Research on Enhancing the Effectiveness of Community-Based Elderly Care Services in Dalian through the 'Five Community Linkage' Mechanism

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Abstract: With the acceleration of China's population ageing process, community-based elderly care has emerged as a vital model for addressing demographic pressures and enhancing the quality of life for older adults. The traditional government-led, single-service provision model is increasingly inadequate to meet the diverse and multi-tiered needs of the elderly. This paper employs the 'Five Community Linkage' framework to explore how innovating this mechanism can enhance the efficacy of community elderly care services in Dalian City. The article first analyses the current state of community-based elderly care services in Dalian and the preliminary implementation of the 'Five Community Linkage' initiative. It then delves into prominent issues within the existing mechanism, such as inadequate coordination, insufficient resource integration, shortages of professional personnel, and weak sustainability. Subsequently, it proposes targeted, systematic solutions, including establishing an integrated coordination platform, stimulating the vitality of diverse stakeholders, strengthening the development of professional talent pools, and improving the safeguards for sustainable development. Finally, the conclusion emphasises that innovating the 'Five Community Linkage' mechanism is crucial for overcoming bottlenecks in Dalian's community-based elderly care development. This holds significant theoretical and practical implications for establishing a high-quality community care system with distinctive Dalian characteristics.

Keywords: Five Community Linkage; Community-based elderly care; Service effectiveness

1. The Present Situation of Community Elderly Care Service in Dalian

Dalian ranks among China's earliest cities to enter an ageing society. According to the Seventh National Population Census, residents aged 60 and above constitute over 24% of Dalian's permanent population, presenting a severe ageing situation characterised by coexisting trends of advanced age, empty-nest households, and dependency. Confronted with substantial elderly care pressures, the Dalian Municipal Government prioritises developing community-based elderly care services, positioning it as a cornerstone of the 'Happy Dalian' initiative.
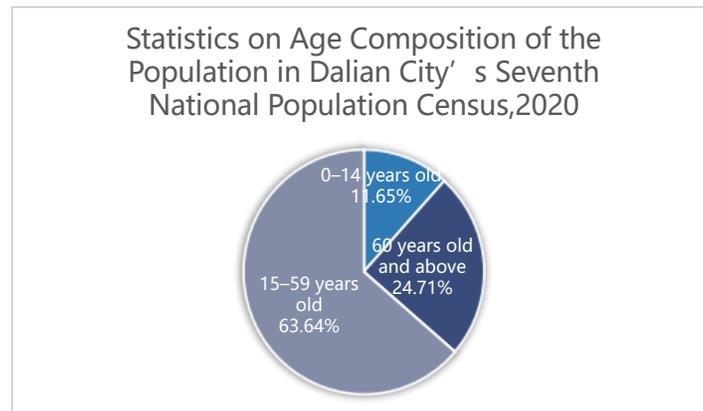
Figure 1. Age Structure of Dalian City's Seventh National Population Census

1.1. Preliminary Establishment of Community-Based Elderly Care Infrastructure

In recent years, through policy guidance and fiscal investment, Dalian City has preliminarily established an elderly care service system centred on home-based care, supported by community services, supplemented by institutional care, and integrating medical treatment with elderly care. A substantial number of community elderly care service centres (stations), day care centres, and senior canteens have been established across the city, providing basic services such as daily living assistance, rehabilitation care, and cultural activities for the elderly. These facilities form the physical infrastructure and foundational network for community-based elderly care services.

1.2. Initial Exploration and Practice of the 'Five Community Linkage' Mechanism

Under the guidance of national policy, Dalian has commenced practical exploration of the 'Five Community Linkage' mechanism. Community Level: Community residents' committees, serving as the core of grassroots governance, undertake substantial responsibilities including promoting elderly care policies, assessing service needs, and coordinating activities. They function as the pivotal hub and platform within the collaborative framework. Social Organisation Level: A cohort of specialised social organisations and enterprises dedicated to elderly care services has emerged. Through government procurement of services and other channels, they undertake community-based elderly care operational projects, delivering relatively professional care services.

2. Challenges in Implementing Dalian's 'Five Community Linkage' Mechanism for Community-Based Elderly Care

Despite the initial introduction of the 'Five Community Linkage' mechanism, its operational execution has yet to achieve organic integration among its constituent elements. Persistent issues such as inadequate coordination and suboptimal effectiveness continue to constrain the overall improvement of community elderly care service quality.

