

Chapter 6

Opportunities for Seniors: Active Lifestyles and Well-Being

Vision

Older Singaporeans will lead healthy and active lifestyles. They will have fulfilling relationships within their families, across generations. They will also have many friends, and are involved in community groups and activities. Singaporeans, both young and old, will have positive attitudes towards ageing and towards seniors.

Introduction

1. Singapore's growing elderly population, with their knowledge and experiences, is a valuable resource to society. About 87% of seniors aged 65 years and above are ambulant and physically independent. They are active, and are able to continue contributing to their families, communities and society. The challenge would be to harness the potential and skills of seniors to benefit both themselves and society.

2. The post-war baby boomers will come of age by 2012. Besides being better educated and more financially secure, they will have different interests and expectations. These future seniors will want to be able to make their own lifestyle choices. The silver market will recognize the changing expectations of this cohort of seniors and develop lifestyle products and services to meet new demands. The Government also has a role to play, in providing more opportunities for seniors to maintain an active lifestyle.

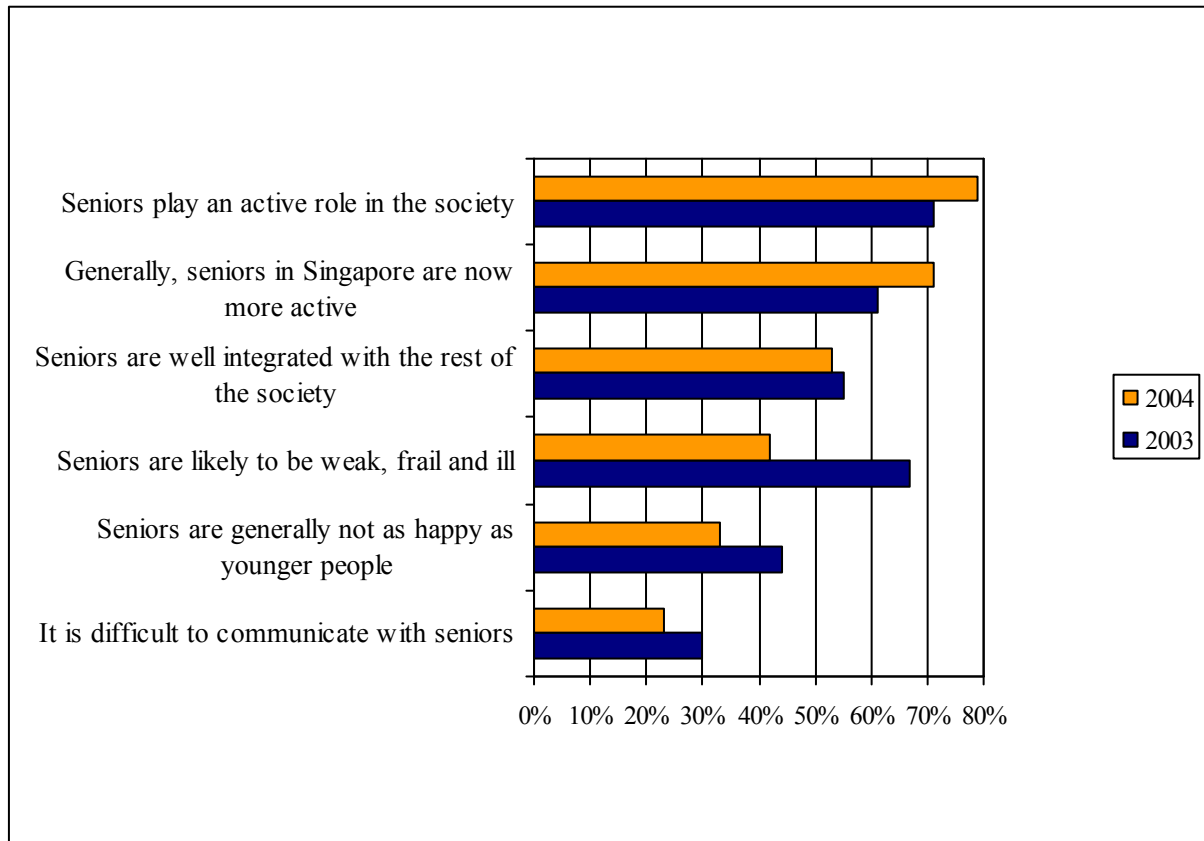
Efforts Over Last Five Years

3. The IMC in 1999 focused on social integration of seniors and intergenerational cohesion. One of the key recommendations by the IMC was to develop "heartware", to allow individuals and society to develop community values through various programmes. Another key recommendation was to improve attitudes and perceptions of ageing and seniors through public education.

