

# The Current Situation of Accessibility of Community-based Home Care Services for the Elderly in Rural Areas in the Background of Rural Revitalization

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the issue of accessibility of rural community-based home-based elderly care services in the background of rural revitalization. The article reviews domestic and foreign experiences, analyzes the current situation and problems, discusses the opportunities and challenges faced, and summarizes the innovative practical paths for enhancing accessibility in China at present. The aim is to provide references for future research on the accessibility of rural community-based home-based elderly care services, and to offer theoretical support for improving the elderly care system and promoting rural revitalization.

**Keywords:** Rural revitalization; Rural community; Home-based elderly care; Service accessibility

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## 1. Introduction

The “14th Five-Year Plan” and the Outline of Long-Range Objectives through the Year 2035 clearly state that the difficulties in addressing the issue of elderly care in China are concentrated in rural areas. The data from the seventh national census shows that the elderly population aged 60 and above in rural areas accounts for 23.81% of the total rural population, indicating a much higher degree of aging than that in urban areas. This is the result of the combined effects of the urban-rural dual structure, the acceleration of urbanization, and the family planning policy<sup>[1]</sup>. A large number of rural young and middle-aged laborers have flocked to cities, resulting in an unbalanced rural population structure, a significant trend of small family size, the empty nest phenomenon, and traditional family-based elderly care models facing severe challenges. The lack of care for the elderly due to children’s migration to cities makes it difficult to meet their living and spiritual needs, and they also struggle to bear the responsibility of elderly care in terms of economy and energy. The development of institutional elderly

care in rural areas lags behind, with problems such as high costs, poor facilities, and uneven service quality. This limits its popularization. In contrast, home-based elderly care has become the mainstream choice in rural areas due to its familiarity with the environment, the ability to maintain family ties, and lower costs. However, the geographical dispersion, inconvenient transportation, and scarce resources in rural areas severely restrict the accessibility of home-based elderly care services, affecting the quality of life of the elderly and hindering the development of the elderly care industry. Therefore, solving this problem is of great significance for improving the elderly care system <sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2. Concept analysis**

### **2.1. Accessibility of home-based elderly care services**

Accessibility is a key indicator for evaluating the quality of home-based elderly care services in rural communities, covering four dimensions: physical, economic, information, and cultural. Physical accessibility focuses on the spatial layout of service facilities and the convenience of transportation. In rural areas, which are vast and villages are scattered, if service facilities are concentrated in the town centers or a few villages, elderly people in remote areas will have difficulty accessing services due to long distances and inconvenient transportation. Economic accessibility refers to the matching degree between service prices and the payment capabilities of the elderly. Rural elderly people mainly rely on pensions, children's support, and a small amount of savings for their income. If service prices are too high, they will be unable to enjoy the services. Information accessibility emphasizes the transparency of service information and the smoothness of access channels. Rural information dissemination channels are limited, making it difficult for the elderly to obtain information on elderly care services. They have insufficient understanding of the content, methods, and institutions of the services and are unable to effectively utilize the service resources. Cultural accessibility focuses on the compatibility of service content with rural traditional culture. Rural areas have unique cultural traditions and customs, and elderly care services should respect and integrate these cultures to avoid conflicts with the values of the elderly. Services should adopt service methods and communication languages that are in line with the characteristics of rural culture to enhance the acceptability of the services <sup>[3]</sup>.

### **2.2. Rural community-based home-based elderly care services**

Internationally, rural community-based home-based elderly care services have been deeply influenced by the concept of "community care" in the UK <sup>[4]</sup>. This concept was proposed by the UK in the 1950s, with the core being to enable the elderly to receive care in the community and family environment. It integrates informal support, such as family, neighbors, and volunteers, with formal services such as government public services and professional elderly care institutions to build a service network covering various aspects, including daily care, medical care, and spiritual comfort, emphasizing the autonomy and participation of the elderly. In China, the concept of rural community-based home-based elderly care services has developed based on the "9073" elderly care pattern <sup>[5]</sup>. China has constructed an elderly care service system based on family as the foundation, community as the support, institutions as the supplement, and integration of medical care and elderly care. The policy-driven feature is prominent. Various regions have explored characteristic service models based on their own actual conditions, such as renovating idle collective buildings into elderly care service centers and building elderly care service information platforms through internet technology.

