

Research on the Model of Bengbu City Government's Purchase of Elderly Meal Assistance Services

-- Comparison Based on Three Typical Cases

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Abstract: The purchase of elderly meal assistance services by local governments is an important part of China's government's purchase of public services, and it is currently in the period of policy pilot and institutional exploration in some cities. This article selects three different types of elderly meal assistance models in Bengbu City, and explores the characteristics, existing problems, and development trends of the elderly meal assistance service model in Bengbu City from three aspects: competition level, inter subject relationship, and institutionalization level. Based on this, it proposes further strategies and thoughts to improve the government's purchase of elderly meal assistance services.

Keywords: Government procurement; Public services; Elderly meal assistance.

1. Introduction

With the aging and fewer children, the level of aging in China is not optimistic, and traditional elderly care models are no longer suitable for today's era, unable to meet the diverse needs of the elderly. The government's purchase of elderly meal assistance services from social forces can effectively solve the dining problems of elderly groups with living difficulties such as empty nests, living alone, staying behind, and the elderly.

The government's purchase of public services is generally defined as the government paying fees to entrust social forces to provide public services to meet the corresponding needs of the people. The social forces here include both the private sector that emphasizes efficiency and profit, as well as non-profit social organizations, public institutions, etc. (Li Yanduo, 2022) [1]. The system of government purchasing public services is often a "three entity" model, which includes the government, the recipient of public services, and the beneficiary of public services (Xiang Xiansheng, 2014). The areas of purchase involve traditional services such as education, public health, poverty alleviation, elderly care, and disability services, as well as many new social needs such as social work, community development, community correction, and environmental protection. In recent years, the practice of elderly care meal assistance services has been vigorously carried out in multiple regions, and some scholars have conducted a comprehensive analysis of the current situation of elderly care meal assistance services in specific regions [2]. Rao Jing (2022), based on the Smith policy implementation model, investigated the implementation effect of the elderly catering service policy in Mount Huangshan City [3]. The overall effect of policy implementation was good, but the profit objectives of catering enterprises and the low utilization rate of government investment funds reduced the quality of elderly catering service [4]. The current laws of the country have comprehensively stipulated the protection of community elderly care meal assistance services, but there are still some legal issues. Firstly, the service positioning is unclear, and the

scope and business model of service implementation are unreasonable; Secondly, the scope of key protected groups is not unified; Thirdly, the attractiveness of preferential policies to social capital is insufficient; The fourth is the failure to fully protect consumer rights (Tang Ying, 2023) [5]. The implementation process of policies is a dynamic adjustment process. In response to the feedback results of policy implementation, Hunan Province has made new regulations on community home-based elderly care meal assistance services, allowing families to bear meal expenses beyond discounts or subsidies, encouraging social forces to participate in elderly care services, and providing services for home-based elderly through online and offline channels (Cheng Su, 2023) [6]. Gao Miao (2022) proposed suggestions to narrow the supply-demand gap, provide personalized services, and improve regulatory systems in response to the supply-demand contradiction and inadequate regulatory mechanisms in elderly meal assistance services in Changning District, Shanghai [7].

This article draws on the ideas of domestic and foreign scholars on the research of public service models [8], and explores the characteristics, existing problems, and development trends of the elderly meal assistance service model in Bengbu City from three aspects: competition level, inter subject relationship, and institutionalization level. Based on this, it proposes further strategies and thoughts to improve the government's purchase of elderly meal assistance services.

2. Case Introduction

2.1. Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center Elderly Canteen - Outsourced Enterprise Comprehensive Custody Type

Yuhui District governs 5 streets, 2 towns, and 1 township, with a total of 36 administrative villages and 32 community neighborhood committees. According to the data from the 7th National Population Census, as of midnight on November 1,

2020, the permanent population of Yuhui District was 325814, including 63696 elderly people aged 60 and above, accounting for approximately 19.55% of the total population.

The Civil Affairs Bureau of Yuhui District has renovated the original Sunset Red Elderly Apartments in order to build a three-level elderly care service system for the district, township, and village bureaus. By bidding for the operation rights of the national elderly care company Ankang Tong Company, we aim to build a district level elderly care service guidance center that has both comprehensive service functions and command, training, and demonstration functions for the entire district's elderly care service stations. The elderly care service center has senior university, chess and card room, calligraphy room, dance room, audio-visual entertainment room, day care room and other senior activity venues. And there is a central management system, where elderly people in Yuhui District can communicate with operators by making phone calls to express their needs.

