

# *How to Sustain the Elderly Volunteer Service: Based on the Case Study of the Mutual Assistance Elderly Care Model in Guangzhou*

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**Abstract:** The “Younger Seniors Serving Older Seniors” model in Guangzhou, advanced by Guangzhou Volunteer Association via the Public Welfare Time, has mobilized thousands of senior volunteers and created diverse community services (home visits, patrols, skills help, meals, policy outreach). Major constraints are limited funding and venues, weak professional training and mental-health support, uneven volunteer retention, and lack of formal cross-agency coordination. Recommended steps: engage professional and interest-based volunteers, build routine training and counseling, improve age-friendly infrastructure, and institutionalize collaboration between committees, social workers, and volunteer bodies. These measures aim to move elderly volunteering from episodic activities to sustained community governance, boosting service quality and older residents’ wellbeing.

## **1. Introduction**

China's population aging is becoming increasingly severe, which means a reduction in the labor force and an increasing burden of social pension. How to fully tap into the demographic dividend of younger elderly and improve their welfare has become an urgent issue to be addressed. The 15th Five-Year Plan further emphasizes the national strategy of active aging, developing the human resources of the elderly, guiding them to achieve the goals of being productive and happy in their later years through social participation, and pointing out the need to develop elderly volunteer services and strengthen the management of volunteer organizations. Under this background, volunteer services, as a flexible, inclusive, and socially valuable form of social participation, are becoming increasingly important.

In May 2025, China issued its first comprehensive policy document on 'enabling the elderly to contribute meaningfully in society.' Titled 'Guidelines on Supporting Elderly Social Participation to Achieve Active Engagement,' the document was jointly released by 19 government agencies including the Ministry of Civil Affairs. It emphasizes establishing sustainable volunteer service mechanisms for seniors, enhancing mobilization efforts, diversifying service offerings, innovating service models, improving support systems, optimizing social participation environments, and leveraging the role of social organizations.

Guangzhou actively implements the national important instructions and arrangements on aging work and volunteer services, deeply practicing the concept of 'proactive aging and healthy aging.' The Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau and the Aging Work Committee have repeatedly emphasized the development of elderly volunteer services and the promotion of participation by younger seniors. Guangzhou has become one of the earliest cities in China to explore the silver-age volunteer service model.

Under the guidance of Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau, the Guangzhou Volunteer Association (GVA) has pioneered mutual elderly care initiatives. Since 2019, it launched the "Public Welfare Time" volunteer service platform, featuring a dedicated elderly care volunteer zone. By establishing a time-saving mechanism for elderly care services, mobilizing silver-haired volunteers, and creating a feedback cycle system, GVA has developed an information platform for mutual elderly care volunteer services. This initiative has introduced a new model of active aging —"Younger Seniors Serving Older Seniors" —encouraging silver-haired volunteers to contribute their "silver-haired strength" and effectively expanding participation channels for the "Silver Age Action".

However, China's elderly volunteer services now generally face issues such as strong willingness to participate, low frequency of participation, and difficulty in sustaining participation. This article will start from typical cases in Guangzhou, extract excellent experiences, and provide Guangzhou experience for the development of elderly volunteer services.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Current Status of Elderly Volunteer Service Participation**

With the increase in life expectancy and the improvement in health levels, the human capital of the elderly is gradually being developed. The elderly population typically has ample time, is familiar with their local area, and possesses rich social experience, providing favorable conditions for their participation in volunteer services[1]. In my country, elderly volunteer services are centered in the community, and the traditional cultural concept of neighborly mutual assistance has gradually developed into practical forms such as elderly volunteer service organizations and community mutual aid elderly care groups in modern society[2]. Research has found that the main content of elderly volunteers' participation in volunteer services includes community governance, civil mediation, policy promotion, and home visits, with motivations primarily based on selfless dedication, enriching their lives, and learning and growth. Overall, the participation rate of elderly volunteers in my country is on the rise. Organizational promotion has enhanced the sustainability and motivation of volunteer participation, but there is still a situation of "high willingness to participate but low actual participation rate". The proportion of stable participation still needs to be improved[1,3]. Community elderly volunteer services face challenges such as single organization, scarce resources, poor sustainability, supply and demand mismatch, and information gaps[4].