4. Since 1999, MCYS has introduced year-round public education programmes on active ageing. Public education efforts emphasized early planning for old age and for seniors to maintain an active lifestyle and be engaged in their families and communities. There have also been on-going efforts with key influencers like the media, schools and voluntary organizations such as the Singapore Action Group of Elders (SAGE) and Retired & Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP), to develop positive attitudes towards ageing and seniors.

5. In addition, many programmes have been launched by multiple agencies to promote positive attitudes towards seniors. One example is the annual Senior Citizens Award which seeks to honour model grandparents and active senior citizens in the community and provide role models for other seniors to emulate. In addition, a taskforce to promote grandparenting and intergenerational bonding was set up in 2002 and intergenerational programmes were co-funded by Family Matters! Singapore and MCYS. Another example is the reading programme under the National Library Board (NLB) where senior volunteers conduct storytelling sessions for children in the libraries.

Chart 6.1: Statistics on Perception of Seniors



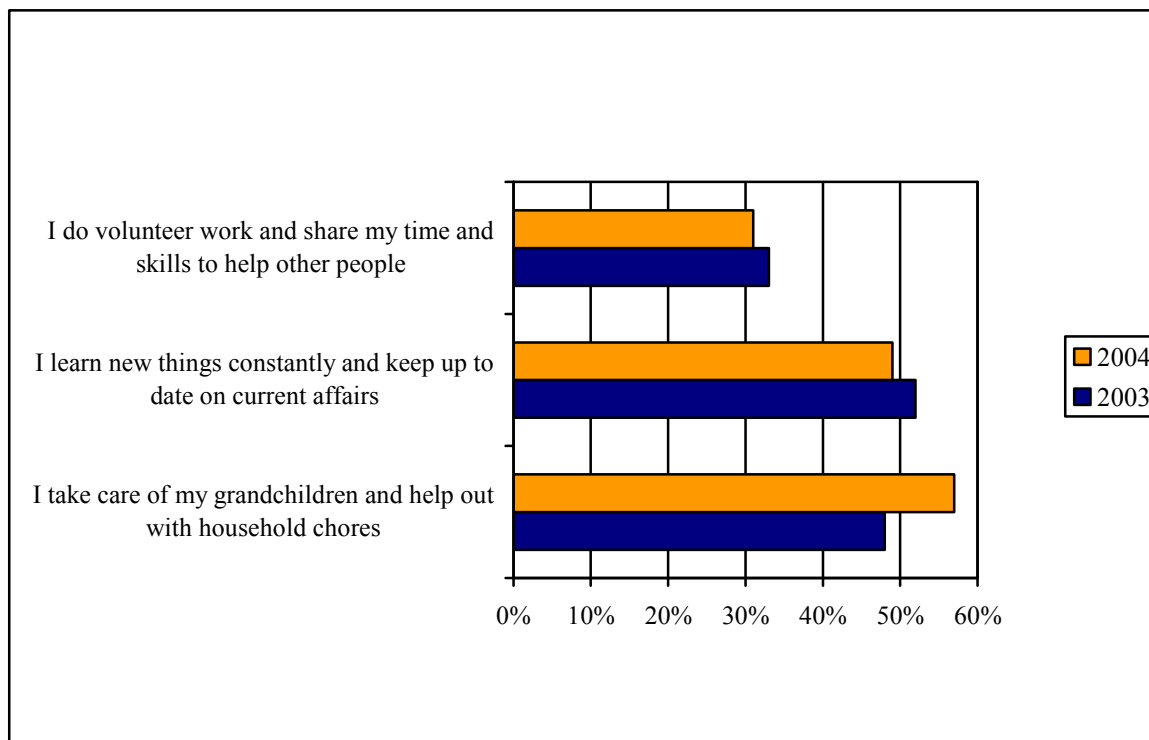
Source: Attitudinal and Perception Survey on Ageing and Elderly, Year 2003 & 2004

6. Surveys¹ over the last few years show improvements in the perception of seniors. In addition, seniors are increasingly leading more active lifestyles. Sports participation rate of seniors has increased from 33% in 2001 to 37% in 2005².