In 2021, in order to build a diversified elderly care meal assistance service system, the People's Government of Yuhui District decided to carry out pilot work on elderly canteens. The elderly canteens of Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center became one of the first batch of pilot projects for the construction of elderly canteens. The cafeteria is relatively small and covers an area of approximately 90 square meters. It consists of an open back kitchen and dining area, and can accommodate up to 50 people at the same time. The cafeteria has fewer staff, only 3 people, and each person holds multiple positions. The cafeteria has low profits, with a daily order volume of no more than 50 orders, and there are instances of counterfeit or fraudulent subsidies. According to the person in charge of the guidance center, since its operation, the cafeteria has been basically in a state of balanced income and expenditure, with slight losses.

2.2. Hexu Elderly Canteen in Yan'an Street, Longzihu District - Introducing a non-profit organizational model

In 2020, under the promotion of the Yan'an Street Office, the Hexu Community Canteen was put into trial operation, providing dining services for individuals living alone, extremely poor, and receiving subsistence allowances in the jurisdiction. Meanwhile, elderly people over 80 years old in the community can enjoy half price. The cafeteria relies on Hexu Community Junhua Property Management Service Co., Ltd., chooses a legitimate catering operation company, outsources the cafeteria management rights, and the government is responsible for supervision and regulation. And the cafeteria and community volunteer service team work together to provide door-to-door delivery services for elderly people living alone, alone, and with limited mobility in the community.

In 2021, the Hexu Community Canteen was listed as an elderly canteen, under the unified jurisdiction of the Longzihu District Civil Affairs Bureau. Due to the fact that the Hexu Elderly Cafeteria is operated by the Hexu Grand Cafeteria, which has a public welfare nature, the public welfare of the Hexu Elderly Cafeteria is much higher than that of other elderly cafeterias contracted by enterprises. Firstly, in addition to the subsidy prices set by the government for the elderly, the catering prices at the Warm Elderly Canteen are lower than the market prices. Secondly, community volunteers will provide meal delivery services for elderly

individuals with limited mobility, such as those living alone or alone. The Hexu Elderly Cafeteria has a relatively large scale, and in addition to providing meal assistance and delivery services for the elderly, there is still room for opening up to the outside world and participating in market competition. The location of the Hexu Elderly Cafeteria is superior, and the economic level of its jurisdiction is relatively high. Therefore, the Hexu Elderly Cafeteria has sufficient passenger flow to support its operation. The public welfare nature of the Hexu Elderly Cafeteria has also made it widely known, and with the government's demonstration subsidies, the Hexu Elderly Cafeteria has had good economic benefits since its operation.

2.3. "Hospitality and Fulfillment" Chain Catering Stores and Elderly Canteens in Bengshan District - Introducing Chain Catering Store Type

As both contractors of elderly meal assistance services purchased by the Bengbu Municipal Government, there is a slight difference between the "hospitable and full" chain restaurant elderly cafeteria in Bengshan District and the comprehensive elderly service center elderly cafeteria in Yuhui District and the Hexu elderly cafeteria in Yan'an Street, Longzihu District. The degree of marketization of the "hospitable and full" chain restaurant elderly cafeteria in Bengshan District is higher. The "hospitable and full" chain restaurant and elderly cafeteria in Bengshan District are listed and operated as "hospitable and full" chain restaurants. Essentially, this elderly cafeteria is still a social restaurant, but elderly people in the area can still enjoy discounts when dining, and this elderly cafeteria can also enjoy government subsidies. However, in reality, the majority of diners who come to dine are young diners, with fewer elderly people. And the cafeteria is located near the shopping mall, far away from residential areas, therefore, the elderly cafeteria plays a weaker role in assisting with meals.

3. Differences and Similarities in the Purchase of Elderly Meal Assistance Services by the Bengbu Municipal Government

3.1. Degree of Competition

The degree of competition is a measure of the degree of marketization in government procurement of public services, divided into two states: competitive and non competitive. The degree of competition can be judged by the number of participating entities.

