

The Evolution, Logic, and Prospects of Community-Based Home Elderly Care Policies in China: An Analysis based on Historical Institutionalism

Zhayang Zhaoma*, Qiuhe Li

School of Public Administration, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610000, China.

* Corresponding author Email: cdxz2407@163.com

Abstract: In response to the pressing issue of population aging and the increasing demand for elderly care services in China, a series of community-based home elderly care policies have been implemented. Utilizing a historical institutionalism analytical framework, this study categorizes the evolution of these policies into four distinct historical stages: emergence due to circumstances, exploratory initiation, clear acceleration, and quality enhancement. Based on structural and historical perspectives, this analysis summarizes the institutional context and policy establishment, the political variables and structural interaction, the key nodes and institutional breaks, as well as path dependence coupled with gradual transformation. Looking ahead, there is a need for community-based home elderly care policies to advance in four key areas: expanding coverage and diversifying services, enhancing informatization and intelligence, fostering marketization and socialization, and promoting integration and specialization, thereby improving institutional synergy to address the increasingly complex needs of the elderly population.

Keywords: Community-based Home Elderly Care; Policy Evolution; Historical Institutionalism.

1. Introduction

Population aging is a significant issue faced by human society today[1]. In 2023, Chinese leaders emphasized that "The happiness of a society is largely determined by the happiness of its elderly." The journey of Chinese elderly toward "the road to happiness" can be traced back to the early 1980s, when the deepening trend of population aging, both domestically and globally, made establishing goals for aging nations a new policy focus. The "China Committee for the World Assembly on Aging" was established to begin exploring solutions to elderly care issues. Following family and institutional care models, community-based home elderly care emerged against the backdrop of market economy reforms and other institutional factors. This model leverages social resources to support elderly individuals living at home, with family at its core, a community service network providing support, and a pension insurance system offering security[2]. In 1999, China entered an aging society, leading to a "getting old before getting rich" situation. By 2020, China transitioned to a "low-fertility aging" model, and by the end of 2023, it officially entered a moderately aged society. The demand for elderly care services has become increasingly complex and burdensome. In light of the ongoing aging crisis, analyzing the connotations and significance of community-based home elderly care services at the policy level, while reviewing its historical evolution and logical processes, can guide further practices in elderly care services.

Currently, research on community-based home elderly care policies can be categorized into several directions: (1) Summarizing the characteristics and advanced experiences of foreign community-based elderly care services, providing insights for the innovation and improvement of China's community-based elderly care service model[3, 4]; (2) Proposing improvements and enhancements to existing policies based on local practices and reflections on issues encountered during the implementation of community-based

elderly care service policies[5, 6]; (3) Affirming the government's leading role in promoting community-based elderly care service policies, clarifying its functions and responsibilities, and proposing optimization paths for policy implementation[7, 8]; (4) Summarizing and analyzing the dilemmas and challenges faced by social organizations and institutions in the process of providing community-based home care services for the elderly, and proposes corresponding countermeasures and recommendations[9, 10]; (5) In the context of rapid technological development, empowering community-based home care services through technology has become a new trend. In this process, countermeasures and policy recommendations are proposed regarding the issues at the policy level[11, 12]. Through a review of existing literature, it is found that current research provides a theoretical basis for the promotion and development of community-based home care service policies. However, most studies primarily analyze local cases and the current implementation status of policies to suggest improvements, with few studies deconstructing the trajectory of policy changes from a historical development perspective. Therefore, this research, based on the framework of historical institutionalism, aims to systematically analyze the evolution and logic of community-based home care service policies, and to forecast their future development trends. By summarizing from a historical perspective, this study seeks to grasp the characteristics and development trends of policy changes in community-based home care services, providing references for their long-term development.

2. Analytical Framework of Historical Institutionalism

The concept of historical institutionalism emerged in the 1990s and is used to interpret institutional change within a historical perspective. It integrates the strengths of structuralism and rationalism, establishing an explanatory framework of "macro structure-meso institutions-micro

actors"[13]. This framework connects various levels of theory, with strong explanatory power in the theories of institutional generation, path dependence, and institutional change.

