

# POLICY REVIEW

## Seniors looking after one another

Guideline casts light on community care culture in rural nursing homes

By LI LEI

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On a recent afternoon, dozens of elderly farmers were playing chess in a courtyard awash with sunshine, a common scene at the Madongchuan Township Zhaotai Village Mutual Support Nursing Home.

Situated behind them was their dormitory — rows of cave dwellings, a unique form of residence in Yan'an, a hilly part of Northwest China's Shaanxi province.

There are no caregivers in sight. Instead, the residents look after one another at the self-service nursing facility, which was repurposed from a deserted primary school in Madongchuan township.

The younger ones grow cabbages and other vegetables in a small patch of land nearby. They cook outdoors using a shared kitchen, and the food is delivered to those with mobility issues. After meals, many play chess or chit-chat at their leisure.

Local authorities also hired a retired village doctor to oversee the facility so that the residents no longer have to travel to a nearby county for less severe health problems such as cold and fever.

"They were enjoying themselves in the moment, and leading rather independent lives," Zhao Liwen, secretary-general of Taikang Yicai Foundation, said of her first impression about the residents during a visit in 2019.

The Beijing-based charity donated 1 million yuan (\$139,000) to the nursing home to help expand its space a year earlier.

When she arrived, the seniors, all empty-nesters in their 80s and 90s who are either childless or have children working in big cities, huddled together to wrap dumplings in anticipation of Chinese New Year.

The scene was a sharp contrast from life in the area more than a decade ago. Village elders used to live lonely lives, scattered among the rugged terrain and unable to access hospitals and other public services.

Then in 2013, a flood washed their crumbling homes away, forcing them to move into the nursing facility.

"I have been working in the charity sector for some years, but the elderly people in Yan'an had left me with very deep impressions," Zhao said.

The nursing home in Yan'an is one of the best examples of China's ramped-up efforts to tap the strength of "relationship-based communities" in rural areas to ensure fast-graying residents are cared for.

Compared with a more transactional or rule-based society in urban areas, rural communities in China are known to operate through personal connections and mutual trust.

The self-sufficient, interdependent culture embodied by the nursing home is being bolstered by authorities to cope with aging in the countryside, a decades-long issue that has been exacerbated by an exodus of younger residents.

### Resolving shortage

In a recent document issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and 11 other central government organs, authorities are looking to older adults to care for even older ones in rural areas to address a nationwide shortage of caregivers.

While briefing reporters about the guideline late last month, Li Yongxin, deputy director of the ministry's elder care service department, said the department is working to entice younger retirees and others with the "strength and willingness" to work as caregivers, start related businesses and offer voluntary services in the countryside.

"Working in the sector requires both professional precision and compassionate warmth," Li said, adding that it is a respectable profession that helps ease social and family burdens.

In rural areas, older people usually rely on family members for care because commercial services are either scarce or unaffordable.

However, the age-old arrangement is facing challenges as younger people have left rural hometowns for better paid jobs in coastal areas.



SHI YU / CHINA DAILY

Despite recent government efforts to vitalize rural areas and create jobs in the countryside, more than 176 million rural workers left home to find jobs elsewhere last year, a year-on-year increase of 2.7 percent.

The mass migration creates large numbers of so-called left-behind seniors and empty-nesters in need of socialized care services.

Zhao, the secretary-general of Taikang Yicai, said rural areas may lag in terms of economic prosperity, but their closely-knit communities may lend them some strength when it comes to elder care.

The success of the nursing home in Madongchuan, she said, was partly because the project has mobilized local human resources that would otherwise have been overlooked.

Rather than relying on caregivers from outside the village, the approach is more economically sustainable.

Zhao said her foundation is working with a local university and authorities in Yan'an to find out if the project can be replicated in other hollowed-out villages.

"We're eager to see if the model can function in the formerly impoverished places without much government funding," she said.

### Cafeteria program

Another area harnessing the familial atmosphere of rural communities to care for seniors can be found in Yangxi village in the southern part of Gansu province, which was home to

some of the country's most intractable poverty. Jing Lizhong, a social worker, witnessed firsthand how a nonprofit cafeteria had greatly improved the health of local empty-nesters and offered seniors an area where they can gather for fun or receive services such as haircuts or blood pressure checks.

Jing, who works with a charity in Gansu, was first brought to Yangxi by a project to promote drip irrigation technology and expand the profit margin of local apple farmers. During his stay, the 35-year-old was stunned by how older people there make do with instant noodles and other convenient foods.

"There's a type of dried food called 'lazy-bones noodles'. When it comes to meal time, seniors would boil the noodles, serve them in sour soup and make do with it," he said. Over time, such food began taking a toll on the elderly people's health.

"Some say they do not even have the strength to walk around," Jing said. In 2022, a cafeteria was built in the village as part of a charity project called Amity Papa and Mama's Canteen. The project was initiated by the Amity Foundation and Alibaba Philanthropy in 2014 and now has more than 200 cafeterias in 28 provincial-level jurisdictions.

For just 2 yuan, older villagers can have a proper lunch in Yangxi, enjoying foods such as steamed buns, braised chicken legs and deep-fried pancakes, and the menu changes daily. The program covers the bulk of the meal costs.

The program was launched with an investment deemed modest by even local standards.

The construction of the more than 100-square-meter facility cost just 100,000 yuan because many younger farmers came back from urban factories and contributed labor.

Elderly farmers known for their culinary skills were recruited to cook there, and they were happy to accept the positions because even though the pay was low, they wouldn't have to venture out of the village to find jobs.

Voluntary services offered by the diners helped mitigate the need to hire sanitary workers and administration staff.

"The village's older people's committee created a duty roster to do the cleaning after lunch," Jing said.

