during the last few months.

1. Respect for human dignity

All policy guidelines need to be based on the respect for human dignity and the **integrity of every person**. Older persons' human rights must be protected; advanced age should never by itself be a criterion for excluding persons from specialised healthcare. The need for qualified personnel and the lack of adequate equipment are emblematic of the critical organisation of long-term care in institutions. The absolute priority now is to make sure that this tragedy will never be repeated. European countries must undertake a transition to long-term care systems that put people's needs and dignity at their heart.

2. Fighting ageism

Since the foundation of the ESU, we have expressed our strong opposition against **ageism**. Everyone, regardless of age, gender or dependency is entitled to enjoy the fundamental human rights, lead a life of dignity and independence and participate in social and cultural life. Fighting discrimination and abuse of older persons involves fighting ageism as a structural factor of stereotyping.

3. Solidarity

Solidarity is one of the cornerstones of the European house we build, step by step. While the pandemic highlighted challenges for health and care systems, the crisis also highlights the power and importance of **solidarity**. We saw the interdependence at different policy levels and felt how we depend on each other. Mutual support in neighbourhoods and local communities, all kinds of services, young people caring and providing both practical and psychological support... the creativity to connect was impressive. It seems as if communities need a social vaccine that accompanies a COVID-19 vaccine, that has an enduring character. This solidarity is also the pillar of the cooperation among member states to implement the European recovery strategy, to jointly pursue the protection of European citizens' health and to assure the sustainability of healthcare systems.

4. Resilient citizens included in decisions that affect their lives

In the very short time that emergency decisions had to be made to stop the spread of the virus and prevent people from infection, governments and responsible actors in care settings made little time for the consultation of advisory bodies or the preparatory communications with the persons affected. However, decision-makers know how important these processes are to meet people's needs and retain their support and understanding. At one time, it seemed that the COVID-19 crisis turned all older persons into helpless, dependent, ignorant citizens, a burden for society. This cannot happen again. The particular vulnerability of older persons to COVID-19 cannot become an excuse for rhetoric that belittles them. We promote the empowerment of seniors and call for the **participation** of senior citizens, making them an active part of society, in particular in decisions that effect their lives.

An age-friendly society enables active participation and involvement of senior citizens. Also in unforeseen critical times. Therefore, the ESU calls for the development of sustainable structures, guaranteeing respect for older persons' human rights and openness to participation. European seniors hope to be part of the recovery process following the dramatic crisis. We will stand up for Europe and for European values of human dignity, peace, democracy and solidarity and defend these values as basic values for people all over the world.

In this spirit we will celebrate the International Day of Older Persons.

An Hermans
President
European Seniors' Union