



## The Older Person and the Family

*We are the link with a long line of ancestors. We are an important pillar of society. Most of us continue to play useful roles and to share our wisdom and experience with younger generations.*

*South African Older Person's Charter*

### 1. Introduction

5.2 % of the total population of South Africa is over the age of 65, which translates into 2 737 420 persons. According to the 2011 census, a breakdown of these statistics in terms of race indicates that 4.2 % of Africans, 4.7% of coloureds, 6.8% of Indians, and 14.2% of whites are over the age of 65. The 2013 South Africa Survey notes that “only 24% of the African population is above the age of 40, indicating low life expectancy mostly because of poverty, limited access to healthcare, and the impact of HIV/AIDS. At 14%, the white population has a share of people aged 65 and over that is significantly higher than those of other race groups”.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the demographic impact of HIV/AIDS, the South African proportion of older persons is projected to increase over the next two decades, and by 2025 more than one person in ten will be 60 years or older.<sup>2</sup>

During Heritage month, September, the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office, NICRO and the Western Cape Department of Social Development held a Roundtable Discussion on the ‘Older Person and the Family’ which considered the important role that older persons play in our families, our communities and the broader society.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. The Family and Aging

According to Obioha and T'soeunyane “aging is a gradual process during which critical emotional, physical and social changes occur. In addition, ageing is the accumulation of changes in an

organism or object over time. In humans, it refers to a multidimensional process of physical, psychological, and social change”.<sup>4</sup> There is no remedy for aging; the process of aging is a universal phenomenon and the last stage of the human life cycle. Each stage corresponds to different roles and expectations. “The family structure which encompasses people of different ages, sex, occupation and strength is usually organized along these lines and differences. There is division of labour and tasks in which individuals are expected to contribute towards the continuity and stability of their families, based on their social categorization of age, sex and other characteristics and boundaries”.<sup>5</sup> The family shares a biological and social connection of interdependency. Older persons are an important source of memory knowledge, wisdom and expertise and continue to play meaningful and constructive roles within the family. The duty of the care of the elderly extends across cultures and history, and there is a reciprocity of care of parents by their children.

However, the shape of the family unit is not static but reflects changing social, economic and epidemiological realities; rising rates of migration, single parent households, divorce, and remarriage; and blended and stepfamily relations. Furthermore, the skipped-generation family household—in which an older person or couple resides with at least one grandchild but no middle-generation family members—has become increasingly common because of high mortality from HIV/AIDS.<sup>6</sup> Older persons are caring for the orphaned and vulnerable children while their own physical and cognitive function may be

deteriorating. Many had hopes of being provided for by their children and grandchildren, but find their roles in this situation reversed.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the Older Persons Grants that are paid to persons over the age of 60 of both sexes are of vital importance. The grant is R1 350 per month, and increases to R1 370 once the recipient reaches the age of 75.<sup>8</sup> This equates to R45 per day.<sup>9</sup> Many households are entirely dependent on this grant, since it is often difficult to access the Child Support Grant without the child's birth certificate. This is particularly the case in the rural areas. The 'old age pension', together with whatever small savings the grandparents may have, is often all that stands between a family and starvation.

### 3. The Older Persons Act 13 of 2006

Section 9 of the Constitution, which asserts the right of all to equality, states that "national legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination". The Older Persons Act seeks to "deal effectively with the plight of older persons by establishing a framework aimed at the empowerment and protection of older persons and at the promotion and maintenance of their status, rights, well-being, safety and security".<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the Act promotes a "shift [in] the emphasis from institutional care to community-based care in order to ensure that an older person remains in his or her home within the community for as long as possible".<sup>11</sup> The South African Older Persons Forum emphasizes that the Act also aims to promote the integration of older persons in the community by creating an enabling environment and promoting participation in activities with people of other ages and cultures.<sup>12</sup>

Section 3 of the Act speaks to its implementation by all organs of the state through joint interventions and responsibility, and through prioritizing services to those with the greatest need. This involves numerous government departments and agencies, including the Departments of Health, Justice, Home Affairs, Local Government, Land Affairs, Transport, and Agriculture, as well as the South African Police Service. The South African Older Persons Forum represents the voice of the older person, while provincial forums provide assistance in prioritising needs, planning, evaluation and co-ordination of services. Lastly, the SA Human Rights Commission has the authority and mandate

to address needs and initiate action should the rights of older persons be violated.<sup>13</sup>

The Act sets out measures to protect the elderly from exploitation and abuse. These measures include the establishment of a register of people convicted of the abuse and exploitation of an older person. Such people are prohibited from working in a residential facility catering for older persons and from providing community and home based care to older persons.<sup>14</sup> However, during a recent report to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Social Development, Minister Bathabile Dlamini reported that the Register was not yet fully operational and that those tasked with its management were still in the process of being trained.<sup>15</sup>

Reporting of such abuse by a concerned member of the public can be via a professional, such as a social worker, or via the police. The social worker would open a file for investigation, and if the allegations were confirmed, action would be taken to protect victim and against the offender. The police would conclude the investigation and legal procedures would follow. The outcome of a court enquiry would determine whether or not the person charged should be placed on the Register.