### **3. The current accessibility of home-based elderly care services in rural communities**

#### **3.1. Experiences from foreign countries**

##### **3.1.1. Japanese model**

Japan has established a comprehensive community-based elderly care service network <sup>[6]</sup>. Community elderly care service centers collaborate closely with surrounding medical institutions to provide medical assistance and health management services for the elderly. The community elderly care service center in Shimogamo Ward, Tokyo Metropolis, is equipped with professional medical staff and facilities, and can offer services such as daily health checks and disease diagnosis, and treatment. Japan attaches great importance to the training of elderly care professionals and has established a strict training and assessment system. It also attracts social forces to participate through policies such as financial subsidies and tax incentives to enhance the accessibility of services.

##### **3.1.2. American model**

In the rural communities of the United States, personalized and market-oriented home-based elderly care services are prominent. Through the establishment of information platforms for elderly care services by leveraging information technology, the elderly can conveniently inquire about and select service items. In some rural areas of California, elderly care institutions utilize telemedicine technology to provide medical consultation and diagnosis services for the elderly. The US government encourages enterprises and social organizations to participate in the elderly care service market, forming a diversified supply pattern, and ensuring the quality of services and the rights and interests of the elderly <sup>[7]</sup>.

##### **3.1.3. German “multi-generational house” mode**

German “Multi-generational Houses” are built within communities, facilitating intergenerational communication and mutual assistance <sup>[8]</sup>. In rural areas, “Multi-generational Houses” gather residents of different age groups to carry out cultural, recreational, and mutual assistance activities. Young people and children provide companionship and assistance to the elderly, while the elderly impart experience and skills. This model integrates rural human resources, promotes intergenerational harmony, enriches the social and spiritual cultural life of the elderly, enhances service accessibility, and has reference significance for rural communities in China that retain good traditional culture and have close neighborhood relations.

##### **3.1.4. The “time bank” model in the Netherlands**

In the Netherlands, the “time bank” initiative encourages residents to engage in volunteer work and records the service hours for the purpose of exchanging them for services needed by oneself <sup>[9]</sup>. In rural communities, younger and healthy elderly people provide services such as daily care and companionship to elderly people with disabilities or those in poor health and store their time. This model mobilizes internal human resources within the community, reduces the cost of elderly care services, improves the accessibility and sustainability of services, and rural communities in China can refer to establishing a localized mutual assistance elderly care time savings mechanism.

#### **3.2. Domestic practical experience**

##### **3.2.1. Zhejiang province model**

Zhejiang Province integrates resources to build regional home-based elderly care service centers, providing

large-scale and specialized services for the elderly in surrounding villages. The home-based elderly care service center in Tonglu County of Hangzhou integrates multiple functions and offers services such as daily care, cultural and entertainment activities, and rehabilitation care. Zhejiang vigorously promotes the “Internet + Elderly Care” model and develops elderly care apps <sup>[10]</sup>. Elderly people can obtain services by placing orders through mobile phones, which has enhanced the service supply capacity and solved the accessibility problem of services.

### **3.2.2. Chongqing model**

Chongqing, considering the vast rural areas and scattered population, has launched the “mutual assistance elderly care” model <sup>[11]</sup>. In rural communities, mutual assistance elderly care points are established, and younger and healthier elderly people help elderly people with disabilities and the elderly in need. Volunteers at the mutual assistance elderly care point in Wuxi County provide services such as meal delivery and companionship for elderly people in the surrounding areas. Chongqing also strengthens the construction of rural elderly care talent teams and enhances the ability of service personnel through training to ensure service quality.

