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Views

Elderly Service Manpower Commitment

To achieve people-oriented and quality services tailored to the needs of the elderly, it is important that sufficient manpower with enthusiasm, relevant knowledge and caring skills are provided. However, it is an indisputable fact that manpower for the elderly, given the loss of front-line care workers and the lack of new entrants, faces serious problems. The data collected by the Social Welfare Department from 69 subvented non-government organisations providing elderly and rehabilitation services in August found the vacancy rates for personal care workers and household workers were 18% and 18.8% respectively as at 31 July last year. In response to the continuous rise of the elderly population, the government has actively launched a number of pilot projects, such as: Pilot Scheme on Community Care Service Voucher for the Elderly; Pilot Scheme on Home Care and Support for Elderly Persons with Mild Impairment, Pilot Scheme on Support for Elderly Persons Discharged from Public Hospitals After Treatment, etc. The purpose of these schemes is to provide immediate services as soon as possible to elderly in need, even to the point of zero waiting time. The original intention is good. Unfortunately, these schemes also put pressure on the tight human resources. With the current services facing acute manpower shortage, even if the hardware is all in place, it will be hard to roll out the new services if sufficient and appropriate staff could not be hired.

In response to the shortage of manpower for elderly service, this year's policy address proposed some measures to stabilise the regular manpower resources. These include providing additional resources for elderly care units to increase the salaries of personal care workers and household workers, and providing greater flexibility to subvented elderly care service units to the extent of labour importation. Indeed, increasing remuneration and benefits are important elements in retaining qualified personnel. However, in the face of the ageing situation of front-line care workers, the situation will be more serious in the future if no new entrants are attracted to the industry. Although the "Navigation Scheme for Young Persons in Care Services" launched in recent years has helped to train and encourage young people to join the elderly care service, most young people only consider the frontline helper position as a stepping stone for other more specialised jobs with better pay and prospects. Only a handful of them, therefore, will remain after the completion of the courses, which is a drop in the ocean of labour shortage. As for the importation of labour, it seems imperative but there are still many areas that we need to think twice. Among these: the qualifications, experience, training and assessment of foreign workers, cultural and language differences, and the ratio of foreign workers to local staff must be carefully considered. What is more likely to be overlooked is the stereotype on foreign workers. A local personal helper once said: "At present, the image of helper is already very low. With the importation of labour, our job will be seen as the bottom of the echelons." Therefore, it is absolutely essential to enhance the professional image of frontline helpers. Otherwise, more experienced staff might switch job, which in turn would adversely affect service quality. In the long run, it is imperative to stabilise regular human resources for elderly services, review the professional quality of the entire elderly care industry, the deployment of non-professional manpower and re-examine the remuneration and promotion structure of different work types.

"Ageing in Place" is the wish of many elderly. In fact, the majority of elderly staying in communities are supported by family members. Family carers are considered the most important part of unconventional manpower in the elderly care system. Therefore, we must ensure that they have the knowledge, skills, resources (stable income and support services) and physical as well as mental health to support their elders at home. At present, subvented community service units do provide information, skills training, equipment borrowing, counseling and referral services for the carers, but their inflexible service hours make it difficult for carers to obtain services while being at work themselves. Support for these carers, such as setting up a 24-hour counselling hotline, evening and weekend training programmes, and encouraging employers to promote family-friendly policies; should be strengthened. In addition, many family members give up their work to take care of their elders full time and that causes financial pressure. To express the community's affirmation on their dedication, it is essential to provide them with carers' allowances. Unfortunately, the current "Living Allowance for Carers of Elderly Persons from Low Income Families" not only has limited quotas but also the meager sum is not enough to cover for the caring of the elderly and their personal needs; which make it difficult for them to feel at ease taking care of their elders full-time at home. If the government can provide more comprehensive financial support for full-time elderly carers, for example, learning from the "Carer Payment" in Australia where full-time carers are provided with caring compensation and are integrated into the regular care system; and that should help with the long-term commitment to caring for the elderly.

In addition to family members, foreign domestic helpers (FDH) are, in fact, another unconventional manpower for elderly care. When taking care of elderly people who live alone, the children usually employ FDHs to live with their elders. Recently, the government revealed that it is exploring a cash voucher model to subsidise elders living alone in public housing, mainly those with medical needs, to employ FDHs. This is undoubtedly the government's good intention towards elderly who live alone. However, there are quite a few worthy considerations in implementing the plan. Apart from how to support the elderly in handling the complicated procedures for hiring and arranging residence for FDHs, the communication barriers between FDHs and the elderly must be resolved. Otherwise, that would affect the relationship and quality of caring. In addition, it is also important to train and assess the skills of FDHs to care for elders. We must identify and define areas where FDHs are not qualified to care for those elderly when more professional nursing support should be sought. Therefore, even if the government implements the subsidy scheme for employing FDHs, it should not reduce their commitment on long-term care services.

According to the Census and Statistics Department, elderly persons aged 65 or above accounted for 16.6% of the total population last year, that is, 1 out of every 6 persons was elderly. By 2036, the elderly population is expected to account for 31.1% of the total population, that is, 1 out of every 3 persons will be elderly. In the face of the huge manpower needs of caring for the elderly in the future, we really have an urgent need to think more seriously about how to effectively set and enhance the routine and unconventional manpower for caring of the elderly.

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