¹ Attitudinal and Perception Survey on Ageing and Elderly 2003 and 2004

² Singapore Sports Council

Chart 6.2: Statistics on Seniors Leading Active Lifestyles



Source: Attitudinal and Perception Survey on Ageing and Elderly, Year 2003 & 2004

CAI's Focus

7. Building on the efforts of the IMC, the Committee on Ageing Issues (CAI) continues to emphasise the importance of maintaining an active lifestyle. To achieve this, the CAI recommends that more quality programmes, lifestyle products and services be developed for seniors by the Government, people and private sectors. There can also be more systematic outreach by the various parties to engage seniors in activities and programmes.

8. The four key thrusts for seniors to be engaged in active lifestyle and well-being are:

- (i) promote healthy living;
- (ii) encourage the development of active lifestyles and social networks;
- (iii) encourage seniors to continue to learn and contribute to society; and
- (iv) build strong family ties.

Funding Support and Outreach

Promote ground-up initiatives

9. We can look forward to a variety of opportunities in the community for seniors to lead an active lifestyle. Seniors can choose to be engaged in sports, to become a volunteer or to take up lifelong learning among many other activities. They can also choose to join social events with friends or enjoy family time with their relatives such as children and grandchildren. We feel that the Government has a role in supporting the development of these interesting programmes for seniors.

10. **The CAI recommends that the Government should commit \$10 million over five years to set up the ‘Golden Opportunities! (GO!) Fund’ to seed more programmes and activities for seniors and by seniors.** The Government should be prepared to provide additional resources if need be.

11. The GO! Fund can be tapped by seniors who come together to organise activities with themes on healthy living, social networking, learning and contributing and intergenerational bonding. Organisations that organise activities or programmes for seniors can also tap on this fund. This fund could enable seniors to be continually enriched by the various activities and create a vibrant sector of opportunities for seniors. The CAI recommends that this fund be operated on a co-funding basis to encourage community ownership for the activities.

Systematically inform seniors of activities

12. The CAI notes that though there is a range of activities available in the community for seniors, some seniors may not be aware of these activities and thus do not participate in them. **The CAI recommends that the Government systematically inform older persons of these activities.** For instance, the Government could publish an active lifestyle magazine to be made readily available to older persons. The Government can inform and encourage seniors to participate in these activities and programmes, including volunteering and employment opportunities at certain life stages (e.g. 55 years old when a person can withdraw his CPF money).

13. In addition to efforts by the Government, collaborative efforts by community and grassroots organisations are required. Community groups can actively reach out to older persons to inform them of opportunities of employment and community activities.

Encourage Healthy Living

14. Participation in sporting activities keeps one physically healthy and mentally fit. Studies have found that being physically active reduces the risk of being overweight or ill. It also improves overall quality of life and lowers the mortality rate. From the national perspective, healthy lifestyles will reduce the need for healthcare, which can be costly to both the individual and the state.

15. Sports popular with seniors, such as taiji quan and gateball, are readily available at the grassroots or neighbourhood levels. Groups of seniors can be seen participating in these activities. Nonetheless, the CAI urges stakeholders to increase the sports participation rate of seniors. Community and grassroots organisations can do more to support the efforts to encourage healthy living among seniors. The Government can facilitate the process by **identifying** sports suitable for seniors, providing the **infrastructure and facilities** for such sports and **incentivising** seniors to participate in these sports.

Provide more infrastructure and facilities for sports

16. The CAI feels that more infrastructural support could be provided to facilitate seniors participating in sports. This can be achieved by making sports facilities elder-friendly and easily available within housing estates. Elder-friendly features such as resting benches, access ramps and appropriate exercise equipment must be provided at all sports complexes. Such features will make it more conducive for seniors to participate in sports.

