

The Weekly

CALL TO CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

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Enjoying her retirement ... Selina Mellisi is happy with the living conditions and the company she enjoys at the Boikhuco old age home in Mangaung

Abandoned by their children and families, elderly people often find refuge in government owned or subsidised old age homes where they get provided with food, medical care and education.

Society's continued neglect of the aged, which leaves them exposed to dangers like abuse, rape and harassment, has prompted the Free State MEC for social development, Sisi Ntombela, to appeal for conscientious efforts to protect elderly people.

Ntombela was speaking in an interview with The Weekly in the wake of the International Day for Older Persons on Monday. Globally, there are 600 million people who are aged 60 and above, and this number is expected to double by 2015. According to projections, the figure will reach two billion by 2050.

"We are worried and we call on our communities to care for our old people. These are the people who fought for our freedom and instilled good values in us. They still continue to care for our children especially HIV/AIDS orphans. They use their pension money to ensure their vulnerable and needy grandchildren are cared for," said Ntombela.

She also encouraged old people to join Older Persons Forums. Some of the challenges faced by old persons are access to proper information and shortage of personnel in home-based care centres. Most elderly people in South Africa use their State pensions to care for their children and grandchildren. In most cases, the meagre pensions are not enough to address the huge needs of their families.

In need of more financial back-up, old people usually turn to loan sharks who harass them if they do not pay them back. Most of them do not know where to turn to for help and have no knowledge of their rights. "My pension money is sometimes not enough to care for my family, which consists of my children and four grand-children. This is too much but I have to soldier on; it is my responsibility," said the 83-year-old Mmakgotso Molehe from Botshabelo. To compliment her pension money she rummages through dumpsites for 'valuables' that she can in turn sell.

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About 2 400 old people are taken care of by non-government organisations (NGO's) owned old age homes while 138 live in government-funded institutions in the Free State. One of these old age homes is Boikhuco Old Age Home in Bloemfontein's Bochabela Township, which takes care of 80 old people. They are provided with basic needs such as food, shelter, security, health care and education.

Selina Mellisi (79) is one of the people enjoying the safety and care, courtesy of government funding. She said her five children had abandoned her and did not take care of her prior to coming to Boikhuco. She praised the old age home for taking good care of her and fellow pensioners. She advised young people to respect their elders in order to live long and fulfilling lives.

"The reason I am still alive today and will continue to live longer is that I respected my parents. This is not the case these days; young people do as they please because they think they know better.

If they make an effort to learn from us, I can assure you they will be better people," Mellisi told The Weekly.

Auxiliary social worker, Monique Khechane, who has worked at Boikhuco Old Age Home since 2007, said she appreciated and respected the wealth of wisdom old people have. Khechane said the advice she receives from the elderly in the old age home helps her overcome some of the challenges she comes across in her own life. "I enjoy working with them because they have a lot of wisdom. They demand you be patient with them because they are easily offended. The best advice I ever received is to respect my parents, and this has helped me achieve my goals. They have become my best friends and I have learned a lot from with them." She said elderly people need helpers who are patient, because they are fragile due to illnesses. "Some of them have illnesses that make them forgetful. I have learnt to just laugh it off and make the situation bearable for them."

One of the conditions that are common among old people is dementia, which is a progressive deterioration of intellectual functions such as the memory, while other brain functions such as controlling movement and senses are retained. South Africa passed the Older Persons Act in 2006, which promotes the status, well-being, safety and security of older persons. It also recognises their skills and wisdom and promotes their participation.



Caring for elders ... Auxiliary Social Worker, Monique Khechane enjoys assisting and educating older people



Protecting the elderly ... Social Development MEC, Sisi Ntombela, has vowed to ensure that government continues to support elderly people