Families should form an essential source of support to older persons, but many families are confronted by socio-economic challenges which have the potential to undermine the proper care of the elderly. The breakdown of the extended family, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and increasing rural migration to the urban areas means that many families are scattered. The Older Persons Act acknowledges that "patterns in family circumstances are changing and most are unable to care for their relatives; [this] leads to an increase in physical, social and economic abuse".<sup>16</sup>

The Act seeks to strengthen families by developing "skills and knowledge in frail care [that can] be transferred, which will enable families to take better care of their loved ones and keep them longer in the family".<sup>17</sup> Support services should be provided, which could include home visits by a social or community worker. Similarly, health care visitors can evaluate the well-being and care of older persons living with their families. Respite care can be provided, allowing primary care givers to have some 'time out'. Should it not be possible for the older person to remain living in the community due to increasing frailty, illness or abuse, arrangements can be made for residential

care. Provision for the regulation and monitoring of residential care facilities is made in the Act.

#### 4. The Older Persons Charter

Elderly people themselves contributed to the drafting of the South African Older Persons Charter, which was drawn up by the South African Older Persons Forum, based on the experiences and demands of older people from across the country. In the Charter, which was launched by the Minister of Social Development in April 2011, older persons ask to ‘...lead useful and satisfying lives, to stay in our homes for as long as we are able, to receive care and support when we need it and, when we are no longer able to live at home, to be cared for in a place that protects us and allows us to lead dignified lives until the end of our lives.’ These are consistent with the international universal principles of independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity as contained in the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the South African Older Persons Act discussed above.<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, the Charter reminds us that older persons

*“are the generation most affected by our troubled past. Our object in writing this Charter is to promote our present rights and ensure that future generations of older persons will be spared the division and discrimination we suffered. We lived through troubled times. We worked hard, we raised children and cared for our families as best we could. We carried a heavy burden but we gained experience and wisdom... Some of us are ill and some are disabled but all of us are entitled to be treated with respect. We do not want to be labeled as frail, senile, feeble-minded, hard-of-hearing or forgetful. We do not want to experience another form of discrimination nor do we want hand-outs. We want to share in building a free South Africa”.*<sup>19</sup>

Commenting on the National Week of the Older Person, the Cape Town Justice and Peace Commission said that

*“this national week came into being to help remind our country of the honoured place older persons should have in our communities and for the contribution that older persons have made to our country. It should never be forgotten that our democratic state was built, in part, through the*

*huge sacrifice made by older persons drawn from historically disadvantaged communities, who refused to be defeated by the tyranny of apartheid”.*<sup>20</sup>

The agency of older persons, as articulated in the Charter, must be respected. The Charter urges, for example, that residential facilities be built “in areas where we live, including rural areas, so we can remain near to our families and friends and do not have to move away”.<sup>21</sup> It is clear from the above that older persons can and do play an important role in their families and communities which should be acknowledged and respected.

#### 5. The *Ikamva Labantu* Experience: The Older Person and the Family

*Ikamva Labantu* is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation assisting and empowering vulnerable families and communities in township areas. The organization runs various programmes for older persons.<sup>22</sup> The co-ordinator of their programme for older persons, Lulama Sigasana, explained that their work was in step with section 9 of the Bill of Rights as discussed above. This legislative framework translates into structures and associations for older persons; and activities which enhance their income generating capacity and which enable them to live in an environment that caters for their changing needs and creates opportunities that promote an optimal level of social, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, their programmes enable older persons to pursue opportunities for full development of their potential and to benefit from family and community care and protection in accordance with societal cultural values.

*Ikamva Labantu* strives to create a supportive environment for older persons; and to keep the older person active in his or her community for as long as possible by delivering its services through a ‘senior club’ model, which people attend about five times a week. Club activities are supervised and co-ordinated by a club assistant, and there is on-site health evaluation and referrals to the clinic or other health and social services. Better health care results in a decline in disability, greater independence and more participation in the life of the family and community. The organisation also offers leisure activities, such as arts and crafts, which may be income generating or used in the early childhood development programmes run by the organization. The governance of these clubs rests with a forum known as *Ilizwi Labadala* (the

Voice of the Elders). It is composed of members from the 17 senior clubs, and meets monthly to discuss issues that affect the older person. It also serves as a place of learning, sharing experience and capacity building for the programme.

