European Care and Nursing Homes:
Challenges and Opportunities for the future of a growing sector

How to secure care for older people in the EU

This document is a position paper, which provides an overview of the situation of the social healthcare sector in the European context.

It is aimed at drawing attention not only to the critical issues but, above all, the significant role played by the social healthcare sector before the European Commission.

Many critical issues need to be addressed in residential homes:

- Structural shortage of health professionals
- Slowdown in the flow of workers from other European countries
- Progressive increase in operational costs
- Unsuitable rates for a residential system that requires specialized assistance, more qualified professional figures and higher quality of health care
- Over-regulation and no room for entrepreneurs

In some countries (like Italy and Spain) the contractual and salary condition creates a disadvantage for the social healthcare sector because professionals working in hospital units enjoy higher salaries and greater prestige.

Strategies and objectives to achieve

ECHO's strategic objective is to represent all E.U. members to strengthen its role and support long-term care policies, in light of the demographic revolution that the E.U. will soon need to face, which involves the following aspects:

- Guaranteeing free and fair competition for and profitable cooperation between private and public providers everywhere;
- Guaranteeing continuous improvement of quality of care and reduction of management costs;
- Promoting recognition of the role of social care services for the elderly as an important economic driver, which is producing steady jobs and immediate income for EU States.
- Relaunch the attractiveness of the health and social sector through the homogeneity of salaries between hospitals and residential homes and between public and private sectors
- Implement training plans to train your own qualified professionals in-house and hire them; this is possible by offering internships thanks to agreements with universities and creating training courses dedicated to the elderly sector
- Renew a care program based on a multi-professional approach

Long-term care is an economic driver and elderly care plays an important role in the European economy as it creates steady jobs, investment, economic development and revenues for the States that are higher than what they spend.

ECHO members currently take care of more than 3.5 million of elderly people in nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, home care, day care centers, telemedicine and employ more than 3.5 million people.

The European health policies aim to guarantee "Accessibility and quality of services" to European citizens from birth to death, including the period in which they live in a care home due to frailty and multiple pathologies.

It is very important to review residential home staff when presenting new professional figures to support the management of the elderly.

For the future, politics should take care of making two different models of structures economically sustainable. This will need to be organized and based on the intensity of care needs to guarantee the necessary assistance to citizens.

The two different models to be proposed are:

- **Specialized retirement homes**: it stands out thanks to a highly qualified and multidisciplinary professional approach capable of managing complex patients (for example non-self-sufficient elderly with dementia or serious disability)

- **Facilities open towards the territory**: services synergistically in line with the territory and home care. They could be independent accommodation connected to a residential structure or day centers to support home care where the elderly can take advantage of some services.

Prevention policies need to be implemented to avoid a progressive and continual increase in the number of completely non self-sufficient elderly people.

This is a fundamental issue because the aforementioned increase can become a growing cost that places the welfare of countries in difficulty.

We need a new vision concerning a model of care that is integrated between home care and residential care services, in which nursing homes must be central to deliver residential care, home care services, healthy aging programs and telemedicine.

As European citizens, frail elderly people should become a priority of public health programs and deserve our best attention and care.

Financing clinical research programs is also a duty of governments as they are aimed at preventing, treating and reducing chronic diseases that afflict human beings in the last phase of their lives.

Prevention policies are strongly recommended to prevent a wider range of the population from making use of long-term residential care services.

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We face challenges that can no longer be postponed!

To sum up, the Long-Term Care Sector is at a crossroads. The economic sustainability of the companies in this field

1. The mission of the social health network
2. The review of care standards and outcomes
3. The connection between the residential network and other services for the elderly
4. The connection between the public network and the accredited private market
5. The management and development of staff
6. Knowledge of the dynamism of need, demand and supply

ECHO was founded 1989 in Brussels as a Confederation of national associations of private care homes. It is a nonprofit organization that pursues social, scientific, informing and training objectives in long term care sector. In particular it:

- **Promotes** the development and qualification of companies in the field of long-term care for the elderly;
- **Supports** the interests of its members by engaging in dialogue with National Governments, European institutions, Health and Social Authorities and the media;
- **Encourages** the spread of knowledge and circulation of best practices;
- **Organizes** congresses, conferences, meetings and seminars on long-term care topics;
- **Develops** the culture of quality among social and healthcare providers