### **2.2. Incentives and Safeguards**

Existing research on incentive and support mechanisms for elderly volunteer services mainly analyzes three aspects: spiritual, material, and institutional. Spiritual incentives primarily include honors and awards, providing growth opportunities, and skills training. Spiritual incentives can satisfy elderly volunteers' sense of belonging and accomplishment, strengthen their identity, and promote self-actualization[1]. Material incentives mainly involve providing volunteer hours, transportation subsidies, meal subsidies, volunteer points, and infrastructure. Certain material incentives and guarantees help alleviate the material concerns of younger elderly people, thereby promoting the participation of the elderly, especially those with lower incomes, in volunteer

services[5,6]. Institutional incentives, establishing sound systems helps remove barriers to elderly volunteer service participation. Systems guide elderly people's understanding of volunteer service, and policies, organizational arrangements, and platform construction that support and encourage elderly volunteer service can effectively improve the willingness of younger elderly people to participate in volunteer services[2,7].

### **3. Research Method**

This study primarily surveyed individuals involved in elderly volunteer services. Based on a literature review, the study employed methods such as field research, in-depth interviews, and group interviews to conduct extensive exchanges with elderly volunteers, social workers, community committees, and other personnel involved in elderly volunteer services, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of Guangzhou's mutual-aid elderly care model.

## **4. The Effect and Problems of the Construction of the Elderly Volunteer Service in Guangzhou**

### **4.1. Achievements in Construction**

As of October 2024, Guangzhou's "Public Welfare Time" program had registered over 21,000 senior volunteers and established more than 700 volunteer service teams. By 2025, the city will have 177 elderly care centers, 2,683 service stations, and 1,395 senior dining halls covering urban and rural areas, forming a "1+N" community elderly care service network. The Guangzhou Volunteer Association launched the "Seedling Program" to cultivate elderly care service brands, with Yuexiu, Tianhe, and Huadu districts having developed exemplary volunteer teams that provide diverse services such as health care, safety checks, and emotional companionship for senior citizens.

### **4.2. Development Challenges**

Through field research and in-depth interviews, the team discovered that while the "Younger Seniors Serving Older Seniors" mutual care model has achieved significant success, it also faces two major challenges: First, a shortage of funding and facilities. Many senior volunteer leaders highlighted this issue during interviews. The lack of funds makes it difficult to prepare necessary materials for volunteer activities, forcing many senior volunteers to cover costs out of their own pockets. The scarcity of dedicated spaces further complicates operations, often requiring temporary setups in small areas, which creates inconvenience for junior volunteers.

Secondly, there is a lack of training and psychological counseling for elderly volunteers. During volunteer activities, these volunteers may encounter unexpected situations, face skepticism or verbal abuse from others, and develop feelings of sadness or negativity while serving elderly individuals with difficulties. Without proper training and timely psychological support, volunteer activities may instead diminish the sense of well-being among this demographic.

Third, challenges exist in mobilizing and sustaining participation from elderly volunteers. There is significant variation in the willingness of younger generations to participate, and many elderly volunteers find it difficult to maintain involvement due to travel or caregiving responsibilities for grandchildren, leading to a bottleneck in the expansion of the volunteer workforce.

Fourth, the inter-agency collaborative governance of volunteer organizations remains uninstitutionalized. Although multiple parties such as neighborhood committees, social workers, and the Guangzhou Volunteer Association are involved in the development of elderly volunteer services, there is a lack of a regular collaborative mechanism, leading to issues such as excessive

management burdens and inefficient organization for certain parties.

## **5. Volunteer Service Content for the Elderly**

Against the backdrop of accelerating aging and refined community governance, the "Younger Seniors Serving Older Seniors" volunteer service model is guided by both community needs and the needs of the elderly, forming a multi-level and normalized service system. It not only responds to the needs of community governance but also meets the life and emotional support needs of the elderly, becoming an important practical path to promote active aging.