2.1. Ineffective Coordination Mechanism

The current implementation of Dalian's 'Five Community Linkage' initiative largely remains passive execution under administrative directives rather than proactive exploration grounded in shared objectives and intrinsic needs. Its strong administrative character manifests in community residents' committees serving as the core of collaboration. Burdened by heavy administrative workloads, these committees often perceive the initiative as a top-down task, lacking both the motivation and capacity for proactive resource integration. Collaboration predominantly occurs through meetings and documentation, lacking regular communication, coordination, and resource-sharing platforms. Responsibilities among stakeholders remain ambiguous. The roles and boundaries of community committees, social organisations, and social workers within elderly care services are unclear, frequently leading to service duplication or gaps. For instance, services

provided by social organisations may overlap with activities organised by the community itself, while the professional services of social workers fail to effectively connect with the daily care provided by volunteers.Inadequate resource integration, mismatch between service provision and elderly needs.

2.2. The resources of the 'Five-Community' have not been effectively mobilised and precisely allocated.

Resource fragmentation manifests as community venues, facilities, manpower, and funding being managed by disparate entities, lacking a unified database and coordination mechanism. This results in both resource underutilisation and shortages coexisting. Demand responses are imprecise, with service provision predominantly relying on one-size-fits-all universal services. There is insufficient insight into the personalised, specialised needs of diverse groups such as those with disabilities, partial disabilities, empty-nest seniors, and the elderly. Social organisations' service programmes are sometimes designed to meet contractual targets rather than stemming from thorough research into community elders' needs. Limited introduction of charitable resources, with inadequate mechanisms for leveraging and attracting social philanthropy. Donations from businesses and social forces are often one-off or temporary, failing to establish stable, sustainable support channels.

2.3. Professional service capabilities require enhancement

Specialist personnel are pivotal to improving service effectiveness, yet current capacity remains inadequate. The social work workforce is both understaffed and underqualified, with a severe shortage of professional geriatric social workers. Existing practitioners often juggle multiple roles, lacking sufficient specialised knowledge and skills training to deliver high-quality psychological counselling, rehabilitation guidance, crisis intervention, and similar services. The professionalism of social organisations varies considerably. Some elderly care service providers are small-scale and under-resourced, with staff possessing limited specialised expertise. Their services predominantly focus on basic daily care, making it challenging to deliver advanced services such as rehabilitation nursing or dementia care. Volunteer teams are unstable, with community volunteers predominantly comprising retired seniors. Their service capacity and availability are constrained, and high turnover rates persist. The absence of systematic training and effective incentive mechanisms undermines the sustainability of these services.

2.4. Weak resource sustainability

Currently, funding for community-based elderly care services in Dalian remains heavily reliant on municipal and district-level government allocations and welfare lottery public welfare funds, with social capital and charitable contributions accounting for a relatively small proportion. The short project cycles and unstable funding for government-procured services make it difficult for social organisations and operational institutions to undertake long-term planning and staff development. Many service programmes become unsustainable once government funding withdraws. Market mechanisms remain underdeveloped, failing to effectively explore a diversified cost-sharing model where 'the government subsidises a portion, society donates a portion, and individuals contribute a portion'. The consumption habits of elderly individuals and their families in purchasing services have yet to fully form, preventing the market from fully playing its decisive role in resource allocation.

3. Strategies for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Community-Based Elderly Care Services in Dalian through Innovation of the 'Five Community Linkage' Mechanism

To address the aforementioned issues, it is imperative to undertake systematic and comprehensive innovation of the existing 'five-sector linkage' mechanism, driving its transformation from being merely 'in place' to being genuinely 'effective'.

3.1. Establishing an Intelligent, Integrated 'Five Community Linkage' Operational Platform

Leveraging digital technology as the driving force to dismantle information silos and achieve efficient coordination. A municipal-level 'Smart Elderly Care' cloud platform shall be established, integrating data from departments including Civil Affairs, Health and Wellness, and Human Resources and Social Security. This will create a comprehensive database encompassing elderly residents' basic information, health records, service requirements, and service resources (facilities, personnel, infrastructure). The platform shall provide accessible interfaces to all entities within the 'Five-Community' framework. Implement online-offline coordinated dispatch: Elderly individuals may submit service requests via the platform or smart devices with a single click. The platform will intelligently match tasks to the nearest social organisation, social worker, or volunteer, while overseeing service delivery and evaluating quality to form a closed-loop management system. Develop a resource-matching network platform featuring dedicated sections for publishing and claiming charitable resources, enabling precise alignment between corporate donation intentions and community needs to enhance the efficiency of charitable resource utilisation.