2.1. Theory of Institutional Generation

Historical institutionalism rejects the assumption of institutional vacuum, positing that the emergence of new institutions is constrained and motivated by existing institutions. The generation of institutions is triggered by conflicts arising from existing institutions or crises faced by old institutions in new environments, where the influences of old institutions persist in the newly formed institutions[14].

2.2. Theory of Path Dependence

The concept of path dependence was first introduced by biologists and later applied to the study of institutional change. It suggests that the operation of institutions generates "inertia", leading to development along established paths over a certain historical period. Institutions possess self-reinforcing features, stemming from barriers set at their inception and the adaptive learning of relevant groups. Consequently, path dependence imparts a relative stability to institutions[15].

2.3. Theory of Institutional Change

The process of institutional change encompasses the "normal period" formed by the continuity of institutions and the "critical juncture" arising from institutional rupture. The emergence of institutional change is jointly caused by endogenous processes and external shocks[16]. Based on the intensity of institutional change, it can be categorized into three forms: functional change, institutional evolution, and institutional rupture[17].

By employing meso-level theory and integrating the structural perspective of historical institutionalism-which emphasizes the overarching institutional context and the sequence of political variables-with a historical perspective that focuses on path dependence and institutional innovation, this study analyzes the evolutionary logic of community-based elderly care policies from four dimensions: the institutional context and policy establishment, the political variables and structural interaction, the key nodes and institutional breaks and path dependence coupled with gradual transformation. The analytical framework outlined below has been established for this purpose:

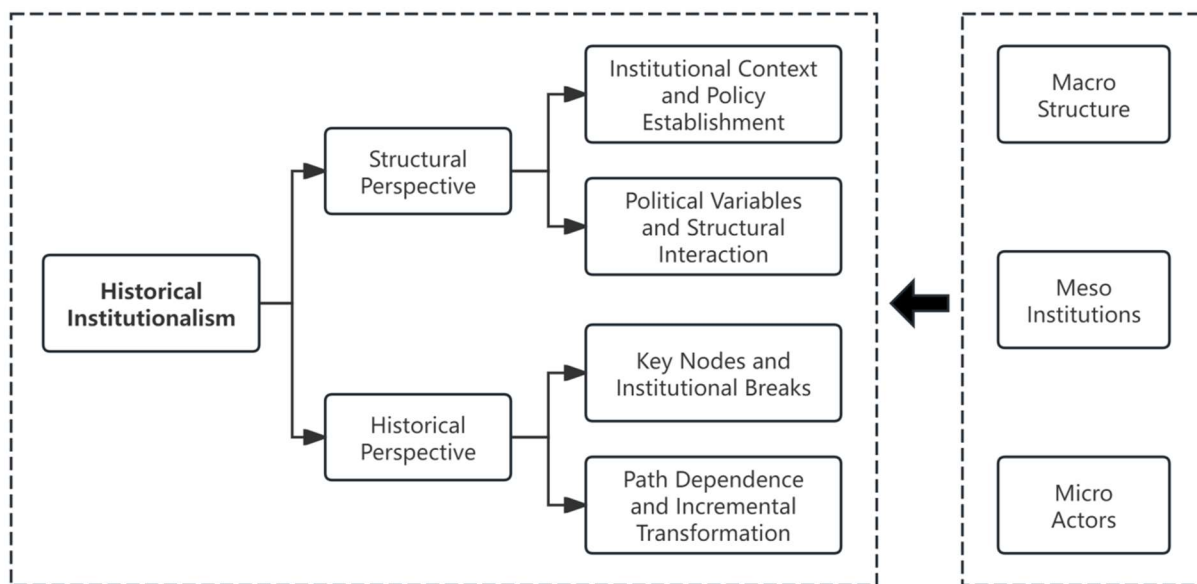


Fig. 1 A Historical Institutionalism Analytical Framework for the Evolution of Community-Based Home Elderly Care Service Policies