Feature Highlight: Picture of a senior teaching gateball



17. More public spaces within housing estates should also be made available for sporting activities for seniors. This will make it convenient for seniors to engage in sports without travelling great distances. At the same time, we would want seniors to participate fully in society and be socially integrated within their families and in the community. **The CAI recommends that the Government should ensure that all public spaces in housing estates such as parks and sporting venues have facilities that cater to the whole family, including seniors.** Examples would include gateball courts, open space suitable for taiji quan and other exercises.

18. Leading a healthy lifestyle has to begin from young so that the habit of healthy living is carried into adulthood and into old age. There are ongoing health education efforts by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) in schools, workplaces and the community at large, to raise awareness among Singaporeans on the importance of healthy living.

19. A national Community Health Screening Programme was launched in July 2000 for those aged 50 years and above. Under this programme, one could be screened for high blood pressure, diabetes and high blood cholesterol within the community at venues like void decks and community centres. Health promotion materials are also distributed during the health screening sessions. Nevertheless, the CAI feels that more can be done to further raise public's awareness on the need to live a healthy lifestyle.

Raise public awareness on healthy living

20. It is important to encourage Singaporeans to live healthily so as to delay the onset of age-related chronic diseases and functional disabilities³. The Government should build on their success and further raise public awareness. **The CAI recommends that HPB implement more programmes to inform seniors of the importance and benefits of healthy living.** Programmes focused on age related illnesses could be held within housing estates for better outreach.

Promote Active Lifestyles and Social Networks

21. A person's priorities change through the different stages of life. Older individuals whose children have grown up and are independent, may have less family commitments. They will want to have opportunities for new pursuits and to lead an active lifestyle into old age. Many older persons will want to continue to work and contribute to society.

22. An active lifestyle would bring seniors into contact with their peers and the community, and enable them to form social networks. Seniors with strong social networks are healthier and tend to live longer. These social networks also enable them to provide support to one another. Strong social bonds are also one of the foundations for a cohesive and resilient society.

23. As seniors have different preferences and abilities, there has to be a range of activities to cater to the different groups of seniors. Currently, there are numerous programmes available in the community for seniors. For instance, PA runs more than 400 Senior Citizens' Clubs, engaging seniors in a wide range of lifestyle activities. Neighbourhood Links, which are under the purview of MCYS, and other organisations such as NLB actively engage seniors in active ageing programmes.

24. However, as the profile of seniors is changing, PA and other community groups need to tailor their activities to attract the new cohort of seniors. Programmes that are suitable for more educated seniors such as reading clubs and language courses should be made available.

³ Examples of age related illnesses are hypertension and gender specific diseases like osteoporosis.

25. The more educated cohort of seniors will want to have more choices. Hence, there is scope for the commercial sector to cater to the growing demand for recreational activities. Service providers should also actively adapt existing programmes for seniors who may be frail or less mobile, e.g. programmes such as arts and crafts.

More space for group activities within estates

26. Seniors prefer to have activities within their housing estates⁴. Also, **the CAI recommends that more public spaces could be made available within housing estates and neighbourhood parks for seniors to interact and socialize.** For instance, HDB and National Parks Board (NParks) should allow Resident Committees to ‘own’ small plots of garden within HDB estates so that residents, including seniors, can engage in gardening activities; Resident Committees can also make use of HDB void deck space to carry out activities suitable for seniors. There is scope for PA to work with HDB, NParks and Town Councils to promote such initiatives.

27. The HDB has introduced family playgrounds in new developments such as Sengkang. The family playground will have facilities and equipment suitable for different age groups, including seniors (e.g. exercise equipment suitable for seniors). Apart from the equipment, it also allows different generations to come together at a common place. Town councils have also introduced family playgrounds during upgrading efforts. The CAI recommends that HDB and Town Councils ensure that all recreation areas in housing estates are suitable for the whole family, including seniors.

Promote Learning and Contributing

28. Seniors are an important resource. Many have a wealth of experiences and possess valuable skills that could be harnessed through active engagement with the community. Being active in community work can also help seniors maintain their self-esteem and make them feel valued by society. Active senior volunteerism will also lead to positive attitudes towards ageing and seniors.

⁴ Singapore Sports Council Mini-survey on Seniors, 2004.

