

Research on the Construction of Social Service System for the Elderly in Urban and Rural Areas

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Abstract: At the beginning of 2023, the news of delayed retirement sparked heated discussions. The main reason behind this is that the degree of aging in China has further aggravated, making the construction of the elderly service system an important task for social development. In this context, this paper takes Zibo City, Shandong Province, where the aging phenomenon is prominent, as the research area. The current situation and problems in the construction and development of the social service system for the elderly in the city were compared through on-site investigation and literature review, corresponding countermeasures and suggestions are put forward in response to the aging population to build an aging society where wealth and prosperity are shared.

Keywords: Service system for the elderly; Aging society

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1. Introduction

Aging is a common phenomenon in the entire human society^[1]. Therefore, elderly care is an important social issue and also a major issue that needs to be studied in social governance.

The 14th Five-Year Plan period is an important window period for the transformation of China's aging society. The Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Party made a long-term plan for the pension issue during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, emphasizing the great significance to highlight the importance of "promoting the coordinated development of the pension industry and improving the construction of the basic pension service system."

2. Population aging status and development trend

2.1. The elderly base population is large, and the growth rate is too fast

Our country is at a critical turning point in population development. Understanding the trend and characteristics of the changes in our population are crucial to improving the elderly care service system and actively responding to the aging population. Taking Zibo City, Shandong Province as an example, Shandong Province is the province with the largest elderly population in the country. The province's elderly population aged 60 and over reached 21.51 million, accounting for 21.15% of the overall population; the elderly population aged 65 and over reached 16.1938 million, accounting for 15.92%; the proportions of the elderly population aged 60 and 65 were 2.25% and 1.72% higher than that of the whole country respectively, showing the characteristics of large base population and fast growth (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Population Aging in Shandong Province

Year	Population aged 60 and over	Proportion of population aged 60 and over	Elderly population aged 65 and over	Proportion of population aged 65 and over
2010 Sixth Census	1413.1	14.75%	942.98	9.84%
2020 Seventh Census	2122.1	20.90%	1536.4	15.13%

Note: Data from the sixth and seventh censuses and the “14th Five-Year Plan” development plan for the elderly in Shandong Province.

According to the statistical results of the Seventh Census of Zibo City, the resident population of Zibo City was 4,704,138 in 2020, compared to 4,530,597 in the sixth census in 2010, which is a total increase of 173,541 people in 10 years, or an increase of 3.83%. The average annual growth rate is 0.38%, of which, among the population of Zibo City, the population aged 0–14 is 700,495, accounting for 14.89%; the population aged 15–59 is 2,910,484, accounting for 61.87%; and the population over 60 is 1,093,159, accounting for 23.24%, of which the population of 65 years old and over was 775,957, accounting for 16.50%. Compared with the Sixth Census in 2010, the proportion of the population aged 60 and above increased by 8.24%, and the proportion of the population aged 65 and above increased by 6.84% ^[2] (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Age composition of the city’s population in 2020

Age	Population (person)	Proportion (%)
0–14 years old	700,495	14.89
15–59 years old	2,910,484	61.87
60 and over	1,093,159	23.24
65 years old and over	775,957	16.50
Total	4704138	100

Among the 11 districts and counties in Zibo City, there were 9 districts and counties where the proportion of the elderly population aged 65 and above exceeded 14%.

Based on **Table 3**, it is clear that Zibo City has a higher population of elderly than the national average, and the elderly population is growing rapidly. Therefore, the problem of aging has become an important issue affecting the economic and social development of Zibo City. Especially in recent years, the characteristics of a large elderly population, rapid increase of elderly population, and empty nests have become increasingly obvious. The social burden is heavy, and the demand for social services for the elderly is large.

Table 3. Population age composition in districts and counties in 2020

District	Proportion of total population (%)			
	0–14 years old	15–59 years old	60 years old and over	65 years old and over
Citywide	14.89	61.87	23.24	16.50
Zichuan District	13.76	61.21	25.03	17.70
Zhangdian District	16.85	65.74	17.41	11.97
Boshan District	11.86	59.12	29.02	20.17
Linzi District	14.55	61.54	23.91	17.47
Zhoucun District	13.49	65.21	21.30	15.04
Huantai County	14.35	60.06	25.60	19.11
Gaoqing County	14.76	58.74	26.49	20.18
Yiyuan County	15.53	58.97	25.50	17.15
High-tech Zone	18.63	64.37	17.00	11.45
Economic Development Zone	15.75	63.48	20.76	14.56
Wenchang Lake District	13.63	57.39	28.98	21.07

2.2. Unbalanced development of aging regions

The uneven regional development of aging is not only manifested in the uneven development between regions, but also in the uneven development of urban and rural areas of the same region. Due to differences in economic development conditions and population development policies, the number and aging rate in rural areas is higher than the urban areas of the region, and the phenomenon of urban-rural inversion is serious. In terms of material planning and policy formulation, there are differences between rural and urban areas, which makes the aging problem in rural areas more serious.