3. Historical Evolution of Community-Based Home Elderly Care Service Policies

As the issue of aging intensifies, the formulation of elderly care policies has garnered increasing government attention. In the 1990s, concepts such as "community elderly care" and "elderly care services" began to emerge in China. In 2000, the National Development and Reform Commission initiated the "Home Elderly Care Service Pilot Project". The evolution of community-based home elderly care service policies has undergone four stages: emergence driven by circumstances, exploratory initiation, clear acceleration, and quality enhancement.

3.1. Emergence Due to Circumstances: From Institutional to Community Care (1992-1999)

In 1992, China established the goal of reforming its market economy, leading to the dissolution of the traditional work unit system and the development of community services. The primary responsibility for elderly care shifted from work units to communities. In June of the same year, the "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Community Services" were issued, emphasizing the development of community services as part of resident services, with significant support from departments such as civil affairs and aging, laying the foundation for the development of community-based home elderly care services. In 1993, a joint opinion from fourteen ministries of the Ministry of Civil Affairs highlighted that community services, including elderly care, should be a primary focus, thereby establishing communities as key

providers of elderly care services and significantly promoting their development. The "Seven-Year Development Outline for Aging Work in China" released in 1994, pointed out the challenges facing aging services and set goals for ensuring that the elderly have access to care, medical services, meaningful activities, education, and leisure. It also emphasized the role of family care in economic support, daily living assistance, and emotional comfort. In 1996, China enacted the "Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly". This is the first comprehensive legal framework safeguarding the rights of the elderly, which recognized the importance of family in elderly care, indicating a high level of attention to aging issues.

During this historical period, the decline of institutional care and the rise of community care naturally led to the emergence of community-based home elderly care services. Although there were no explicit policy documents defining this concept, there was a clear emphasis on community and family care, as well as on constructing a policy framework for family-based elderly care. Specific initiatives such as home medical services and elderly activities reflected the principles of community-based home elderly care, facilitating the initial development of family care policies and laying the groundwork for policy refinement in the new century.

3.2. Exploratory Initiation: From Pilot Projects to Institutional Support (2000-2007)

As China entered an aging society, the government significantly increased its focus on elderly care issues. In 2000, the National Development and Reform Commission launched the "Home Elderly Care Service Pilot Project", emphasizing home-based elderly care services that extended from institutions to communities, providing centralized residential care and gradually expanding to home services. This exploration received positive social feedback. In February of the same year, the "Opinions on Accelerating the Socialization of Social Welfare" were published, emphasizing that elderly care should be home-based. In August, the "Decision on Strengthening Aging Work" was issued, highlighting the severe challenges posed by an aging population and the urgent need to develop community management and elderly service facilities, advocating for a combination of family and social care and the establishment of a comprehensive elderly social service system, with a strong emphasis on developing elderly services in communities. In November, the "Opinions on Promoting Urban Community Development" from the Ministry of Civil Affairs pointed out that with ongoing reforms, the role and importance of communities had become increasingly prominent, raising higher demands for the development of community services and elderly care projects. In 2006, the "Chinese Elderly Care Service System" characterized by home-based care, community support, and institutional supplementation, was proposed at the Second National Aging Work Conference; this system was further emphasized in the February 2006 "Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Elderly Care Service Industry". The 2007 "11th Five-Year Plan for Community Service System Development" called for the vigorous development of community-based home elderly care services and set higher requirements for serving special groups such as "empty-nest elderly" and "disabled elderly".

During this period, in response to the changing dynamics

of an aging society, "community-based home elderly care services" were explicitly proposed and promoted. From initial pilot projects to subsequent policies providing institutional support, China gradually established a distinctive elderly care service system, laying a solid foundation for the further refinement of community-based home elderly care service policies.

