

## **"Ehpads (nursing homes) during lockdown: heartbreak outside, anguish inside"**

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By Valérie Régnier, Head of Sant'Egidio in France

*TRIBUNE - The head of the Sant'Egidio community in France describes the ordeal of the residents of the Ehpads or nursing homes in France, who cannot receive visitors, and the torments imposed on their families. She calls for the elderly to no longer be separated from the rest of society.*

The generation that rebuilt our country after 1945 is paying the highest price for the pandemic. This is the second time in less than 20 years: in 2003, the heat wave caused the deaths of more than 15,000 seniors in three weeks. Today, up to a third of deaths occur in some old people's homes. The "Ehpads" (Residential homes for the dependent elderly) are once again proving to be fearsome snares. The evil that afflicts our elders is not new. These institutions are part of a social construct in which the imperative of efficiency means that the frail members of society are increasingly isolated. In normal times, their operation is obviously costly and thankless, and their respect for each person's dignity is questionable. In times of confinement, their inability to safeguard vulnerable lives has come out in the open.

Confinement has inevitably exacerbated the ordinary management of these nursing homes, which was already problematic. The lack of masks and protective gear for the staff providing day-to-day care, the shortage of tests to identify and isolate the sick among the caregivers and the residents has inevitably led to a disaster. The lack of communication and transparency did the rest by contributing to delays in decision-making. Our elderly lived through the same situation than the rest of us, only much, much worse. Under the pretext of not alarming family members, nor the associations and public opinion, the seriousness of the situation was denied, the number of deaths was concealed and, for a while, our elderly relatives who died in the nursing homes of Covid-19 were not even counted in the daily statistics. Retirement homes were locked down overnight, with no time to say goodbye.

Many have thought about taking their parents back home. But how can you transform yourself into a caregiver, an assistant, a nurse in such a short time? Above all, the retirement homes were locked up overnight, without any chance to say goodbye. Many have tried to return to see their relatives at least for a moment. But they were not allowed to do so. Very quickly, nothing was possible, not even a small hand wave through the gates. Outside the nursing homes, the heartbreak was deepening. Inside, the anguish spread. Being deprived of loved ones, no longer being visited by relatives, friends or volunteers, facing unfamiliar faces due to staff turnover: So many traumas that had to be faced in addition to the main enemy were fatal even before the virus.

### Alternatives to the nursing homes

How many of our elders chose to give up fighting, stopped eating and lost the will to live, gave themselves up in a great loneliness to a terrifying disease they knew nothing about? It's nobody's fault? Really? Are we not all to blame? Isn't it time to change our social model, time to do away with the real apartheid that nursing homes represent?

A society in which the blessing of a long life need not be cursed and end miserably is not hard to imagine. Alternatives to placement in nursing homes do exist. Co-housing meets the three basic needs of the elderly who have no money, family or home. Home assistance and, when necessary,

home hospitalization allow others to stay at home and be looked after. Finally, creative networks of solidarity and proximity, linking families, friends, neighbours, caretakers and shopkeepers at the local level, be it neighbourhood, street or building, are crucial, as the current crisis has made us rediscover. What is missing is the development of these resources and the necessary people to serve them. It is up to the State to support them. And this is also an emergency.

Yesterday's false assurances have collapsed. It's time for us to get back on our feet. We must learn to live differently. For, through all this misfortune, one thing has become clear: a society that lets its elderly die in this way has no future.