

## Is volunteering a choice for lonely seniors?

### ***“Let us be active!” project survey results***

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Can the problem of social exclusion of seniors be solved by involving them in voluntary activities? What should the cities do to activate the older people for voluntary actions and how the volunteering for seniors should be organized to provide positive experiences both for volunteers and those who receive help? Those are the questions, which the project “Let us be active! – Social inclusion of seniors through volunteering in Estonia, Latvia and Finland” is trying to find the answers to. Last autumn each of participating cities – Pärnu, Riga and Turku – conducted the survey among seniors and professionals to find out how many older people are interested in voluntary activities, what they would like to do and what is the attitude of social workers and other professionals towards this kind of service. Altogether, 862 seniors and 245 professionals were interviewed in the three cities.

### **Societies age, loneliness kills**

Social exclusion together with loneliness are the biggest challenges in life of seniors. At the same time, evidence confirms that loneliness is twice as dangerous for health as obesity (1). It is common to think that older people are not worth to invest in and that their mental and physical capacities do not allow them to be active. As the European population is getting older on a great scale, active and healthy ageing should be promoted.

### **Challenge 1 – How to active the inactive?**

The “Let us be active!” study revealed that most of the seniors in Estonia and Latvia remain inactive, while the situation seems to be better in Finland. In Turku, 1/3 of interviewed seniors is already volunteering, 1/3 is interested to start and only 1/3 would not like to be involved. For Riga the number of not interested people is as high as 82%!

Those, who would like to become volunteers, recognize helping others as a way to feel useful, an opportunity to spend time with younger people and generally to widen their social network. The expected reward is simple: making someone happy is enough and a free ticket to the cultural event would be a great addition!

On the other hand, the inactive seniors claim they have nothing to offer to others, do not have time and want to rest. While the two latter are personal decisions, it is worth to mention that older people offer valuable skills and knowledge, which should benefit the society and not get wasted!

## **Challenge 2 – How to promote volunteering activities for seniors?**

Besides the challenge of activating those inactive, there is another nut to crack – how to promote volunteering for seniors and how to spread the information about the available and suitable places for older people?

This is where the city administration comes with the new services, new concepts and models of cross-border cooperation and creating the model of recruiting the volunteers, finding them a suitable tasks and supporting them in their actions. The conducted study showed that seniors need clear understanding what volunteering include, clear information where they can volunteer and clear instruction what they should do. They are ready to look for this information in brochures distributed in healthcare centres, in newspapers and in internet but the other, already active and volunteering seniors, are the best ambassadors of the idea.

The “Let us be active!” project is working until the end of 2016 on all those issues. The aim is to improve information about existing and develop new opportunities for voluntary work for seniors in Pärnu, Turku and Riga. The project is coordinated by Baltic Region Healthy Cities Association with the co-financing of Central Baltic Programme 2014-2020. More information on [www.letusbeactive.eu](http://www.letusbeactive.eu)

### References:

1. Victor C.R. & Bowling A. (2012), A Longitudinal Analysis of Loneliness Among Older People in Great Britain, *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, Volume 146, Issue 3, 2012