## 6. Mental Health of Older Persons

The mental health of the older person should be a priority. Old age can be a time of significant losses. These may include increasing frailty; the loss of faculties; increasing dependence; decrease in income; the loss of a spouse; accommodation that does not take into account infirmities; and the need for the assistance of others in performing bodily functions. A recent British study found that elderly people of both sexes who are socially isolated and lonely because they do not see friends or family regularly are almost 50% more likely to die before their time, even after underlying health problems were taken into account. The study concluded that “that simply enabling people to get out and about more often would not only make feel them less lonely but actively increase their life expectancy.... the latest study goes further than previous research to establish a link between isolation and early death”.<sup>24</sup>

Pets can play an important role in healthy aging. Caring for a pet can bring pleasure and help boost morale and optimism. “Illness, death, and moves can take away close friends and family members. And making new friends can get harder”.<sup>25</sup> Pets provide company and the routine of caring for a pet can give structure and purpose to daily life, encourage exercise and diminish stress.<sup>26</sup>

## 7. Community Care Using Technology

Various technologies are available which enhance independent living and which can be used to ensure the health and safety of older persons and enable them to access immediate help in an emergency. According to Anton de Beer of

Telecare Solutions, some of these technologies offer “remote care, support and reassurance to physically, mentally and emotionally restricted and less mobile persons ... empowering them with independent, self-supporting lifestyles within their personal environment”. At present Telecare Solutions is involved in a public-private partnership with various organizations working with the elderly including the Western Cape Department of Social Development, ER 24, Dementia SA and the Helderberg Stroke Support Group. The target group is state-dependent senior citizens who have access to electricity.

## 8. Conclusion

The study by Obioha and T'Soeunyane concludes that those roles traditionally performed by the elderly in terms of the socialization and protection of children, as well as keeping the family system cohesive, persist and “place them strategically in scheme of things, which means that the recognition of their relevance to the society still persists, even though they might look physically frail and weak”.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear that active, dignified aging in the community for as long as possible is the best practice model. “The great opportunity for public health programs in the first half of the 21st century is to keep older people healthy longer, delaying or avoiding disability and dependence”.<sup>28</sup> In the words of an older person who, on his release from prison dedicated the remaining years of his life to the service of others, Nelson Mandela, “a society that does not value its older people denies its roots and endangers its future. Let us strive to enhance their capacity to support themselves for as long as possible and, when they cannot do so anymore, to care for them”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'South Africa Survey 2013' South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 2013, pg 10

<sup>2</sup> Presentation by Anton de Beer of Telecare Solution at a CPLD Roundtable on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2014

<sup>3</sup> The Roundtable was addressed by Prof Emeka Obioha of the Tshwane University of Technology; Gavin Weir: of the Sector Task Team for Older Persons (STTOP) and NOAH; Chrina Barendse of the Older Persons Programme of the Western Cape Department of Social Development; Lulama Sigasana, the Programme Head: Health & Seniors, *Ikamva Labantu*; and Anton de Beer of Telecare Solutions

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- <sup>4</sup> 'The Roles of the Elderly in Sotho Family System and Society of Lesotho, Southern Africa' Emeka E. Obioha and Pont'so G. T'soeunyan, *Anthropologist*, 14(3): 251-260 (2012)
- <sup>5</sup> See above
- <sup>6</sup> 'Changing Role of Family', *Global Health and Aging*, National Institute of Aging, US Department of Health and Human Sciences, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2014
- <sup>7</sup> Presentation by Lulama Sigasana 'The Ikamva Labantu Experience: The Older Person and the Family', 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2014
- <sup>8</sup> [http://www.services.gov.za/services/content/Home/ServicesForPeople/Socialbenefits/oldagegrant/en\\_ZA](http://www.services.gov.za/services/content/Home/ServicesForPeople/Socialbenefits/oldagegrant/en_ZA)
- <sup>9</sup> Gavin Weir, presentation to roundtable on the Family and the Older Person
- <sup>10</sup> Preamble to the Older Persons Act 13 of 2006
- <sup>11</sup> The Older Persons Act 13 of 2006, section 2(c)
- <sup>12</sup> The South African Older Persons Forum Website: <http://www.saopf.org.za/your-rights/older-persons-charter>
- <sup>13</sup> Chrina Barendse 'Roundtable Discussion on the Older Person and the Family with the focus on Legislation', 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2014
- <sup>14</sup> The Older Persons Act 13 of 2006, section 31
- <sup>15</sup> Writer's notes of the PPC on Social Development Meeting, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2014
- <sup>16</sup> Chrina Barendse *op cit*
- <sup>17</sup> Chrina Barendse *op cit*
- <sup>18</sup> <http://www.saopf.org.za/your-rights/older-persons-charter>
- <sup>19</sup> <http://www.saopf.org.za/sites/default/files/your-rights/older-persons-charter>
- <sup>20</sup> Cape Town Diocese Justice and Peace Commission on the National Week of the Older Person, 29<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> October 2014
- <sup>21</sup> The Older Person's Charter
- <sup>22</sup> Lulama Sigasana *op cit*
- <sup>23</sup> Lulama Sigasana *op cit*
- <sup>24</sup> The Telegraph, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013
- <sup>25</sup> <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/emotional-health/the-health-benefits-of-pets.htm#older>
- <sup>26</sup> <http://money.usnews.com/money/retirement/slideshows/10-reasons-older-people-need-pets/2>
- <sup>27</sup> 'The Roles of the Elderly in Sotho Family System and Society of Lesotho, Southern Africa' Emeka E. Obioha and Pont'so G. T'soeunyan, *Anthropologist*, 14(3): 251-260 (2012)
- <sup>28</sup> Changing Role of the Family \_ National Institute on Aging.htm
- <sup>29</sup> Nelson Mandela, message announcing 1999 as the United Nations International Year of Older Persons, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1998

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