Feature Highlight: Volunteering with Kampung Senang



There are many different types of volunteering opportunities for seniors. One example is the organic farming project by Kampung Senang Charity & Education Foundation. Kampung Senang is a charitable organization established in December 1999, with the aim of building a community of wellness, peace and harmony through its multi-faceted activities (i.e. day care for seniors, organic farming, gifts of food delivery etc). Volunteers are an integral component of Kampung Senang's programs. Its organic farming project attracts a high number (two thirds of the active volunteers committed to the organic farming are individuals aged 50 years and over) of senior volunteers due to its low barrier and ease of entry (e.g. basic requirements such as love of flora and interest in gardening). Volunteers of the organic farming project are engaged in activities such as planting, watering, harvesting and packing of the vegetables. The more ambulant volunteers also help to deliver the produce harvested from the organic farm to Kampung Senang's beneficiaries (the poor, sick and other seniors).

Develop and promote volunteering opportunities for seniors

29. The senior volunteerism rate in other ageing societies suggests that seniors are active contributors to community. About 43%⁵ of seniors in U.S. volunteer, 10%⁶ in Canada and 11%⁷ in Western Australia. For Singapore, the impending large numbers of seniors can be actively engaged. The process to encourage greater volunteerism among younger Singaporeans and our future seniors begins now.

⁵ Independent Sector's 1999 national survey of giving and volunteering in the United States.

⁶ National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participation 2000.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics Voluntary Work Survey June 1995 unpublished tables.

30. The CAI would like to see the volunteerism rate for seniors double from the current 4% to 8% by the year 2010 and 15% by 2030. To achieve this, new ways of engaging seniors should be continuously identified and promoted. Apart from identifying opportunities, well structured volunteer recruitment plans and training on volunteer management will help the host organisations attract and retain senior volunteers.

31. **The CAI recommends that the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) work with partners to develop and promote more volunteering opportunities for seniors.** For example, seniors could be recruited as coaches / exercise leaders / game officials for community sports events. These seniors could also volunteer as sports coaches in schools. In the school setting, seniors could be involved in student enrichment programmes.

32. Seniors' interest to volunteer should not be hindered by the lack of awareness. As part of the outreach efforts, there should be more intensive public education such as campaigns on senior volunteering. NVPC could set up a library of information and resource kits to allow easy reference by organizations interested in recruiting senior volunteers. A best practice guide for Non-Profit Organisations detailing recommended and positive volunteer management practices (including appreciation of volunteers) could also be established.

Provide and promote lifelong learning opportunities

33. Lifelong learning helps seniors maintain mental alertness⁸ and relevance in society. Continuous learning can help to prevent dementia in older persons⁹. As future seniors get more educated and financially secure, more will seek learning opportunities to enrich themselves.

⁸ Michael Brickey. (2001). "The extended life: Four strategies for healthy longevity", *The Futurist*, 35, 5: 52.

⁹ Shankar Vedantam. "Mind Games May Trump Alzheimer's: Study Cites Effects Of Bridge, Chess", *Washington Post*, Thursday, June 19, 2003, Page A01.
(Source: http://www.alzstl.org/news%20items/mind_games_may_trump_alzheimer.htm)

34. Lifelong learning is common in developed countries. There are several Third Age Universities – Kobe Silver College in Japan, the University for Third Age in Cambridge in United Kingdom and the University of West Florida Center for Lifelong Learning in USA. In South Korea, the Centre for Lifelong Education under the Korean Educational Development Institute conducts research on lifelong education.

35. In Singapore, lifelong learning has been promoted by the Ministry of Manpower since year 2000. The focus has been on employability related learning and the target audience were the less-skilled and lower-educated Singaporeans. For instance, the theme in 2003 was “Lifelong Learning for Employability”.

36. Besides employability related learning, we foresee that some seniors, especially the more educated ones, would want to pursue learning for personal interest as opposed to employability.

37. In Singapore, there are courses for seniors organised by the community. For example, Marine Parade Family Service Centre has started the YAH! Community College, which offers courses such as life skills development and information and communication technology. Seniors who are 55 years old and above take up lifelong learning certificate courses in the community college. The Centre for Lifelong Learning at the National University of Singapore Extension offers courses in language, literature and culture. The CAI feels that more learning opportunities should be made available to seniors.