Over the past two years, the cafeteria has morphed into a complex where older people can get haircuts free-of-charge, which are given by their peers. This has saved them the trouble of visiting a nearby county for the service, because the village had no barbershop.

They can also get their blood pressure tested with equipment stored at the cafeteria.

When someone passes away, the facility becomes a makeshift memorial hall, where villagers can pay their respects to their deceased neighbors.

"When some older people miss a meal or two, others call their children or make house calls to make sure no accidents have happened," Jing said.

### Policy Digest

#### Rules rolled out on export of second-hand vehicles

The Ministry of Commerce, together with four other central government bodies, said in a notice that they have decided to allow all regions in the country to engage in the second-hand automobile export industry. Specific requirements and procedures to standardize the export of second-hand vehicles were also released.

China picked 10 provinces and cities in 2019 as the first in the country to conduct such business. The country added more provinces and cities to the list in the following years.

The second-hand automobile export industry has helped stabilize and improve China's foreign trade, the notice said.

The notice required local authorities to set up their own special work mechanisms to ensure the healthy and sustainable development of the second-hand automobile export industry, asking them to focus on ensuring the quality of the automobiles exported and orderly operations, and to prevent excessive competition.

Companies should obtain third-party reports showing that their exports of second-hand automobiles meet China's quality requirements, the notice said, adding that if import countries have their own standards for second-hand automobile imports, the companies should also make sure that their products meet these standards.

#### Nation seeks to expand its waste recycling system

The country aims to set up a waste recycling system covering all sectors and a resource recycling industry with an annual output of 5 trillion yuan (\$695 billion) by 2025.

According to a guideline issued by the General Office of the State Council, the country's annual utilization of bulky solid waste, such as tailings, fly ash, coal gangue, slag, byproduct gypsum, construction waste and crop straw, should reach 4 billion metric tons by that year.

In addition, its annual utilization of scrapped steel, iron, copper, aluminum, lead, zinc, paper, plastic, rubber and glass should reach 450 million metric tons by then, the guideline said.

By 2030, China should have a waste recycling system that is comprehensive, highly efficient and orderly, where all kinds of waste are fully exploited, according to the guideline.

#### 7 ski and tourist resorts get national designation

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the General Administration of Sport designated a third batch of national ski and tourist resorts earlier this month.

The seven resorts are located in the provinces of Shanxi, Jilin, Heilongjiang and Gansu and the Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang Uygur autonomous regions.

In an attempt to promote the ice-and-snow economy, the ministry and the administration issued a notice in September, encouraging provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities across the country to recommend local ski resorts as candidates for national ski and tourist resorts.

To date, the two departments have granted national designation to 26 ski and tourist resorts.

WANG QINGYUN

## Authorities removing obstacles for would-be caregivers

By LI LEI

Authorities have moved to remove many obstacles for workers who want to become caregivers to address a shortage in the number of people looking after the elderly.

Among the obstacles targets are age limits, education requirements and restrictions related to *hukou*, or household registration status, officials said last month, citing the "strong, practical nature" of caregiving.

The change was spelled out in a recent guideline issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and 11 other central government organs. The new rules have technically opened up the sector to lesser-trained out-of-town workers who have surpassed legal retirement age.

In China, male workers generally retire at age 60, and female workers at age 55. Both

can retire even earlier if they work manual labor jobs.

While briefing reporters about the guideline late last month, Li Yongxin, deputy director of the ministry's elder care service department, vowed more vocational training would be offered to equip potential caregivers with necessary skills.

Officials are also working on an eight-tier professional title system to grade capable workers, similar to one that exists for white-collar workers, he said.

"The accreditation will serve as an important reference to determine their pay," Li said.

Despite caregiving often involving tasks such as changing urine-tainted sheets and helping those with mobility issues bathe, such workers tend to be underpaid and have to work overtime.

The lack of a certification system for pro-

fessional skills meant there was no basis for promotions or pay raises, creating problems for employers willing to pay more to hire more skilled workers.

As a result, most of the posts are taken by middle-aged women from rural areas who work under short-term, informal conditions in cities to help out with family expenses.

"Many are unlikely to work in cities in the long run because social security protection for out-of-town workers is scarce," said Fang Jiakou, who owns a nursing home in Tianjin.

In 1995, Fang bought a disused hospital in the city and turned it into a nursing home. The 68-year-old was among the first to promote eight-hour workdays in the sector, which is notorious for grueling working hours because many elderly people require around-the-clock care.

Fang said for-profit nursing homes usually

maximize their profit margins by exploiting caregivers and forcing them to work long hours.

"I embraced the eight-hour workday when I entered the sector, not only for those office workers but also for those changing sheets for disabled elderly people. That has won me a lot of support from my employees."

China's 30 million caregivers, according to the Ministry of Commerce, is 20 million shy of actual market demand.

Earlier this month, the National Bureau of Statistics disclosed fresh population data, which showed that nearly 300 million people, or 21 percent of the population, were age 60 or older by the end of last year. That is almost 90 million more than a decade ago.

A 2015 nationwide survey found that China had more than 40 million disabled or

semi-disabled people who needed intensive care. Experts estimate that number could surpass 77 million by 2030.

The demand for care is still higher for some of China's wealthiest cities, such as Shanghai, where authorities said recently that 36 percent of its permanent residents were age 60 or older by the end of 2022.

Meanwhile, the country's working age population, defined as those between age 16 and 59, was 864 million last year, down from 915 million in 2014, it said.

About 20 million Chinese retire every year. In particular, those born in the 1960s have begun to depart the workforce in large numbers in recent years, according to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security.

Under the current legal framework, the retirees have problems opening social security accounts or signing formal employment contracts with their employers due to age restrictions, leaving them vulnerable to labor abuse.