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Sharjah: The First Arab Age-Friendly City

This article was contributed by The Executive Office Of Sharjah
Age Friendly City Program

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Sharjah is one of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The area covers 2,590 square kilometers (not counting islands). Sharjah dates back to more than 6,000 years and is known for its long history and rich culture. It boasts a diverse economy and, thanks to its strategic location and robust infrastructure, it attracts foreign investments and provides plenty of job opportunities.

Sharjah is ruled by His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, who assumed power on January 25, 1972. Sharjah has received several titles, including Cultural Capital of the Arab World 1998, the Middle East's first World Health Organization (WHO) Healthy City in 2015, Arab Tourism Capital 2015, and Capital of Arab Press 2016, as well as World Book Capital for 2019.

Sharjah's population reached 1,405,843 people in 2015. The number of people age 60+ stood at 34,503, representing 2.5 percent of the overall population. Based on its age structure, Sharjah is a young emirate; 24.2 percent of the population is children and teenagers (0-19 years) and 73.2 percent are youth and adults (20-59 years). However the number of older citizens of the emirate is expected to double over the next 17 years.

His Highness affirmed that Sharjah attaches the highest importance to human development and sustainable growth. He added that Sharjah has instituted plans that focus on the individual throughout the life stages, as individuals represent the society's real wealth and its most important investment.

His Highness has emphasized that over the past 30 years, Sharjah has adopted the "Serving the Human" plan, which takes care of social well-being. He points out that countries that endeavor to achieve a comprehensive, just, and sustainable development must pay sufficient attention to their citizens,

encourage social partnerships by all means, and take care of older people who have dedicated their precious years to society. Underlining the need to care for seniors, His Highness emphasized Sharjah's attention to senior citizens and their health by providing everyone above 60 years of age with free medical and social services.

Sheikh Salem bin Abdul Rahman Al Qasimi, Chairman of the Sharjah Ruler's Office and Head of the High Committee for Follow-up of Sharjah's Membership in the World Health Organization's Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (the Network), said Sharjah's joining the Network in September 2016 is yet another distinction in the emirate's record of global achievements. He noted that practices and services included in the program have already been implemented by Sharjah as part of its general policy for decades. He stressed that the emirate still leads the way in introducing innovative initiatives, suitable alternatives, and successful solutions to provide a decent life for all its residents.

Sharjah's membership in the Network aims to evaluate services, programs, and infrastructure of the emirate against the eight criteria mandated by the WHO. It confirms the emirate's commitment to the continuous improvement of its services to the community, particularly the older population, as well as to sustainable development.

It also aims to explore outstanding experiences and best practices of other member cities, given that it is the first Arab city to join the Network and therefore is an example for other cities in the Middle East.

As part of Sharjah's commitment to its membership, a decision was issued in February 2017 by the highest authority in the emirate, represented by His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah, to provide a comprehensive sustainable environment for residents in Sharjah, especially

the older adults, enabling them to easily access the emirate's resources.

Sharjah's vision of being an age-friendly emirate and an ideal environment for people of all ages requires continuously launching relevant programs and activities and working with older people based on the principles of equality, justice, and advocacy. A high committee was set up, composed of Sharjah government decision-makers, that seeks to achieve the above-mentioned vision through the following objectives:

- Developing services for older persons across all sectors and ensuring their sustainability
- Spreading community awareness to prepare for the demographic transformation of a rapidly aging population
- Enabling older people to engage in society and exchange experiences

Over the past few years, Sharjah has taken a series of measures to promote the community awareness objective. Furthermore, in preparation for the emirate's accession into the Network, several forums and meetings were held, such as the third Elderly Services Forum, in 2014, in preparation for implementing the criteria of age-friendly cities in Sharjah.

At a forum held in 2015, WHO introduced the Network, together with a number of the Network's member cities, such as Tokyo, Japan, and Bilbao, Spain. The 2016 forum sought to present best practices adopted by institutions in the emirate in the care and service of the older residents, according to the WHO's eight age-friendly domains.

The 2017 forum was organized in partnership with WHO in Geneva and included heads and representatives of

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government entities in Sharjah and the UAE, as well as other stakeholders in the society. More than 400 people attended, and the main objective of the forum was to review experiences, best initiatives, programs, and methods of development, and to learn more about international standards and ways of meeting them.

The two-day event saw the participation of representatives from France, China, the United States, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. The first day discussed the establishment of age-friendly environments and provided tools for creating better access to physical environments. It was divided into three sessions that outlined experiences related to external spaces, buildings, transportation, and housing.

The second day reviewed lessons that can be used in creating comprehensive social environments. Topics included health programs, long-term care, communication, information, and tools for social engagement of older persons, in addition to civil participation, employment, social integration programs, and eliminating discrimination based on age. The forum produced several recommendations, including the following priorities:

- Relying on field research and studies to observe views and needs of older persons
- Offering services to seniors through the combined efforts of government, private, and public benefit sectors, in addition to the older adults themselves, who are the real stakeholders

- Configuring cities in a manner that would make all ages feel welcome, allow participation opportunities for all, and encourage understanding and solidarity between generations
- Employing technology and innovation to develop practices that serve certain segments of society, particularly the older population

The many services provided by the government of Sharjah for senior care include a toll-free number for offering health and social counseling to older persons and receiving requests for home care services.

Also available are workshops for qualifying caregivers of older individuals by equipping them with the necessary skills. In 2017, three such workshops were held, qualifying 90 caregivers.

Home care services are also provided at the social, psychological, lifestyle, self-care, and health levels. Covering medication, nursing, physiotherapy, and medical tests, these services have benefited 2,979 individuals.

As part of the endeavors to meet the requirements of age-friendly cities, a strategic plan has been drawn up listing 40 strategic initiatives focused on the provision of age-friendly places, health programs for older persons, and laws that guarantee their rights, as well as day centers that provide health, recreation, sports, and social facilities for the older people in residential areas, ensuring their social integration.

Many of those initiatives have already been implemented, including the Mobile Clinic launched on April 26, 2017.

Equipped with an array of diagnostic aids, including X-ray, ultrasound, and laboratory devices, the clinic seeks to offer early diagnosis of chronic diseases and awareness to the public, together with the Mobile Dental Clinic. The Mobile Clinic made 14 rounds in nine areas of Sharjah through August 2017, extending its services to 71 older persons.

Additionally, the home nursing initiative was launched in July 2017, making it possible for older patients to be cared for at home free of charge. The initiative is aimed at enhancing patients' health and supporting their integration into their families, as well as sparing them the trouble of visiting health institutions. The service was provided for 11 older people as of August 2017.

A sports initiative for older persons was also introduced to encourage them to exercise and be part of society through various activities, such as chess and shooting competitions and marathons. Another initiative was launched to activate daily participation through (Al Asalah Clubs and physiotherapy centers) for seniors. As part of this initiative, 313 programs were implemented, benefiting 572 older individuals. ♦

AARP International engages global stakeholders to spark solutions that strengthen communities, protect the vulnerable and enable people around the world to pursue their goals and dreams. Working with governments, civil society and the private sector, we are focused on enhancing the quality of life for people as they age. We serve as the global voice for AARP, a social change organization with a membership of more than 37 million.

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