3. The status of the social service system for the elderly

3.1. The government leads, the society participates, and the public cares

As our country's aging problem is getting worse, the state has introduced a series of systems and policies to provide top-level design for the elderly care service system. For example, elderly care service system was included in the 13th Five-Year Plan and 14th Five-Year Plan, providing a strong institutional guarantee for China's effective response to the aging situation [3]. At the same time, the government has also taken elderly care services as an important direction for the development of social undertakings and have continuously incorporated them into the overall plan for national economic and social development and various special plans.

3.2. Based on the legal system, a preliminary social service system for the elderly was formed

The law is an important tool for governing a country, and good laws are the prerequisite for good governance. Since the implementation of the "Suggestions of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of the Elderly Care Service Industry", various regions have established or improved local regulations according to local conditions. For example, Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Zhejiang, Ningxia, and other places reviewed and passed local regulations to promote the development of the elderly care service industry; Shandong, Hunan, Shaanxi, and other places have formulated or revised their regulations on the protection of the rights and interests of the elderly; Shanghai and Hainan formulated new regulations on the management of elderly care institutions. In our country, the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly" was formed as the fundamental basis, with local laws and regulations as the backbone, and "Suggestions of the State Council on Accelerating the

Development of the Elderly Service Industry” and other normative documents are the regulations and policy systems for the protection of the rights and interests of the elderly and the development of the elderly care service industry. These regulations and policies cover various aspects such as elderly care, medical care, and judicial protection, and have laid a solid institutional foundation for the construction and development of China’s aging social service system.

3.3. Promoting community elderly care services

Our country defines the socialized pension model suitable for the national conditions as community pension. Community pension developed from social pension and family pension. It takes the family as the core and relies on the community. Institutional elderly care services are introduced into the community, including day care, life care, housekeeping services, and mental care for the elderly, with the idea of home-based elderly care service system with community entrustment ^[4]. Local governments have vigorously promoted this elderly care model and modified several preferential policies to support the construction of home-based elderly care, which solved the difficulties of some elderly people. All regions have explored the community elderly care model, carried out pilot exploration, actively summarized the reform experience that can be replicated and promoted, and set an example for the development of the elderly service industry.

4. Problems existing in the operation of the social service system for the elderly

Although various regions have made some achievements in promoting elderly care services, there are still many problems in the elderly care service system in theory and practice.

4.1. The construction of the service system for the elderly does not fully meet the needs of the elderly

The elderly care service system should aim to meet the needs and wishes of the elderly. However, because the elderly are affected by many factors such as economic conditions, health, and family, the current service system can only be constructed based the lifestyle, and communities and institutions are only platforms for providing elderly care services, without considering the service system. The foundation and core of the service system is to provide targeted and high-quality services for the elderly.

At present, China’s demand for elderly care services presents an “olive-shaped” feature, that is, there are few high-end and low-end demands, and more mid-range demands for basic life care. However, in reality, the construction of the elderly care service system presents a “dumbbell-shaped” distribution ^[5]. Most service establishments are either too fancy or too cheap. On one hand, elderly people with ordinary income cannot afford to live in high-end institutions; on the other hand, low-cost institutions have poor service quality. In addition, most areas still have the problem of unequal care in community home-based care services. In communities with good economic conditions, the elderly care services provided is relatively comprehensive; while in areas with poor economic conditions, there are not many community-based elderly care services. This also means that there is a gap in the construction of China’s urban and rural pension service systems, which cannot fulfill the needs and wishes of the elderly.

4.2. The operating mechanism is flawed and the service responsibilities are vague

The construction and development of the service system for the elderly requires not only the efforts of government, but also the participation of social forces. However, the service mechanism led by the government and participated by the society has not yet been fully formed. The elderly service business is a systematic project, where the development of elderly care institutions is inseparable from the cooperation of multiple departments such as finance, medical and health, and environmental protection. However, there is currently a lack of unity and coordination among community elderly care service resources, and there is a disconnection in work ^[6]. Taking the civil affairs department and the health department as examples, the

number and service quality of the existing elderly care institutions in various regions are far from meeting the needs of society. There are not enough beds and nursing staff, while there are many unused beds in many districts and neighborhood clinics and health centers. Professionals with high professional qualifications do not fully utilize their abilities, and there is a lack of synergy among them.