3.3. Clear Acceleration: From Emphasizing Community to Expanding Society (2008-2015)

In 2008, the National Aging Office and other departments issued the "Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting Home-Based Elderly Care Services", which marked the first time that home-based elderly care services were standardized at the central government level. This document clearly defined the conceptual connotation of home-based elderly care services, establishing community-based home care as one of the three main forms of elderly care, thereby enhancing its significance and status[18]. The issuance of this document also reflected the widespread dissemination of the "home-based elderly care" concept, signaling the entry of community-based home care services into a period of functional enhancement. This necessitated further integration of social forces to enrich resources, develop markets, and effectively meet residents' needs. In September 2013, the State Council released the "Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Elderly Care Service Industry", which emphasized the importance of leveraging market forces and gradually positioning social entities as the main drivers of the elderly care service industry. In the same month, the "Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of the Health Service Industry" was issued, highlighting the need to accelerate the development of community health and home-based elderly care services. In October of the same year, policies related to the construction of information platforms were released, proposing the establishment of an integrated public service information platform that is both informatized and standardized within communities, prioritizing the development of systematic applications targeting the elderly population. In 2015, China amended the "Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly" for the second time, further strengthening the legal safeguards for elderly individuals to enjoy their rights and services.

During this historical period, building on earlier policy practices and addressing challenges such as resource scarcity and limited supply, community-based home care service policies began to undergo more specific adjustments. On one hand, efforts were made to continuously improve market mechanisms and actively incorporate social forces, thereby enhancing the sufficiency and comprehensiveness of community-based home care service provision. On the other hand, these services were integrated with medical care and information technology to offer more comprehensive support.

3.4. Quality Enhancement: From Basic Construction to Maturation and Perfection (2016-Present)

Through the advancement of the previous three stages, the policy framework for community-based home care services in China has been largely established. Building on practical experiences, in 2016, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and other departments jointly launched a new round of pilot projects for

community-based home care services. The related "Notice" emphasized the need to summarize and promote replicable, sustainable experiences in the development of home and community elderly care services, thereby facilitating the nationwide development of community-based home care services. The "13th Five-Year Plan" for elderly care services, released in 2017, underscored the concept of integrating medical care with elderly care, proposing a service system characterized by "home-based care as the foundation, community support, institutional supplementation, and the integration of medical and elderly care", thus achieving a transformation from a "three-in-one" to a "four-in-one" model. The "Opinions on Promoting the Development of Elderly Care Services," issued in 2019, emphasized the requirement to enhance the quality of elderly care services. In 2023, the "Basic Standards for Home-Based Elderly Care Services" was released, establishing national standards for home-based elderly care services for the first time. This provided a fundamental basis for reasonably defining relevant scopes, qualifications, and supply processes, holding practical significance for promoting the standardization and professionalization of home-based elderly care services.

During this historical period, following a new round of policy pilot projects and promotions, community-based home care service policies have established themselves at the core of China's elderly care policy system. With increasingly top-level and comprehensive policies introduced in recent years, the policy system for community-based home care services has evolved from basic construction to a state of maturation and perfection.

4. The Evolutionary Logic of Community-Based Home Elderly Care Service Policies

The policy for community-based home elderly care services has transitioned from a focus on "community" to a focus on "service". Under the analytical framework of historical institutionalism, this evolution can be understood as a process characterized by four main pathways: macro-institutional factors, political variables, critical junctures, and path dependency.

4.1. Institutional Context and Policy Establishment

Historical institutionalism posits that policy change is influenced by macro-institutional contexts, thereby suggesting that analyzing these contexts can provide a basis for current policy formulation. The evolution of community-based home elderly care service policies has been significantly affected by three institutional background factors:

(1) Market Economic System Reform

Following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party, China has deepened its understanding of market economy principles during the reform and opening-up process. The 14th National Congress of the Communist Party formally proposed the goal of establishing a socialist market economy in 1992, marking the beginning of market economic reforms. As marketization progressed, the traditional "honeycomb" work unit system became increasingly rigid and failed to meet the needs of contemporary development, leading to its gradual dissolution. Concurrently, with the "devolution of power", many

grassroots management tasks were delegated to communities, which were more open and interactive compared to work units. Community services became a crucial aspect of development, particularly in inheriting the elderly care responsibilities previously held by work units, thus laying the foundation for community-based home elderly care services.

