

# CHINA TO SHIFT FOCUS TO AGING IN PLACE

*How remote and forbidding China can seem in daily news reports ranging from air pollution in the lungs of Olympic athletes to rubble surrounding earthquake victims. Yet, nothing has brought home more just how much our peoples share of the modern human condition than a visit to the American Society on Aging offices early this year by Wang Xiao Yan, director of the Community Alliance in Beijing.*

*Community Alliance is an independent, grassroots nonprofit organization founded in 2006 to serve China's 153 million people ages 60 and older. The group's mission statement says, "We strive to ensure social justice and welfare for the elderly, especially elder women and those who are among the most disadvantaged in communities."*

*The similarities between the goals of professionals and advocates for elders in the United States and China became clear recently when Wang, in her capacity as editor in chief of her organization's Community Alliance magazine, sent us the publication's June 2008 issue, which was devoted to "Ageing in Place" (using the international spelling). What follows, reprinted with Wang's permission, is her introductory column from that issue. If much of its content sounds eerily famil-*



Photo: Community Alliance

*China's single-child families and the rapid industrialization causing numerous young people to move away from home, as well as other factors, have left up to half of the country's 153 million people ages 60 or older as "empty-nest elderly," according to the Community Alliance in Beijing. The Chinese government is answering this and other challenges with a new strategy emphasizing community-based care to supplement family support.*

*iar to American health and service providers, don't be surprised if your inner ear seems to be playing "It's a Small World, After All."*

**By WANG XIAO YAN**

In 2008, at the highest levels of the Chinese government, representatives of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference had a critical discussion on the national welfare of the elderly. From these discussions, China's leaders put forward a new nationwide proposal to shift from the past model of family responsibility for eldercare to create a new community-based model for aging in place with the establishment of new community-based elder services.

Also earlier this year, the Ministry of Civil Affairs along with 10 other ministries jointly released their report titled *Views on a Comprehensive Strategy for Strengthening and Improving Community Services for Ageing in Place*. China's population is undergoing a period of accelerated aging that must be addressed.

It is estimated that by 2020 the elderly

population in China will reach 248 million, and by 2051 the number will reach 437 million, making up 31% of the country's total population. The question of how to deal with the nation's aging population and address the welfare of the elderly has been brought to the forefront. It is estimated that 85% of China's elderly rely on family support and care. This is in part due to the country's large population, organizations and service for elderly not being mature, and limited financial resources for services. It also follows in the tradition of Chinese culture and customs, and because Chinese elders carry a strong sense of family and belonging.

The newly discussed community-based system for eldercare is a model in which elders can continue to live at home and be provided additional support from locally available community services and institutions. With the rise in the nuclear family and empty-nest families this new model would not only provide elders living at home with a range of community support services and facilitate their remaining in a familiar and

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comfortable living environment, but it would also alleviate the pressure on family members to provide care.

China's existing aging-in-place services are primarily family based and often cannot meet the range of needs of the elderly being served. Apart from younger, more able elderly citizens, others age 80 or older, and especially those who are limited in their ability to care for themselves, desperately need services that can be made available by a community-based eldercare system. For those unable to care for themselves, this is a viable alternative for providing necessary relief, a safe living environment, accessible facilities and support for their daily care.

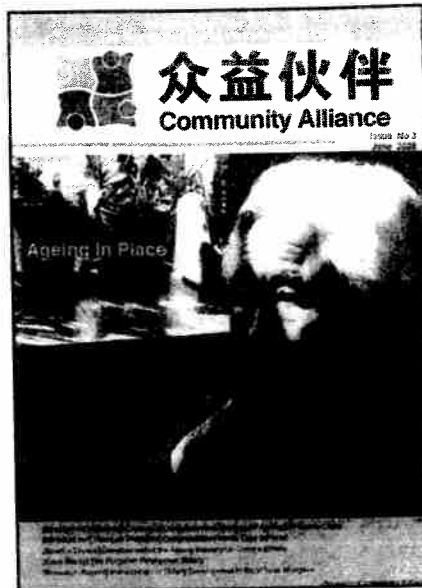
## MAJOR CHALLENGES

The introduction of a comprehensive and effective community-based support system for the elderly currently faces several major challenges. The skills and training of staff and service providers need to be improved. There needs to be better vocational and technical training to establish universal standards for skills and services. At the same time, compensation for caregivers and service providers must be increased to secure their livelihoods and respect in society.

Also, there is limited and narrow funding for the provision of elderly care services. Current funding comes from government allocations, social welfare funds from the sale of lottery tickets and a small amount from donations. The community-based model for aging in place still requires substantial financial support for the provision of both facilities and services.

In addition, service providers and service networks need to improve to provide more effective and integrated services and operations. This includes coordinating the efforts and resources of all stakeholders, including families, communities, governments, corporations, charities and volunteers.

From a national perspective, the initial trials of the community-based model for services should be conducted in the more developed cities and towns. It should then be gradually expanded to the more rural eastern developing regions and central and western areas. Rural areas have a larger aging population than urban areas and face greater pressures.



*This farsighted  
policy will help  
153 million  
elders.*

The Chinese government has drafted a new policy stating that the Chinese people should strive to enable approximately 80% of the cities and towns to maintain comprehensive welfare and service centers for elders. The model features a combination of aging in place and community-based supports and services, with a cultural and activity service center for the elderly in one out of every three townships. This farsighted policy will have long-term positive impacts on rural communities.

The nation's new model for community-based support for elders to age in place is a fundamental step forward in meeting the current challenges and future promises of caring for the welfare of the elderly. We are confronted with unprecedented challenges in implementing and improving this new initiative. With little time to waste and much work to be done, the government with the support of all segments of society must cooperate to accomplish this work together. Working together, we can improve the lives of the 153 million elders in China and create a community-based system for aging-in-place services that is harmonious and beneficial to everyone in society! ◆