4.3. Uneven distribution of pension resources and unequal access to pension service resources

The problem of insufficient pension resources and idle resources coexist in China. According to statistics, in 2019, the number of beds per thousand elderly people in Beijing, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Hubei, Anhui, Inner Mongolia, Guizhou, and Gansu exceeded the national average.

Whether it is from the national level or regional practice, most of the localities are based on the “9073” pension pattern, and as of the end of the fourth quarter of 2021, there are about 877 nursing home beds for 65-year-olds who are in need of institutional care ^[7]. In terms of the number of beds, the results show that 18 of the 31 provinces and cities in the country are below the national average. Therefore, it is clear that the current pension service system fails to achieve fair distribution of resources.

5. Improving the social service system for the elderly in urban and rural areas

Although China’s pension service system has been established, there is still much room for improvement, and below are some countermeasures and suggestions that can be taken.

5.1. Advocating diversified elderly service supply to meet the different needs of the elderly

The pension service system must meet the comprehensive needs of the elderly, including not only basic pension service, but also diversified other services. The active participation of multiple parties should be encouraged. Diversified elderly care services should be provided according to their age, income status, health status and living conditions. If we only rely on the government, it will be difficult to meet the elderly care service needs of the elderly when there is insufficient government funding. To meet the diverse needs of the elderly, it is necessary to maximize the power of the market and society, and introduce market mechanisms to ensure the quality, quantity, and efficiency of elderly care services. Social services for the elderly are a kind of social welfare, and the government is obliged to be the main body of service supply, but not the only one. The subjects of elderly care services should be diversified, and the government should mainly provide bottom-up services among multiple subjects. The government should encourage the market, the state, and families to work together to improve the elderly care system.

5.2. Strengthening the construction of supporting systems for the elderly service system

The establishment of proper legislation should be prioritized, the leading and promoting role of legislation should be maximized ^[8]. A proper legal system is needed to actively respond to the aging population and accelerate the development of elderly services in urban and rural areas. Therefore, it is important to create a legal environment that is conducive to the development of the elderly care industry. It is necessary to further improve the laws, regulations, and systems for the development of the elderly care system. Besides, a better environment can be created for the sound operation and development of the elderly care service system by formulating a series of encouraging policies and measures.

The United States has the Older Americans Act, and Japan has the Elderly Welfare Act and Elderly Health Care Act ^[9]. Drawing on the legislative experience of the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and other countries, China should also speed up the corresponding legislative process and promote the inclusion of administrative regulations to promote the development of the elderly care service industry in the legislative research plan.

5.3. Integrating resources ensure fair distribution of resources in the elderly care service system

The needs of the elderly are quite different from what the elderly care institutions that the government and society can provide, and the services provided by many institutions are insufficient. Therefore, it is necessary to take multiple measures to increase the number of nursing beds. Firstly, we can adjust the proportion of pension resources through the guidance of relevant policies, and so as to maximize the coverage of government pension. Secondly, we can utilize hospital resources to increase the number of beds for the elderly and establish “medical-and-nursing care-type” elderly care institutions to effectively solve the problems of traditional Chinese medical care in elderly care institutions and the lack of resources. Thirdly, we should actively promote the construction of private elderly care institutions and integrate idle resources, such as fast hotels, office buildings, and other idle social resources, for the construction of private elderly care institutions. In accordance with the development idea of “the government leads, the society participates, and the policy supports” and multi-party participation, a new model of elderly care services should be explored and created. We can also use the “Internet+” concept to create a virtual nursing home, actively carry out the construction of “Internet+ elderly care” platform, better leverage the community to provide support for family services, and create an elderly care service model without boundaries.

The future development trend of our country’s elderly service system is mainly to reshape the filial piety culture, to provide professional services for community elderly care with the support of enterprises and non-profit organizations, and to emphasize the social responsibility of elderly care services^[10].

The main needs of the elderly are nursing and medical care, and the current nursing service or medical are not capable of meeting those needs. The pension model combining medical care and nursing care will be the future development trend, and with the rapid development of the service system for the elderly, the mid-range demand for institutional elderly care services will be further released. A large-scale, brand-oriented, and independent elderly care service model will be easier to seize the market and have greater room for improvement.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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