(2) Social Welfare Socialization

The socialization of social welfare aims to mobilize social forces under the concept of shared responsibility, transforming social welfare services into a collective endeavor. This requires expanding the social welfare actors, funding channels, and service teams. Since the market economic reforms, China has initiated research on social welfare socialization. The 2000 Notice on Accelerating the Socialization of Social Welfare set forth goals and requirements, emphasizing the need to involve social forces in welfare initiatives. This socialization is not only a response to the inadequacies of government-provided welfare but also reflects the feasibility of such an approach under socialist marketization, leading to widespread dissemination of this concept. The establishment of community-based home elderly care service policies has similarly been influenced, especially in the context of resource shortages and insufficient supply, by actively incorporating social forces to better meet the elderly's care needs.

(3) Strategic Response to Population Aging

The 14th Five-Year Plan and the 2035 Vision Outline propose the implementation of a national strategy for actively addressing population aging. This is a crucial measure for transitioning from mild to moderate aging, with profound implications for the sustained and healthy development of China's economy and society. On one hand, this national strategy calls for constructing a "coordinated system of home, community, and institutional care, integrating medical and health services", which will facilitate further development of community-based home elderly care services during their maturation period. On the other hand, this strategy fosters the cultivation of new economic growth drivers, creating a virtuous cycle of sustained development in the "silver economy" and increasing investments in elderly care services, thereby enhancing the supply of community-based elderly care.

4.2. Political Variables and Structural Interaction

Historical institutionalism posits that the structural relationships among relevant organizations and actors significantly shape political institutions. Additionally, the sequential arrangement of related political variables—specifically, the causal chains they create with institutions—plays a crucial role in driving institutional change. In the context of China's community-based home elderly care service policies, both the external environment and the interactions among political variables, as well as the actions of stakeholders, have collectively influenced their evolution, both directly and indirectly.

(1) External Environment

Some scholars think that aging results from the interplay of various factors, including technology, economy, and population migration, with technological advancement as a fundamental cause. The formulation of community-based home elderly care service policies is similarly affected by these factors. For instance, rapid technological progress has led to increased labor productivity and decreased mortality

rates, forcing policymakers to confront the substantial challenges posed by population aging while also presenting opportunities to tap into elderly human resources and develop the elderly care industry. This includes leveraging technology to enhance elderly care services and develop smart home care solutions, though it necessitates addressing challenges such as the "digital divide" faced by older adults. Additionally, socioeconomic development has empowered the elderly to consume more, elevating their expectations from mere survival and basic needs to a desire for respect and a fulfilling later life, thereby raising the standards for home elderly care services.

(2) Interaction of Political Variables

The interaction of multiple political variables and their configurations significantly influences institutional change. On one hand, the interplay of political variables such as economy, interests, and ideology drives institutional transformation. Economically, following the reform and opening-up, China's rapid economic development has improved the quality of life for its citizens, thereby raising the demand for elderly care services and laying the foundation for community-based home care service policies. In terms of interests, the introduction and continuous refinement of community-based home care service policies are not only responses to the severe aging situation and its associated consequences but also align with the aspirations for a better life among the populace, reflecting the interests of the Party, the state, and the people. Regarding ideological awareness, during the evolution of community-based home care service policies in China, the government has transitioned from a model of complete state provision to one that incorporates social forces, moving from a singular focus on institutional care to a more diversified elderly care service model. Similarly, residents have shifted from total reliance on government units to engaging with social institutions, and from a mindset focused solely on minimum living guarantees to one that emphasizes enjoying a fulfilling and happy old age. On the other hand, the structural arrangement of community-based home care service policies in relation to other policies or systems also facilitates their transformation. For instance, the enactment of the "Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly" and related standards provides a foundation and direction for defining and refining the scope of policy implementation.

