

Caring for senior citizens and releasing women's potential

In the Italian region of Abruzzo, many women sacrifice job and career opportunities to raise a family, and it is much later, when the children begin to look after themselves, that they start to build a career. Even then, their responsibilities for old and frail parents can create emergency situations and with this additional pressure they often give up any idea of entering the labour market or continuing their career.



The ambition of the Help Donna Development Partnership (DP) was to create an effective and inexpensive system of care for the elderly and thus, removing the psychological pressure on women. The idea was that new flexible care services should enable women to access or remain in the labour market, and at the same time, create jobs for unemployed women in an economic growth sector. The project partners were convinced that this dual strategy would help the region to face the big demographic and social challenges of the immediate future: aging and increasing immigration.

A system of home-based and institutional care

Led by the Municipality of Navelli, the project brought together four other municipalities (Carapelle Calvisio, Collepietro, Fagnano Alto, Prata d'Ansidonia) and four private cooperatives and charities from the same area. These organisations had a lot of experience and competence in social care and they managed Help Donna's different pilot projects. These projects included the development of training courses for carers, the creation of a new vocational profile of "social-family assistant" and the setting up of a day care centre for older people. In addition, the DP conducted a study on the sustainability of the new centre and carried out a whole range of awareness-raising and dissemination activities to transfer the approach to other parts of the region.

The pilot centre was organised in Collepietro, which is one of the partner municipalities and it provided a suitable building, whilst three of the private partners shared the task of managing the centre. As a first step, the project team selected eight families that included an older person who had no particular health problems, but who would not allow their daughter, or daughter-in-law or niece to look for a job or to progress in her career. The senior citizens were invited to test the new centre during a trial period of nine months during which they were transported from their homes to the centre in the morning and then back to their families in the late afternoon. They spent all day with their peers in the centre and were assisted by two tutors who were also qualified nurses. Thanks to this new service, the younger women in their families were able to go to work without any feelings of guilt, as their relatives had both company and support.

The experiment was a big success. It made a real difference to the lives of many elderly women and men, who are often afraid of staying alone but have little that makes their everyday lives interesting. "We tried to give them a new kind of daily life", says Massimiliano D'Innocenzo, a member of the project team, "being together with other people, relying on the permanent support of the tutors who organise activities in the centre, from playing cards to painting and cooking together or to cultural events. Having their birthday parties and Christmas or Easter celebrations in the centre was something people really cherished as well as taking trips and excursions once a month, even as far as to St. Peter's in Rome, made them feel full of life again." In addition, the project team involved the senior citizens in the creation of a video library of five different DVDs in which they were the protagonists. In each film they talked about a specific topic, such as, their childhood or World War Two. In these films, they also demonstrated how to cook traditional food or how to use old tools. The video library is now being used by the schools of the area, to preserve a memory of habits and traditions which risk being lost.

Over time, women who had been unemployed but who had received training from the DP took on more responsibilities for

the activities in the centre but they still had the assistance of professional carers and doctors.

Developing a new vocational profile

To ensure the quality of the new care provision, Help Donna developed a new vocational profile: the “social-family assistant” who is someone who might work in care institutions or in people’s homes. A total of 32 future carers were trained to perform a variety of tasks ranging from offering cultural and creative activities to older and disabled people to providing daily life support and basic nursing. A quota system ensured that different vulnerable target groups could benefit from the opportunity, and thus, 20% immigrant women and 80% native women were recruited and 20% of the entire group had been unemployed for more than two years.

The training course was designed to balance support for both the physical and psychological conditions of older people. The idea was that the “social-family assistant” should be able, during the working day, to replace the woman (daughter, daughter in law, niece...) in the older person’s life. This meant that the training had to cover relevant legal aspects, vocational skills in basic health care, first aid, methods and techniques of social assistance, but also issues such as nutrition, hygiene and the prevention of domestic accidents. Psychological aspects were high on the agenda: What are the specific emotional needs of old and frail people? How to establish a professional relationship between the carer and the person in need of care? Organisational aspects related to work contracts, social services management and the use of technical support tools required for professional care were also addressed.

After the completion of the “classroom” training, the DP ran a pilot programme that involved different work experience placements. Under the supervision of experienced carers and medical experts (doctors, nurses, psychologists, physiotherapists), the new “social-family assistant” provided home support to families that included parents with Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease who needed permanent care. The placements organised for the trainees also involved work experience in traditional care homes for elderly people and in day care centres for people with disabilities.

As sustainable model for a whole territory

The experimental activities turned out to be very successful. Many families were interested in this kind of service and, at the same time, organising centres for elderly care appeared to be a viable business idea with the potential to create jobs for un-

employed people, particularly immigrant women. There was, however, the problem of the cost. Such a centre would need to charge a level of fees that would be unaffordable for many families and so the big question was, how to offer a good service for elderly people at a low price for families, whilst paying a good salary to the care assistants?

To find a solution, the project carried out a study, together with the Tax Unit of the Ministry of Finance. Some of the results propose new legislation to enable tax deductions and/or subsidies for both the families and the social enterprises or cooperatives working in this field. Another recommendation is that the law should stipulate a compulsory involvement of public authorities in the provision of care for older people, so that they could supply infrastructure and buildings, perhaps as part of their policies to combat unemployment. This would certainly help to make these care services more affordable.

Even if it takes time to convince the law-makers of the need for action, the DP has proved that its basic idea is valid and can also be transferred. The pilot centre, located in Collepietro, continues to offer its services, thanks to the financing of the initial partner municipalities, and other local authorities have meanwhile joined the venture. The women who were trained by “Help Donna” have created a cooperative of nine members and these women are now working in the pilot centre and in similar centres that have been created in the region.

To raise the awareness of policy makers and the public-at-large, the project made a substantial investment in its dissemination activities. Seminars and conferences have been held to present the DP’s results and its books, reports, CDROM and DVD have been widely disseminated throughout the region and beyond.

The project evaluation confirmed what the DP team had experienced during the activities. Both the day care centre and home-based care were well received and appreciated by the women who were seeking to reconcile their working life with care responsibilities for their relatives. The new care workers are highly motivated and find satisfaction in their work. After getting used to it, the elderly people now see the centre as an important part of their lives and one of these “guests,” who had not spoken for months has started to talk again!

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