### **5.1. Community Demand Side**

From the perspective of community needs, volunteer services for the elderly mainly focus on three areas. First, visits and assistance with activities. These services rely on volunteer service platforms and the community social work system, achieving needs identification and service matching through multi-level collaboration. Some communities establish resident needs files to provide personalized assistance, making services more targeted and continuous.

Second, public area protection, including security patrols, environmental sanitation maintenance, and safety promotion. Volunteers participate in grassroots governance through daily patrols, garbage sorting promotion, and fire and traffic safety education, improving community safety and strengthening residents' public participation awareness.

Third, skill-based services, such as free sewing, haircuts, and repairs. These are typically provided by social workers who organize training and resource coordination, with the community providing venue support, and volunteers using their skills to provide services that meet residents' actual needs while enhancing the community's mutual assistance atmosphere. Overall, community-oriented volunteer services effectively compensate for the insufficient supply of grassroots services and provide a channel for continued social participation for retirees[8-11].

### **5.2. Demand Side of The Elderly**

The "Younger Seniors Serving Older Seniors" model primarily targets senior citizens, forming a service system centered on physical and mental health support, basic living assistance, and policy dissemination. Home visits are the most common and widespread form of service. Through joint visits by social workers and volunteers, both physical care, such as health monitoring and living condition assessments, and psychological support through companionship, communication, and emotional guidance are provided. Some communities improve service continuity and familiarity by pairing neighbors or matching volunteers with service recipients, making visits more in-depth and effective.

On the spiritual and cultural level, festival visits and cultural performances provide senior citizens with emotional support and opportunities for social interaction, enriching their spiritual lives and enhancing their sense of belonging. Some communities develop specialized volunteer service teams, transforming artistic talents into stable service resources, forming a branded and regular cultural care mechanism.

Regarding basic living security, addressing the issue of declining self-care abilities among some senior citizens, volunteer services collaborate with community elderly care facilities to provide services such as meal assistance, meal preparation, and dietary guidance. Based on community senior citizen canteens, and through a combination of rational layout and door-to-door services, a convenient and accessible community-based elderly care circle is gradually being built, effectively alleviating the practical pressure of home-based aging.

Furthermore, policy promotion services address the issue of insufficient information access among the elderly. Volunteers disseminate knowledge about elderly care policies, medical insurance, and fraud prevention through lectures, consultations, and interactive activities, enhancing the elderly's understanding and utilization of public services and strengthening their sense of gain from the system.

Overall, the "Younger Seniors Serving Older Seniors" initiative organically combines mutual-aid elderly care with community governance by involving younger seniors in services and providing support to older seniors. On the one hand, volunteer participation enhances the social role and meaning of life for younger seniors[11]; on the other hand, continuous care and emotional support improve the quality of life for older seniors, demonstrating a practical path to active aging[12].

## **6. Incentive and Protection Measures**

Next, we will explore the incentive and support measures that are worth learning from in Guangzhou's elderly volunteer service model.

### **6.1. Incentive Side**

On the incentive side, there are four key aspects.

First, establish a multi-level incentive system centered on symbolic recognition. Psychological identification and a sense of belonging are fundamental to sustained participation by older volunteers. Symbolic acknowledgements—such as certificates, public praise, award ceremonies, or communal meals—strengthen volunteers' sense of respect and organizational identification. Embedding recognition in routine cultivation activities (team building, exchange meetings) both maintains interpersonal networks and stabilizes the team. Modest material tokens (small gifts, meal subsidies) can signal care and boost short-term participation, but symbolic, intrinsic incentives should remain primary to avoid commodifying volunteerism.