(3) Agency of Actors

Although historical institutionalism emphasizes the role of external environments and the interaction of political variables in the transformation of community-based home care service policies, the actors involved are not entirely passive; they possess the potential to actively promote policy change. The provision of community-based home care services involves various stakeholders. On one hand, as the focus shifts from institutional to community care, conflicts may arise between entrenched interests that struggle to adapt to changing circumstances and the community, thereby necessitating a more detailed implementation of policies. On the other hand, during the process of incorporating social forces, factors such as insufficient market development and the inability to achieve sustainable and stable benefits may affect the willingness of these forces to engage, consequently impacting policy advancement. Therefore, these stakeholders may either facilitate or hinder the evolution of community-based home care service policies.

4.3. Key Nodes and Institutional Breaks

Key nodes are significant events and critical decision-making periods in the process of policy change that often disrupt existing balances, leading to institutional breaks. In the evolution of community-based home elderly care service policies, five key nodes can be identified:

(1) Dissolution of Work Unit-Based Elderly Care and Development of Community Services

The market economy reforms initiated in 1992 marked the dissolution of work unit-based elderly care services, representing the first key node in the transition of community-based home elderly care service policies. This societal shift laid the groundwork for community engagement in elderly care, prompting the government to emphasize the integration of "community care" and "family care" ultimately giving rise to community-based home elderly care service policies.

(2) Introduction of the Elderly Rights Protection Law, Providing Legal Safeguards

The enactment of the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly" in 1996 serves as the second key node in the transformation of community-based home elderly care service policies. This foundational legislation established legal protections for the rights of the elderly, playing a crucial role in regulating elderly care services and forming the basis for the development of elderly care service policies, including community-based home care.

(3) Aging Society and Complex Care Needs

The progression of aging in China constitutes the third key node in the evolution of community-based home elderly care service policies. The aging trend can be traced back to the early years of the People's Republic of China, with significant population growth during the post-reform period. As this baby boom generation aged, the elderly population surged, compounded by advancements in medical technology that extended life expectancy. By 1999, China officially entered an aging society, facing the challenges of "getting old before getting rich". By the end of 2023, China transitioned into a moderately aging society, intensifying the complexity and demand for elderly care services and presenting significant challenges for the establishment of relevant policies.

(4) Central Policies on Home-Based Elderly Care, Establishing a Basic Framework

In 2008, the National Aging Office and other agencies issued the "Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting Home-Based Elderly Care Services", marking the first central-level policy document addressing home-based elderly care. This fourth key node reflects the widespread dissemination of the "home-based elderly care" concept, establishing community-based elderly care as a vital form of elder support. The policy framework for community-based home elderly care services expanded, with content becoming increasingly detailed and comprehensive.

(5) Service Reform Pilot Initiatives, Advancing Practical Progress

In 2016, China launched a new round of pilot programs for community-based home elderly care services, representing the fifth key node in the evolution of these policies. This phase exemplified a steady advancement of community-based elderly care policies through a "pilot-experience summary-re-pilot" model. The successful experiences from this round of pilots guided the nationwide development of community-based elderly care services, enhancing the implementation and practical effectiveness of related policies.

4.4. Path Dependence and Gradual Transformation

Path dependence refers to the self-reinforcing process of institutions that maintain relative stability over a certain historical period, where new institutions emerging after key nodes retain elements of the old ones. The path dependence of community-based home elderly care services is primarily reflected in four aspects:

(1) Learning Effects

Learning effects denote the gradual understanding and accumulation of experience by stakeholders during policy implementation, leading to continuous improvements and refinements of the policy. In the context of community-based home elderly care service policy evolution, two national pilot initiatives allowed localities to learn from and promote advanced practices, facilitating policy development. Additionally, as challenges encountered in practice were addressed, attempts to incorporate social forces for improvement emerged, generating momentum for policy change.

