

Address by Minister Chabert

By **S. Dubois**

Head of Cabinet

to Mr J. CHABERT

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President of the Committee of the Regions of the European Union

As you have heard today, the European Union is faced with the growing phenomenon of the ageing of its population. Currently, 16% of Europe's 375 million citizens are over 65, and their number will rise to 20% in 2010.

While demographic experts, economists and budget officials consider this phenomenon cause for concern, it also offers an advantage: it is proof that life expectancy in Western Europe is continually increasing - men live to an average age of 75 today and women an average of 81. Two thousand years ago, life expectancy was between 18 and 22 years; a century ago, people generally lived to age 50.... So we have come a long way.

In addition to economic and budgetary scenarios, such as various proposals for extending working life, this situation should above all prompt us to seek to increase the quality of life of senior citizens. There is a need to enable all citizens to live in dignity as long as possible - and the subject of the importance of volunteering being addressed here today is an interesting avenue of reflection with that goal in mind.

As a result of a longer life after retirement, more people wish to continue being useful, to prevent a feeling of despair taking over their lives. Many also feel the need to make a commitment to help others, which is a good illustration of the need for society to become more attentive to the importance of creating greater solidarity between people and giving more emphasis to the quality of life in general.

The policy to aid individuals is giving increasing attention to home care. It is true that people want to live as long as possible in a familiar environment. The development of home care opens a broad scope of action for voluntary work. It is clear that there is room to develop the added "human value" brought by volunteers, combined with the commitment of professionals. The experience of older volunteers can work miracles when it comes to prevention, information on safe housing, food habits, and social and other attitudes.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that it is essential to develop more social, recreational and cultural projects for senior citizens, to offer them training and improve their mobility. We are presently working in Belgium on drastically reducing the cost of public transport for those over 65.

The important thing is to "stay in movement" in every respect. Because, is not the greatest enemy of the older person increasing isolation, an abyss that separates senior citizens from the rest of society? As long as we can stem this isolation, there is hope for leading a useful life during the additional years given to us. But society must accept this creativity and make possible its development.

Internet is likely to take on this role in the future, but in the meantime, we are in a position to see to it that the content of the additional years of life of our citizens is of the highest quality.

Experience must not go unused. Senior citizens deserve respect and are full citizens. Our society cannot look on them as a burden, but must see them as active citizens with a contribution to make to the development of society as a whole.

I would like to thank Aînés-Solidarité-Europe and the European Seniors' Union for their devoted efforts in this respect and I hope we will be seeing the recommendations made today put into practice.

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