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of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies**Keyword

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- Between World AIDS Day and the International Volunteer Day: more volunteers to do more, do better and reach further
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Giving the elderly back their dignity in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

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Ominiserik, a smartly-dressed man in his late sixties, had been reluctant to come to the home in Kokshetau. The former farm manager had thought his children would look after him when his wife died. (p15459)

The elderly have lost the most in the transition from communism to capitalism. They can no longer rely either on the state or their families to look after them. Fortunately though, some can turn to the Red Crescent societies in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, who run a number of homes for the elderly.

“All of this is donated by local businesses,” says Kulyash Karshalova, pointing to the new tiles and paintwork in the entrance hall of the old people’s home run by the Red Crescent in the northern Kazakh town of Kokshetau, 300 km from the Russian border.

As the head of the local branch, Karshalova is proud of her efforts to raise funds for the home. “When our donors see us, they run,” she jokes, “but I am determined to find new donors as these elderly people have the right to a decent place to spend their final years.”

Karshalova, a tiny dynamo of a woman, was inspired to improve conditions in the “Mercy House” after visiting a home in Hamburg run by the German Red Cross. As well as receiving donations in kind, she has just landed a grant from the state – the first ever for the home. “It is not easy to persuade people to give money,” she explains. “We have no culture of philanthropy and with everyone trying to make ends meet, it is often the elderly who lose out.”

Abandoned and Neglected

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where half the population is ethnic Russian, Ukrainian, or German, many young people have returned to their roots in search of a better life. All too often, that means first dumping their elderly

parents in an old people's home.

According to Karshalova, most of her residents have been neglected and then abandoned. The relatives of 58-year-old Nikolay, who is deaf and blind, told him that they were going to Russia for six months. Three years later, he is still waiting for their return.

Valentina Nikoyevena, a handsome, blonde, 78-year-old woman who used to be a decorator, never expected her family to desert her. When her husband died, her daughter and son-in-law drank away her pension. "I didn't eat for three weeks," she says, "I wish I had come here earlier but I was too proud and rather worried about what I would find."

Thanks to Karshalova, conditions at the home are fast improving. Local schoolchildren put on musical shows, the food has improved and as she takes delivery of boxes of chairs, her dream of matching furniture may not be too far off.

Crumbling health service

With the health service under-funded in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, there is little state money for the elderly. Most homes get a major part of their income from the pensions of the residents. However, with the average pension as small as 9,000 tenge or \$60 a month, there is little money left for medical equipment or renovation costs.

For the past five years, 67-year-old Yamina Semanovich has not left the dormitory she shares with ten other women at the Red Crescent home in Temirtau, a depressed steel town in central Kazakhstan. She had been living alone in a derelict house and had lost her legs to gangrene.

The home has only two wheelchairs for the 34 residents who are bed-ridden and the old-fashioned models are too heavy for the nurses to lift Yamina to bring her downstairs. There is also a lack of light frames and crutches for those who can walk.

Despite the hardships, homes run by the Red Crescent are over-subscribed. In Karabalta, near the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, 66 elderly people live in a home meant for 40 and there is always a waiting list.

Most of the residents have few possessions and live in sparsely decorated dormitories. Although some enjoy gardening, there is little to do and many look forward to the evenings when Viktor, a blind resident, plays the accordion.

Giving the elderly their dignity

Although the conditions in these homes may be far from those in western Europe, the commitment of the nursing staff, who can earn as little as 4,000 tenge, or \$25 a month, is clear.

Ominiserik, a smartly-dressed man in his late sixties, had been reluctant to come to the home in Kokshetau. The former farm manager had thought his children would look after him when his wife died. But as he tells Karshalova and her staff, he spent the night in a hotel after his daughter and her alcoholic husband chucked him out. He had taken refuge with them after his two alcoholic sons abused him.

"The authorities told me to come here," he says, mustering as much dignity as he can. "I should have come earlier as I am worn out by all my family problems." Karshalova reassures him, and tells him that a nurse will go to his daughter's house to pick up his clothes and that in the meantime, he should make himself at home.



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