(2) Synergistic Effects

Synergistic effects refer to the mutual influences within the policy network, wherein community-based home elderly care policies are closely linked to other institutional factors such as economic conditions, technological advancements, welfare policies, and labor regulations. Changes in related policies within this network, such as revisions to the statutory retirement age, can trigger corresponding developments in community-based elderly care service policies.

(3) Adaptive Expectations

Adaptive expectations imply that policies adjust in response to changes in the demands and expectations of relevant stakeholders. Community-based home elderly care service policies in China have emerged in response to contemporary societal contexts. As social environments evolve, the complexity and diversity of elderly care needs increase, necessitating continuous adaptation and adjustments to meet public demands and drive policy development.

5. Future Prospects of Community-Based Home Elderly Care Service Policies

Currently, the aging population in China is driven by low fertility rates, evolving from "longevity-driven aging" to "low-fertility aging", which will significantly accelerate the aging process. The report from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party emphasizes the need to implement a national strategy for actively addressing population aging and ensuring that all elderly individuals have access to basic elderly care services. As Chinese leaders emphasized, "We must ensure that all elderly people can enjoy a happy and fulfilling old age". Therefore, the future of community-based home elderly care service policies should not only aim for comprehensive coverage but also prioritize quality. This will lead to enhancements in four key areas: coverage and diversification, informatization and intelligence, marketization and socialization, as well as integration and specialization.

5.1. Strengthening the Foundation: Expanding Coverage and Diversifying Services

As the elderly population continues to grow and the quality

of material life improves, community-based home elderly care service policies should build upon a solid foundation to further expand coverage. This includes enhancing the construction and improvement of home elderly care service facilities to ensure that "all elderly individuals" can access basic elderly care services. Additionally, there should be a greater focus on improving service quality and content, offering diversified and customized home elderly care services to continually enhance the satisfaction and sense of fulfillment among the elderly.

5.2. Technological Empowerment: Enhancing Informatization and Intelligence

The concept of "Internet + Elderly Care" was mentioned in the early 21st century, yet an efficient, age-friendly informatization and intelligence platform has yet to be established. Technological empowerment has not been effectively integrated into the supply of community-based home elderly care services. Therefore, under the backdrop of technological development, community-based home elderly care service policies will further integrate the roles of government, medical institutions, enterprises, and families to establish more age-friendly informatization and intelligence platforms and facilities, thereby enhancing the accessibility and adaptability of community-based elderly care services. For instance, applying computer-assisted interventions in health services for the elderly can be explored[19].

5.3. Stimulating Potential: Fostering Marketization and Socialization

Although China has long begun exploring the incorporation of social forces into the supply of community-based home elderly care services, it has not yet escaped a government-dominated and safety-net-driven situation. The introduced social forces often suffer from weak self-sustainability and irregular operations. Therefore, community-based home elderly care service policies will further guide the marketization and socialization of service supply, improve industry standards, regulate related sectors, and establish reasonable entry and exit mechanisms. This will fully leverage market adjustment functions and stimulate market vitality and potential.

5.4. Scientific Evaluation: Promoting Integration and Specialization

Insufficient resource integration and a lack of professional personnel have led to inadequate supply capabilities for community-based home elderly care services, causing difficulties for the elderly in accessing necessary services. Given the limited overall resources, it is essential to coordinate and integrate these resources to maximize their utility. Furthermore, building a professional workforce will enhance resource utilization efficiency and service quality. Additionally, implementing scientifically sound evaluations for measuring intervention needs and monitoring responsibilities will facilitate dynamic assessments of elderly care demands, clarify responsible entities, and define task contents. Thus, the future development of community-based home elderly care service policies should focus on resource integration, talent recruitment, and establishing a scientific and reasonable evaluation mechanism for process outcomes.

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