

New caregiving system imagined for Singapore in future

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To recognise and encourage caregiving, could a system be set up whereby Singaporeans bank in the hours they spend on volunteer care for use as credits to get care respite or have others care for them later in life?

And to raise awareness of the different end-of-life care options available, so that the elderly and their families can plan in advance, could a toolkit providing such information be rolled out by an End-of-Life Office?

These are among the proposals found in the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) report Action Plan Singapore, which addresses possible scenarios here in a decade's time and how innovation, skills and longevity would affect that future.

In the area of longevity, the proposed "Eldersave" time-banking system, for instance, would force the society to consider how time "invested in essential non-market activities such as caregiving and volunteerism should be more properly valued".

IPS senior research fellow Christopher Gee, who spearheaded discussions in this area, told TODAY that volunteerism is now dependent on altruistic motivations to come forward and help.

"If you do recognise time spent on caregiving, more people might be willing to do it, and you'll enlarge the pool of volunteers and caregivers. So, it's like taking turns to provide care," Mr Gee said.

He shared that time-banking schemes exist in countries such as the United States and Japan, but these are mostly small-scale and among well-defined community groups.

"One of the challenges would be to introduce this on a national scale," said Mr Gee, adding that the idea would need further study.

The report laid out a timeline of targets for the strategies proposed.

To develop a new system of caregiving, a nationally representative time-use survey would have to be set up by December next year, along with a working committee established by a government agency with expertise in manpower issues to study Eldersave.

It was also suggested that a White Paper on national flexible work and caregiving arrangements be produced and a "SkillsFuture++" be set up for carers who are not working, for them to learn relevant work skills through subsidised training and scholarships.

By December 2022, the Eldersave scheme would have been operationalised for those aged 30 and below, while flexible care and work arrangements would have been in place for half of the Singaporean workforce.

And by December 2026, Eldersave would have kicked in for those aged 50 and below, while 80 per cent of the Singaporean workforce would be enjoying flexible care and work arrangements.

As for helping the elderly and their families plan for end-of-life care, the proposed toolkit could be piloted by the end of next year, rolled out by December 2022 and then refined in a second version launched by December 2026.

Besides these strategies, the participants in the longevity discussion — who ranged from voluntary welfare organisation and healthcare representatives to academics and civil servants — identified the removal of age-based barriers at work, home and in the community as another objective.

To this end, the report proposed the launch of a pilot project by the end of next year to redesign the workplace to eliminate ageism, as well as the introduction of a Happy Life Index to measure the professional and personal happiness of workers aged above 50.