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EUROPE FILE

Communities Mobilize to Help Elderly Weather Coronavirus Crisis

From communications robots to food deliveries and moral support, people in Europe and the U.S. are acting to help vulnerable senior citizens

By Ruth Bender

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BERLIN—When Belgium banned visits to nursing homes in mid-March to shield residents from the new coronavirus, the co-founder of a robotics company had an idea.

Fabrice Goffin, co-chief executive of ZoraBots, had seen orders for the company’s humanoid robots plummet amid the spreading pandemic. The machines, he decided, could be used to help those now cut off from their families.

The robots, who respond to simple voice commands, can make video calls and connect even the least tech-savvy to their relatives in seconds. Within days of marketing the robots to nursing homes ZoraBot’s stock of 70 robots were reserved. Mr. Goffin is now bringing over 700 more from its Chinese manufacturer to lend to nursing homes all over Europe, free of charge.

“We have many people who face loneliness in retirement homes, it’s important they have a lot of communication,” said Ostend Mayor Bart Tommelein, who ordered two for the city-run nursing homes.



An elderly man in Ostend, Belgium, greeted a robot made by ZoraBots.

PHOTO: YVES HERMAN/REUTERS

Across the world, neighbors, charities and companies are stepping up to help the most vulnerable, often in a simpler, low-tech way—bringing them anything from food to psychological support.

Not only do the elderly face the highest mortality rates when infected with the coronavirus, the extreme confinement necessary to protect them increases their isolation. Studies conducted in China showed that 14.8% of people aged 80 or older and infected with the virus had died. The Italian National Health Service found the mortality rate for people above the age of 90 reached 19%.

In the U.S., an outbreak of the novel coronavirus at nine Seattle-area nursing homes led to 129 cases within 11 days. This prompted the White House to call on people to stay away from nursing homes and community centers to shut their doors, depriving many elderly of their usual support network.

“Right now, what is most essential is making sure everyone has enough food and medication,” said Judy Willig, executive director of Heights and Hills, a nonprofit supporting Brooklyn’s older adults. Over the past week, 500 new volunteers registered to help, she said.

Other initiatives across the U.S. and Europe range from supermarkets reserving shopping slots for older people, food programs delivering more meals at home, students and the unemployed offering to buy and deliver necessities and charities buying tablet computers to help families separated by confinement measures to stay in touch with older relatives.

Meals on Wheels America, which has partner programs across the U.S., has seen traffic quadruple on its online meals finder, said a company spokeswoman. The organization set up a Covid-19 response fund to help local programs purchase large quantities of shelf stable or frozen meals and to hire paid drivers and other suppliers to meet the growing demand for meal deliveries.



A Meals on Wheels volunteer observed social distancing on a visit this week to a senior citizen in Riverside, Calif.

PHOTO: WILL LESTER/ZUMA PRESS

In Germany—which has one of the world’s oldest populations and the fifth highest number of infections—soccer club 1. FC Nürnberg is sending staff to shop for older people.

Students in Romania, Spain and the U.S. are setting up food-delivery services. In Madrid, one of the hardest-hit cities of Spain, more than 7,400 volunteers registered on the launch day of a new internet platform to provide services for the elderly and other vulnerable groups, according to the regional government.

“We have cases of people living alone that don’t have food beyond today or tomorrow,” said Lola Ferre, who joined a mutual support network created only a few days ago in Barcelona’s Raval neighborhood.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What steps are people in your community taking to help the elderly? Join the conversation below.

Massimo Malara works with some 150 volunteers for Emergency, an NGO in Milan, Italy, delivering food and drugs to older people’s homes. Emergency said each morning they receive some 50 requests for help.

The city has launched “Milan Helps,” a hotline for the elderly and other vulnerable residents to help organize food and medicine deliveries during the coronavirus emergency. They have received around 750 calls since it was activated on March 12, a spokeswoman said. The city is now launching a service specifically dedicated to elderly who live in public housing, who will be called and monitored daily.

British psychotherapist Ruth Chaloner realized how hard being cut off from the world was when she decided to stay home because of a prior illness that had impacted her immune system.



A nursing home in Brighton, southern England.

PHOTO: GLYN KIRK/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

“We are herd animals,” Ms. Chaloner said. “Disconnection is probably the biggest danger besides the virus itself, especially for older people.” Research has shown that adults living alone are more likely to suffer from mental disorders, including anxiety and depression due to loneliness.

Ms. Chaloner set up a free online clinic offering 20-minute support sessions to the elderly and others in isolation. Over 140 therapists have already signed up to help in the service set to launch next week, she said.

In the U.S., Catholic Charities New Hampshire said it was working on getting residents tablets to keep in touch with their loved ones.

Visitor bans in nursing homes and assisted living facilities risked “doing more harm than good” by disconnecting residents from people who provide emotional support, feed and often monitor for signs of abuse and neglect, said Richard J. Mollot, executive director of the Long Term Care Community Group, a New-York-based nonprofit.

One complication is that programs such as Meals on Wheels have themselves often relied on people 55 and over as volunteers, now forcing them to adapt their recruitment programs, said a Meals on Wheels spokeswoman.



A woman wearing a mask and gloves walked past a Red Cross office in Oviedo, Spain.

PHOTO: ELOY ALONSO/REUTERS

In Spain, the Red Cross urged volunteers to be vigilant when helping so as not to undermine the necessary social distancing.

ZoraBots' Mr. Goffin, meanwhile, said he'd asked the Belgian and Chinese governments to help with the cost of transporting some 700 robots from China to Europe as shipping has become more expensive in recent weeks.

Other helpers struggle to reach those they feel are most in need and don't use social media, which are full of offers to help. In Germany, police have warned about criminals posing as helpers to target the elderly. And sometimes, even the elderly can be reluctant to accept help.

Pia Malet, a 91 year-old Parisian who lives alone, said she didn't want or need any help. Despite a nationwide lockdown, Ms. Malet still walks her dog four times a day and goes to buy steak at her local butcher.

"I'm not panicking," said Ms. Malet. "Growing up during the war, I've seen much worse and if this is how I'm supposed to go, then that's how it will be."

—*Xavier Fontdegloria and Giulia Petroni contributed to this article.*

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