### **3.2.3. Shenzhen Taoyuan community model**

The Shenzhen Taoyuan Community organizes and coordinates medical institutions, volunteer teams, and social organizations to provide diversified services for the elderly. The community cooperates with nearby hospitals to establish a regular home-based health check-up mechanism and provide basic medical services; organizes volunteers to provide companionship, household assistance, etc. for elderly people living alone; and conducts rich cultural activities to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the elderly. This model fully leverages the role of the community as a hub, precisely connecting service resources with the needs of the elderly, and enhancing the accessibility and comprehensiveness of services <sup>[12]</sup>.

## **3.3. Problems and lessons learned in practice**

The cost of elderly care services in some European and American countries is extremely high, making it unaffordable for low-income rural elderly people. Moreover, there are problems such as a shortage of service personnel and difficulty in guaranteeing service quality. China cannot simply copy this high-cost model. Instead, it should explore a low-cost and high-efficiency elderly care service model suitable for rural areas. In some domestic regions, there is a phenomenon of idle service facilities. Some rural communities blindly build high-standard elderly care facilities without conducting demand research or effective operation management. In the promotion of the “Internet + Elderly Care” model, some elderly people have low acceptance of information technology, which affects the accessibility of services. Therefore, before building elderly care facilities, it is necessary to conduct thorough demand research, strengthen the training of information technology for the elderly, and actively explore diversified service supply methods.

## **4. Opportunities and challenges of accessibility to rural community-based home-based elderly care services in the background of rural revitalization**

### **4.1. New opportunities**

#### **4.1.1. Policy support**

The national and local governments have introduced supportive policies and increased financial investment.



Guangdong Province has set up a special fund for the development of rural elderly care services, which is used to build rural community elderly care facilities <sup>[15]</sup>. In the rural communities of Zengcheng District, Guangzhou City, the community has built a fully functional day care center with the help of funds, improving the service hardware conditions and enhancing the accessibility of services <sup>[16]</sup>. The Ministry of Finance has provided tax exemptions and other policies to enterprises and social organizations participating in rural community home-based elderly care services, attracting social forces to participate and enhancing the accessibility of services <sup>[17]</sup>.

#### **4.1.2. Resource integration and utilization**

Rural infrastructure improvement driven by rural revitalization. In Changsha City, Ningxiang County, Hunan Province, efforts are being made to promote the construction of “Four Good Rural Roads” <sup>[18]</sup>. In the village of Guiyangang Town, a new road has been built, which has shortened the travel time for the elderly to reach the rural elderly care service centers and enhanced the accessibility of services. In Jianli County, Jingzhou City, Hubei Province, the rural network coverage has been improved, and a “smart elderly care service information system” has been established to achieve precise matching of service demands and supply, thereby enhancing the accessibility of services <sup>[19]</sup>. In Xichuan County, Nanyang City, Henan Province, some township health centers have collaborated with rural community-based elderly care service centers to provide services such as health check-ups and chronic disease management for the elderly, thereby improving the comprehensiveness and accessibility of services <sup>[20]</sup>.

#### **4.1.3. Industrial development**

The development of emerging industries such as rural tourism has increased the income of rural residents and enhanced the consumption capacity of the elderly for elderly care services. In Yangshuo County, Guilin City, Guangxi Province, rural tourism has been developed, resulting in an increase in the income of rural residents and an improvement in the affordability of elderly care services for the elderly <sup>[13]</sup>. In some areas, tourism projects for elderly care have been developed based on rural tourism resources. For instance, Wuyuan County in Shangrao City, Jiangxi Province, has built a base for elderly care tourism, enriching the content of elderly care services and meeting the diverse needs of the elderly <sup>[21]</sup>.

### **4.2. New challenges**

#### **4.2.1. Geographical and economic constraints**

The rural areas are vast, and the population is scattered. Remote mountainous areas have complex geographical environments and poor transportation, making it costly to build elderly care facilities and making it difficult for service personnel to reach the service destinations. In some mountainous villages of Meigu County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, the single journey service time for service personnel is too long, which limits the accessibility of services. The economic development in rural areas is uneven. Some economically underdeveloped areas lack funds for the construction and operation of elderly care facilities. For instance, in Dafang County, Bijie City, Guizhou Province, the development of community elderly care services in rural areas lags behind, making it difficult to meet the diverse needs of the elderly and greatly affecting the quality and accessibility of elderly care services in rural communities <sup>[22]</sup>.