3.2. Stimulating the Endogenous Momentum of Diverse Stakeholders

Clarify the responsibilities and authorities of all parties, strengthen the community hub function, and advance the de-administration reform of neighbourhood committees to genuinely shift their focus towards organising and serving the public. Grant communities greater autonomy in resource integration, enabling them to become proactive organisers and coordinators of the 'five-community linkage' initiative. Support the professional development of social organisations by establishing a transparent, equitable, and standardised long-term mechanism for government procurement of services. Prioritise support for reputable, capable professional social organisations specialising in elderly care. Implement incentive-based policies to encourage service and model innovation among social organisations. Promote the integration and leadership of social workers by establishing dedicated elderly social worker positions at each sub-district level, responsible for needs assessment, case management, resource linkage, and professional services. Social workers shall serve as the professional glue binding the 'Five Community Linkage' guiding and training community volunteers to elevate the overall professional calibre of the service workforce. Promote the regularisation and institutionalisation of volunteering by refining the implementation rules and mutual deposit/withdrawal mechanism of the 'time bank' system. Explore linking volunteer service records to points-based residency applications and credit evaluations to enhance the appeal and sustainability of volunteering.

3.3. Strengthening the Development of Professional Talent

Talent is the cornerstone of service quality. The government implements the Dalian Elderly Care Talent Revitalisation Programme, collaborating with local universities and vocational colleges to provide targeted training for professionals in elderly care management, nursing, social work, and rehabilitation therapy. Participants receive tuition fee reductions and employment subsidies. Establishing a Tiered Training Framework: Led by the Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau in conjunction with professional institutions, systematic and regular vocational skills and care knowledge training will be provided for community workers, social organisation practitioners, and volunteer leaders. A certification-based employment and tiered accreditation system will be implemented. Enhancing Practitioners' Remuneration and Social Standing: A remuneration system linked to service quality and professional competence will be established. Honours such as 'Gold Medal Care Worker' and 'Most Outstanding Elderly Social Worker' will be instituted to bolster professional recognition and attractiveness.

3.4. Enhancing the Safeguard System for Sustainable Development

Establish diversified funding mechanisms and market-oriented operational frameworks. Innovate funding procurement mechanisms: explore establishing the Dalian Community Elderly Care Services Foundation to broadly attract corporate, social and individual donations. Encourage the development of charitable trusts for elderly care and the issuance of

specialised elderly care bonds to expand long-term, stable funding sources. Deepening the Reform of Government Procurement of Services: Implement a 'service voucher' system, granting elderly individuals the autonomy to select service providers. This approach fosters market competition to drive service quality improvements. Cultivating the Elderly Services Consumer Market: Through targeted publicity and guidance, gradually shift the consumption mindset of elderly individuals and their families. Provide government subsidies for basic elderly care services, while encouraging families to purchase personalised and premium services at their own expense. This approach will foster a multi-tiered, sustainable industrial ecosystem.

4. Conclusion

In summary, confronting the increasingly severe challenge of an ageing population, the development of community-based elderly care services in Dalian has entered a critical phase of transformation and upgrading. The traditional, single-pronged administrative model has limited efficacy and struggles to meet the aspirations of the elderly in the new era for a fulfilling later life. Innovating the 'Five Community Linkage' mechanism is not only necessary but also urgent. This study contends that the fundamental pathway to enhancing the efficacy of Dalian's community-based elderly care services lies in achieving a profound transformation from loose coordination to organic integration among the 'Five-Community'. This requires: - Building smart platforms to resolve coordination challenges; - Clarifying role positioning to stimulate 'capacity of the actors'; - Strengthening talent pools to solidify the 'foundation of professionalism'; - Innovating safeguard mechanisms to ensure 'sustained momentum'. This constitutes a systemic endeavour demanding concerted, sustained efforts from governmental, market, and societal stakeholders. Moving forward, Dalian should boldly pioneer and courageously implement innovative approaches, forging a distinctive community-based elderly care pathway through the 'Five Community Linkage' model that embodies contemporary characteristics. Such an initiative will not only substantially enhance the sense of fulfilment, happiness, and security among the city's elderly population but also provide valuable insights for other ageing cities across China.

Funding

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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