Second, reduce participation costs through institutional guarantees and organizational support. For example, organizations providing travel subsidies and meal provisions for elderly volunteers can remove mobility and physical fatigue barriers. And clearly defining responsibilities, rotation schedules, and backup arrangements within the organization can enhance predictability and fairness while lowering the costs of ad hoc mobilization. Organizers should flexibly utilize formal tools such as volunteer timesheets, work-hour banks, or point systems to fully account for group differences, while keeping operations simple and transparent. Coordination among residents' committees, social workers and civil organizations in providing venues, funding and materials creates a stable operating base and eases volunteers' burdens.

Third, promote professionalization and retention through skills development and role matching. Long-term commitment stems from opportunities to contribute effectively and to grow. Identifying volunteers' interests and expertise and assigning matched roles or specialist teams allows volunteers to experience achievement and value. Embedding a training–practice–feedback loop within community projects, supplemented by ongoing training and peer exchange, raises service competence and confidence, thereby improving service quality and strengthening volunteers' sense of responsibility and retention.

Fourth, leverage social ties and psychological support to reinforce intrinsic motivation. Mobilising influential core members and existing social networks facilitates recruitment and helps sustain momentum. Providing emotional support and psychological counselling when volunteers face criticism or conflict buffers against discouragement and prevents drop-out. Creating opportunities for volunteers to teach, perform or otherwise demonstrate their skills satisfies needs for self-realization and growth, fostering a durable, internally-driven motive for continued

engagement

## 6.2. Security Side

The Security side also include four aspects.

First, the provision of materials and venues is jointly undertaken by social workers, neighborhood committees, and third-party resources. The community raises essential supplies through channels such as charity supermarkets and corporate donations, while utilizing facilities like the neighborhood committee office, community square, and senior activity center to reduce operational costs.

Second, there is institutionalized positive feedback and stress relief. Contributions are recognized through public commendations and certificates of honor; "complaint sessions," social worker intervention, and psychological counseling are established to promptly resolve misunderstandings and frustrations among volunteers.

Third, the tripartite collaboration among social workers, neighborhood committees, and volunteers enhances team stability. Through a model involving social worker support, neighborhood committee coordination, and active participation of volunteers, a sense of identity is strengthened, financial and spatial resources are integrated, and the work system is institutionalized.

Fourth, a core think tank and problem response mechanism is established. An advisory group composed of experienced volunteers is responsible for analyzing problems, connecting resources, and following up on residents' demands, ensuring visible results and thus protecting the rights and motivation of volunteers.

## 7. Conclusions

In summary, Guangzhou's elderly volunteer service model boasts a rich variety of activities and diverse, targeted incentive and support measures.

Regarding the types of volunteer services, the model organically combines mutual-aid elderly care with community governance by involving younger seniors and providing support to older seniors. On the one hand, volunteer participation enhances the social role and meaning of life for younger seniors; on the other hand, continuous care and emotional support improve the quality of life for older seniors, demonstrating a realistic path to active aging.

In terms of incentive and support measures, the key lies in "person-job matching + resource guarantee + emotional recognition + problem-solving loop." By respecting expertise, leveraging strengths, rationally dividing tasks, and establishing feedback and support mechanisms, volunteer enthusiasm can be transformed into a long-term, stable force for community service. Meanwhile, the collaboration between social workers and neighborhood committees provides organizational and resource support for volunteer service activities, while think tanks and rapid response mechanisms translate service effectiveness into tangible outcomes, creating a virtuous cycle.

Of course, Guangzhou's elderly volunteer service model also faces some challenges that need to be addressed. Participation among professional groups (such as doctors and teachers) is low, necessitating the exploration of incentive mechanisms such as professional lectures and awards. Some neighborhood committees exhibit a tendency towards administrative task assignment, requiring strengthened value guidance to avoid formalism. There is an urgent need for age-friendly renovations in older communities (such as stair railings and anti-slip facilities), requiring increased government investment and broader channels for connecting with social resources. In the future, deepening the "younger serving older" model can cultivate more localized volunteer teams, promoting the upgrading of volunteer services from "activity-based" to "governance-based," and injecting sustained vitality into grassroots governance. While the Guangzhou elderly volunteer

service model is worth learning from, it also has certain limitations, and local specificities must be fully considered when promoting it to other regions.

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