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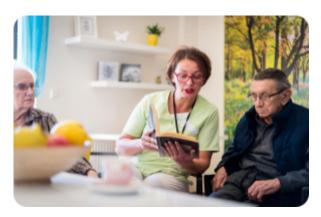alberto.echevarria@echo-eu.com

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European Background

Essentially, social healthcare has, at all times, been overshadowed by all European Governments; after the pandemic, during which many elderly people unfortunately lost their lives, the reputation of the social healthcare sector has been irreparably damaged. It means that the retirement homes have been accused of being the cause of numerous deaths due to negligence in activating procedures against covid. However, the pandemic period has only emphasized the critical issues and difficulties of a sector that has always been kept aside and not taken seriously into consideration.

Policies aimed at the elderly and non-self-sufficient people have, in fact, always been the subject of discussion during conferences but have never been the subject of economic investments or the subject of targeted legislative regulations by European Governments. In any case, in Europe the Governments should begin to seriously deal with the policies related to elderly and non-self-sufficient people, because disruptive demographic changes with the shortage of proper investment could lead to the implosion of the entire system.

Demographic aging of the population in the coming decades is expected to have significant implications on the future of all European nations, as the proportion of elderly people is expected to increase by about 30% across Europe. For this reason, the overall objective of elderly care policy should be to provide universal access to affordable and high-quality care services.

Without adequate investments by governments and without targeted policies, retirement homes risk closure and in such a case who can take care of their elderly and non-self-sufficient relatives?

In residential facilities, the financing of public healthcare by regional government is based on a case-mix system. It means that the level of public funding varies depending on the type of care profile of the residents. In other words, facilities dealing with severe cases receive more funding. Generally, the cost of care is not fully covered by public health financing.

The initiative promoted by ECHO aims to tackle, and include, an overall healthcare reform of the governments' agenda. It is important to consider that in recent years the profile of people entering retirement homes has been changing a lot compared to many years ago.

First of all, they enter a nursing home at a very advanced age, therefore they are already marked by pronounced clinical vulnerabilities. Nowadays, the elderly who live in retirement homes tend to require constant and qualified health care because when they enter the facility they are affected by various pathologies and are no longer self-sufficient.

In addition to being affected by various concomitant pathologies, most of them suffer from cognitive disorders, behavioral problems and lack of autonomy. Their health is unstable and they suffer from significant deficits that prevent them from performing daily activities independently. Therefore, it is not reasonable to close residential facilities for the elderly to focus only on home care.

Throughout Europe we are currently experiencing strong opportunities in respect of the profile of the elderly who are hosted in rest homes: these are mostly people who require significant health care because they are characterized by physical vulnerabilities and significant cognitive decline. Consequently, with the progressive and growing fragility of the elderly, the rest homes require a crucial transformation, which tends to create even higher healthcare intensity.

The relaunch of the residential care sector is the solution to the problem of non-self-sufficiency of many elderly people. This concerns an increasingly growing reality in Europe and should be embedded with the home care services in a territorial global system of each country. The elderly frequently face a many inconveniences and difficulties due to a fragmented system of care; in addition, the lack of continuity in the treatment plan could cause a sense of failure to be taken care. Otherwise, it would be important to strengthen home care and redevelop the residential facilities, because they must contribute to the community's request and should not be two opposing forces: home care and residential care are complementary resources.

New digital technologies can be a powerful ally to achieve integration between home care and residential care. Furthermore, these same technologies can favor and improve both services and for this reason it could be a great opportunity to invest in them.

In Europe, we can find different solutions for elderly care. Evaluating the best solution for an elderly person depends on the ability to carry our Activities of Daily Living with or without cognitive impairment, such as disorientation in time or space. ADLs refer to daily self-care activities including personal hygiene, dressing, eating and the ability to move independently. Home nursing care is available for the elderly with mild to severe cognitive difficulties, as the care provided by home nurses includes technical interventions and basic nursing care.

Day care centers provide nursing care services for older persons with moderate cognitive limitations who still live at home and whose caregivers need respite time. In day care centers, the elderly can spend all daytime involved in daily activities on one or more weekdays, but they spend the night at home and generally do not require special care by qualified nurses.

It may be necessary to enter a residential care facility if this ADL difficulty becomes more problematic to be supported at home. In that case when staying at home becomes impossible, residential care is the only suitable solution and for this reason every government should take responsibility for investing in innovation of the residential care system.