Feature Highlight: YAH! Community College



The YAH! Community College aims to promote Life-long learning as a means towards productive and active ageing among seniors in the community. Seniors aged 55 years and above are able to take up certificate courses at the community college. During their course of learning, the seniors participate in volunteer work, community activities and take up electives such as line dancing, yoga and creative painting. These senior students will then be recruited as “Active Seniors Ambassadors” in the various areas of volunteer work.

38. **The CAI recommends that our universities and polytechnics provide more learning opportunities to seniors.** The courses should be short and non-examinable, and on topics that may be of interest to seniors. We encourage universities to consider allowing seniors to attend lectures and seminars, as well as have access to course curriculum and materials at no charge. These initiatives would facilitate like-minded seniors to form home-based study groups, allowing seniors the opportunity to learn and pursue their interest areas with minimal expenses.

39. Libraries are established centres of learning. Our libraries are located within housing estates and easily accessible to the public. All our public libraries are elder-friendly. There are lifts and access ramps for wheelchair-bound persons. In addition, the book shelves and height of placement of books are arranged such that it would be convenient for seniors to search and reach for books. To make the library completely elder-friendly, **the CAI recommends that the NLB provide more large print books and audio-visual materials that appeal to seniors.**

Build on Strong Family Ties

40. Strong families provide an important pillar of support for the nation. Families are the first line of support for seniors. Children have the responsibility to take care of their elderly parents, providing them with emotional support and looking after their needs. Elderly parents can play a contributing role in the family, for example, by playing an active role as a grandparent. Strong family ties also enable seniors to transmit values, wisdom and family traditions to the next generation.

41. The Government recognises the need for work life balance in support of stronger family ties. Increasingly, human resource practices are becoming family-friendly. The civil service is now on a five-day work week. In the workplace, pro-family practices such as flexi-work arrangements, extended maternity leave and childcare leave have been introduced.

42. Some of the Government's existing policies do encourage intergenerational bonding within families. Some initiatives include the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Family Housing Grant, tax incentives for children looking after aged parents and CPF top-ups among family members. These measures provide support for family members to care for one another.

43. In addition, intergenerational programmes are important to promote family bonding. In Singapore, organisations including voluntary welfare organisations, schools and even the private sector had begun championing such programmes since 2002. Fei Yue Community Services, for example had organised numerous intergenerational activities, an example of which is a community involvement partnership programme¹⁰.

44. In the HDB Sample Household Survey 2003, findings showed that the majority of seniors (90%) received visits from their married children at least once a month. **The CAI recommends the Government build on strong family ties to ensure that the family continues to be the first line of support.**

¹⁰ Fei Yue Community Services: "Generations Together". This programme is a partnership with a school, a neighbourhood link and a retiree centre. This programme was awarded one of the best three Grandparenting and Intergenerational Bonding Programmes in 2003.

Feature Highlight: Yum Cha with Grandparents



Yum Cha with Grandparents was first introduced by the Life Community Services Society. This is a 12-month intergenerational bonding programme which brings grandparents, parents, grandchildren and student volunteers together at a tea party once a month. The bonding developed among the generations was strong as the generations had the opportunity to bond and learn about each other every month for a year. After the first year, another organization, Bethesda Care, adopted the idea and ran the programme as well to continue the forged friendship.

45. We feel that sports is an activity that could involve the whole family. Currently, seniors enjoy concessionary entrance fees at swimming pools and gymnasiums. **The CAI recommends that SSC and People's Association (PA) should introduce family passes to encourage multi-generational use of sports facilities.** The family passes should be sold at concessionary rates and apply to all opening hours so as to encourage seniors to participate in sporting activities together with other family members. In addition, family passes could also be introduced to other community events such as carnivals and performances.

46. Advocacy for greater intergenerational (IG) bonding initiatives is also required. We will need champions for IG in schools, the community and workplace. These champions will help drive the mindset shift towards the importance of intergenerational bonding and cohesion.

47. We feel that there should be more activities that involve higher interaction opportunities across the generations. To strengthen intergenerational bonds, the CAI recommends that MCYS organise training courses to support service providers in the development of IG programmes, and create greater public awareness of intergenerational cohesion through public campaign. Also, conferences and network sessions should be organised on a regular basis, so as to facilitate sharing of best practices among our partners such as professionals, youth leaders and agencies.