### **4.2.2. Supply and demand discrepancy**

The demands of the elderly population in rural areas are increasingly diverse and personalized, with an increase in demands for rehabilitation care, spiritual culture, psychological counseling, etc. However, the current content of community-based home-based elderly care services in rural areas is relatively monotonous, mainly focusing on daily life care. In rural communities in Guangdong Province, there are difficulties in meeting the spiritual culture service demands of young and healthy elderly people, as well as the rehabilitation care service demands of the elderly who are old and disabled. Moreover, the existing service models are unable to precisely match the demands, which affects the acceptability and adaptability of the services <sup>[23]</sup>.

### **4.2.3. Imperfect service system**

There are shortcomings in the rural home-based elderly care service system, and the service quality lacks unified standards and norms. In some rural elderly care service institutions in Qixingguan District, Bijie City, Guizhou Province, the operation of nursing services is not standardized, which affects the trust and satisfaction of the elderly regarding the services and reduces the acceptability of the services <sup>[24]</sup>. There is a shortage of professional talent in rural elderly care services in this area. The service personnel are mostly local villagers, lacking professional training, and they have poor working conditions and low salaries, making it difficult to attract and retain professional talent. In rural areas of Guangdong Province, the professional capabilities of elderly care service personnel are insufficient, and the quality of services is not high, which affects the accessibility and quality of services and restricts the availability and acceptability of services <sup>[25]</sup>.

## **5. Strategies for enhancing accessibility of rural community-based home-based elderly care services in the background of rural revitalization**

**Strengthening the policy support system:** Increase fiscal investment to provide financial support for the construction of elderly care service centers in rural communities <sup>[14]</sup>. Improve policy incentives, expand the scope of tax incentives, clarify land use policies, and attract social forces to participate. **Scientific planning and assessment:** Each region should formulate elderly care service plans based on its actual conditions and conduct regular assessments and adjustments.

**Optimizing resource allocation:** Strengthen infrastructure construction, improve transportation and information conditions in remote areas, and enhance the accessibility and availability of services. Promote resource integration, promote the medical-nursing combination model, and improve the comprehensiveness of services.

**Enriching service contents:** Expand professional services, introduce professional institutions such as rehabilitation care and psychological counseling, and enhance the acceptability of services. Meet individualized needs, establish a demand assessment mechanism, and provide precise services for different elderly groups.

**Improving service quality:** Establish a quality standard system, clarify service norms. Strengthen supervision and management, establish supervision teams, establish a blacklist system, and punish violations. Encourage service institutions to introduce advanced concepts and technologies, and strengthen service quality publicity.

**Enhancing talent cultivation:** Train professional talents, encourage universities to offer elderly care-related majors, and strengthen cooperation with rural service institutions. Improve the quality of existing personnel, increase training investment, and adopt a combination of online and offline methods to enhance the capabilities

of service personnel. Improve remuneration and status, establish a reasonable salary system, and carry out selection and commendation activities to attract and retain talent.

## 6. Conclusion

Against the background of intensified population aging and severe rural elderly care issues, rural community-based home-based elderly care services are important measures to address rural elderly care challenges. Currently, there are many problems with the accessibility of rural community-based home-based elderly care services. The rural revitalization strategy brings opportunities while also presenting challenges. To enhance the accessibility of rural community-based home-based elderly care services, strategies can be improved in terms of strengthening policy support, optimizing resource allocation, enriching service contents, improving service quality, and enhancing talent cultivation. In the future, through the collaborative efforts of the government, society, and enterprises, continuous exploration and innovation of service models are expected to significantly improve the accessibility of rural community-based home-based elderly care services, better meet the elderly care needs of rural residents, enhance their quality of life and happiness, and contribute to the comprehensive realization of the rural revitalization strategy.

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## Author contributions

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