From the perspective of competition level, the "hospitable and full" chain restaurants in Bengshan District have the highest level of competition for elderly canteens, and they obtained the listing and operation rights of elderly canteens through bidding. The Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center and the Hexu Elderly Canteen in Yan'an Street, Longzihu District are both operating elderly canteens commissioned by the government. More precisely, they have added elderly meal assistance services to two institutions that already have elderly care service functions. The reason for adopting a delegated approach is twofold: firstly, the comprehensive elderly care service center and the Hexu cafeteria already bear the responsibility of providing elderly care services within their jurisdiction, and listing the elderly

cafeteria is an icing on the cake. The second is that the comprehensive elderly care service center and the warm canteen have a certain public foundation, and the residents in the jurisdiction have a high degree of recognition for them.

However, from the perspective of business results, the most competitive "hospitable and full" chain restaurant, the elderly cafeteria, has the best revenue. The elderly cafeteria of Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center has been in a loss making state, and the Hexu Elderly cafeteria of Yan'an Street in Longzihu District is only slightly surplus. The main reason for the difference in profits among the three business models is the degree of openness of the cafeteria to the outside world. The essence of the "hospitable and full" chain store elderly cafeteria is still a social catering shop with greater autonomy, and the majority of diners are middle-aged and young people who have not reached the subsidy age. And "hospitable and full" is located near large shopping malls, with strong profitability. The Hexu Restaurant in Longzihu District relies on hotel resources and has a high passenger flow. However, due to its public welfare nature, the catering price is lower than the market price, so its profitability is not strong. The elderly cafeteria of Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center is located in an old residential area, and the diners are mostly elderly people who can enjoy subsidies in nearby communities. Due to factors such as geographical location and passenger flow, the elderly cafeteria has been in a state of slight loss. But according to the person in charge, after opening online ordering methods such as Meituan during the epidemic, the profit level of elderly canteens has slightly improved.

3.2. Intersubjective relationships

The "inter subject relationship" refers to the relationship between the contracting party and the contracting party in the government's purchase of public services, which exists in two states: independence and dependence. The contractor is the surface provider of elderly meal assistance services, and the contracting party is both the government. In the government's purchase of elderly meal assistance services, the relationship between the two is mainly judged by the degree of dependence of the contracting party on the contractor.

From the perspective of inter subject relationships, the comprehensive elderly care service center in Yuhui District, the Hexu cafeteria in Yan'an Street, Longzihu District, and the "hospitable and full" chain restaurant elderly cafeteria all have independent relationships with the government, as they are legal entities and operating entities established, operated independently, self-developed, and constrained by law. However, due to certain differences in certain aspects, there are certain differences in the relationships between the three purchasing models of Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center, Longzihu District Yan'an Street Hexu Canteen, and "hospitable and full" chain restaurant Elderly Canteen.

Firstly, the Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center is directly under the jurisdiction of the Yuhui District Civil Affairs Department and was purchased directly through bidding. The elderly cafeteria undertaken by the elderly care service center is also under the guidance and jurisdiction of the civil affairs department of Yuhui District. The elderly cafeteria has a closer connection with the government, and its independence is the worst among the three. Next is the Hexu Elderly Cafeteria in Yan'an Street, Longzihu District, which is connected to the government by

a property management company. The civil affairs department of Longzihu District first conducts bidding for the property companies within its jurisdiction, and then entrusts the winning property companies to bid for the elderly cafeteria. In this way, the independence between the elderly cafeteria and the government is stronger. Finally, there is the elderly cafeteria operated by the "Hospitality Full" chain restaurant. As a social catering restaurant, "Hospitality Full" undertakes some social responsibilities and undertakes some functions of providing public services. This elderly cafeteria has a completely independent and cooperative relationship with the government.

3.3. Institutionalization degree

The degree of institutionalization measures the stability and trend of existing government procurement models, and determines the clarity of government procurement, the proceduralization of procurement, and the adequacy of resource supply by examining laws, regulations, and policy documents. In 2003, the Government Procurement Law was implemented, which stipulated that the scope of procurement included goods, engineering, and services. However, in the scope of procurement, the understanding of services was limited to the logistics services operated by the government itself, and the broader and more important public services were not included in the procurement scope. At present, the legal basis for the government to purchase elderly meal assistance services mainly comes from local policies and regulations, and the national level laws and regulations still need to be improved [9].

The elderly cafeteria of Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center, the Hexu Elderly cafeteria of Yan'an Street in Longzihu District, and the "hospitable and full" chain restaurant elderly cafeteria, although there are differences in competition and inter subject relationships, all belong to the Bengbu Municipal Government's purchase of elderly meal assistance services. The policies and regulations they follow are basically the same, and the institutionalized construction is also generally the same. When carrying out the Elderly Meal Assistance Action in Bengbu City, it mainly relied on the "Elderly Meal Assistance Service Implementation Plan" issued by the Anhui Provincial Department of Civil Affairs, which made clear provisions on the basic principles, main contents, meal assistance service forms, service and management requirements, and guarantee measures of elderly meal assistance. Based on this, the Civil Affairs Bureau of Bengbu City has formulated the "Bengbu City Elderly Meal Assistance Service Action Service Plan", which has made clear regulations on the construction standards of elderly canteens or meal assistance points, the dining safety of meal assistance institutions, subsidies for meal assistance institutions, and meal assistance forms. However, there is no clear and public explanation for the specific procedures for purchasing services. Whether it is the elderly cafeteria of Yuhui District Comprehensive Elderly Care Service Center, the elderly cafeteria of Yan'an Street in Longzihu District, or the elderly cafeteria of "hospitable and full" chain restaurants, these three government purchase elderly meal assistance service models lack clear purchasing procedures.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1. Local governments play an important role in promoting elderly meal assistance services

Local governments have played a crucial role in promoting elderly meal assistance actions. Firstly, local governments need to coordinate social elderly care resources, conduct comprehensive investigations and evaluations of existing elderly care resources, and ensure the rational allocation and utilization of resources. Secondly, local governments should develop long-term elderly care development plans based on local actual needs and resource conditions to ensure the sustainability of elderly meal assistance services. Meanwhile, local governments need to invest funds and provide venues. Local governments need to provide necessary financial support for elderly meal assistance services to ensure the quality and coverage of the services. Local governments also need to provide or assist in providing suitable venues for elderly care services, such as community centers. Finally, local governments need to effectively manage and supervise elderly meal assistance services to ensure the quality and efficiency of the services.

4.2. It is difficult to balance the public welfare and profitability of elderly canteens

The original intention of the elderly cafeteria is to solve the problem of elderly dining and provide convenient, healthy, and economical catering services. Community elderly canteens serving the elderly should essentially be of a public welfare nature, taking into account the actual needs and economic capacity of the elderly. However, the operation of any catering service involves issues of cost and revenue. Elderly canteens need to pay for costs such as ingredients, labor, and rent during operation. If they rely solely on the dining income of the elderly, it is often difficult to cover these costs, leading to operational difficulties. While pursuing public welfare, elderly canteens also need to ensure their sustainable operation. However, from the current operating results of the three canteens, it is difficult to balance the profitability and public welfare of elderly canteens, and the operating effects of elderly canteens with strong public welfare attributes are not satisfactory [10].

4.3. Efforts will be made to strengthen institutional construction and promote the sustained and stable development of government purchases of elderly meal assistance services

One is to formulate and improve laws, regulations, or normative documents for the government to purchase elderly meal assistance services. It is necessary to raise the level of legislation at the national level to ensure that governments at all levels have clear guiding principles when purchasing public services. These principles should cover fundamental issues such as the eligibility of the purchasing entity, the

purchasing content, the purchasing object, the source of funds, the purchasing procedures, contract management and supervision, and evaluation to ensure the quality and efficiency of services. The second is to strengthen the government's awareness of public responsibility: the government should improve its contract management capabilities, ensure the purchase of public services and the maintenance of public interests, while also achieving effective utilization of resources. The government needs to strengthen training and capacity building to enhance its capabilities in contract negotiation, execution, and supervision. Thirdly, we need to strengthen the construction of elderly meal assistance teams: the government should continuously improve the professional level of elderly meal assistance service personnel, and enhance their service capabilities through training and education.

Acknowledgment

This work is supported by 2023 Anhui University of Finance and Economics Undergraduate Research and Innovation Fund Project (XSKY23209).

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