

The Role and Challenges Faced by Social Work Stations in the Field of Social Assistance

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Abstract

With the continuous downward extension of social assistance to the grassroots level, township (street) social work stations have become an important platform for addressing the shortcomings of grassroots civil affairs and carrying out public services. This study reviews the development history of social work stations and their differentiated governance and service operation models in various regions, and explores their functions in the field of social assistance through practical cases. Studies have shown that social work stations can effectively address the shortcomings of grassroots civil affairs services and bridge the 'last mile' in serving the people by accurately identifying those in need of assistance, translating policies, integrating social resources, and empowering service recipients to integrate into society. Meanwhile, the development of social work stations still faces problems such as a shortage of professional personnel, frequent staff turnover, weak resource integration, and susceptibility to administrative constraints. This study clarifies the value and practical challenges of social work stations in the field of social assistance, and provides a reference for the standardized implementation of assistance services by grassroots social work stations.

Keywords

social work station, social work, social assistance, social worker

1. Introduction

Since the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, the country has gradually increased its attention to social services and put forward higher requirements for the quality and effectiveness of social services [1]. However, due to insufficient manpower, numerous tasks, and lack of professionalism in grassroots civil affairs services in townships, the traditional assistance methods that are 'extensive, incomplete, misguided, and only provide basic support without development' cannot meet the livelihood service needs of people in difficulty when providing social assistance services. With the gradual clarification and implementation of the guidelines for building social work stations, the state has further implemented its responsibility for providing basic livelihood services through social work stations. In particular, the 'Double Hundred Plan' in Guangdong Province and the 'He Plan' in Hunan Province were successfully implemented around 2017, which produced very good results in social assistance. This paper analyzes the development background and operation model of social work stations, combined with numerous case studies, to examine their role in social assistance and the challenges they face. It aims to provide reference and guidance for the further promotion of social work stations and the implementation and improvement of grassroots social work.

2. Establish Background and Development of Township (Subdistrict) Social Work Stations

As the Party and the State have gradually increased their attention to people's livelihood security and basic social services, how to effectively carry out social work and provide social services has become the focus of more people's attention. At the same time, it is also an important issue that the Party and the State need to consider in order to realize developmental social assistance [2]. Many scholars believe that the decision to 'build a large social work talent team' proposed by the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee in 2006 guided the introduction of a series of policies to promote the development of social work, and thus served as the policy starting point for building social work stations [3]. Some scholars believe that the social work station system was first practiced and then transformed into experience and policy. As early as 2000, Shanghai Pudong took the lead in establishing social work stations; later, Shenzhen Nanshan and Guangzhou-Shenzhen Social Work Service Centers accumulated early practical experience for the social work station system [4]. Social work stations are a product of the professional practice of social work in China. In 2017, Guangdong Province took the lead in implementing the 'Double Hundred Plan', and in 2018, Hunan Province launched the 'He Plan'. These two provinces began to build township (street) social work stations on a large scale in their respective provinces and formed their own models. The successful practice of these two plans not only provided confidence for the introduction of more policies, but also provided extensive practical experience for the subsequent construction and operation of social work stations across the country [5].

From 2020 to 2021, the state successively issued a number of policy documents to continuously promote the construction of social work stations. These policies included 'carrying out social assistance based on social work stations', 'improving the social work talent system', 'promoting full coverage of stations', and 'building a three-level social work service network', gradually forming a clear policy implementation roadmap. The call was responded to from all over the country, and the construction of social work stations was finally promoted across the country as a government action and a system design. It has become a professional comprehensive service platform born under China's unique national conditions and advanced system [6].

3. The Internal Governance Mechanism and External Operation Model of Social Work Stations

As a comprehensive platform positioned to effectively provide grassroots civil affairs services, social work stations bear the responsibility of connecting relevant government departments and social resources to address practical problems and improve the well-being of the public in a targeted manner. In order to maximize the function of social work stations, their governance mechanisms and operating models must be fully adapted to and suited to the specific circumstances of the area, street and community.

Based on the in-depth investigations and summaries of various scholars on social work stations in different regions, this study divides the governance mechanism of social work stations into three types: The first type is the direct hiring model represented by the 'Double Hundred Project' in Guangdong Province, in which townships (streets) directly hire social workers or draw them from certified social workers. The government sets up administrative and service positions in a coordinated manner, and the social work station operates independently under the hierarchical system and engages in professional affairs; The second type is the entrustment model represented by the 'He Plan' in Hunan Province, in which the street civil affairs department purchases project-based services from third-party social service agencies, and the social workers dispatched by the agencies provide social services and manage the social work station; The third type is the composite social work station, which is more widely used in Zhejiang Province. Its operation mode is mainly based on the direct dispatch of personnel by the government, supplemented by the professional services and supervision provided by social service agencies, with mutual cooperation and joint operation and maintenance [7].

If the governance mechanism can be seen as the internal management and coordination mechanism of a social work station, then the operational model of a social work station can be considered as the way it provides social services externally. China is vast and populous, with varying population distribution and economic development across different regions. Therefore, the model for social work stations to provide social services is always adapted to local conditions. Through comparison and summarization of service models in different regions and social work stations, it has been found that the way social work stations provide social services can be summarized into four steps: The first step is to investigate the specific living and economic conditions of every resident in the jurisdiction and establish information files; The second step is to identify and explain

applicable policies to those in need; The third step is to develop specific service plans, link government departments, social organizations, volunteers, and other welfare service resources to solve the specific difficulties faced by service recipients; The fourth step is to help service recipients establish connections with society (through solving difficulties, adjusting mindset, building confidence, and developing skills).

4. The Role That Social Work Stations Can Play in Social Assistance

Existing research has elucidated the value of social work stations from multiple dimensions. This study focuses on the core mission of social work stations, emphasizing their role in the field of social assistance, and analyzing this role in conjunction with the four-step workflow summarized above. First, Comprehensive Investigation and Accurate Identification: The unique advantage of social work stations is that they can leverage the professional social workers' ability to 'go door-to-door', not only to fully understand the actual living conditions of every resident and promptly identify those facing difficulties and needing assistance, but also to deeply understand their predicaments and urgent needs. Furthermore, through numerous home visits and interviews, they can build 'familiar relationships' with local residents and gain their trust and support [8]. Through field research, Professor Zhang and Professor Liao found that the bankruptcy of a machinery factory in Guangdong Province led to the unemployment of a large number of people. However, the predicaments faced by the unemployed were not entirely the same. The local social work station, through in-depth visits and comprehensive investigations, categorized those in need of assistance into groups based on their needs, such as those applying for minimum living allowances, those applying for disability certificates, orphans, and single-parent families, and provided targeted assistance services [1]. After establishing trust with the local people through in-depth visits, the residents would proactively provide clues about other people in urgent need to the social workers, helping them to provide social assistance more quickly and accurately [2].

Second, Promote and Translate Policies: Compared to professional social workers, the general public has limited knowledge of policies and may not understand them accurately. At this time, frontline social workers, through their professional knowledge, can connect the needs of service recipients with applicable policies. Through 'policy translation', they can help the public understand policies, cite policies suitable for their own circumstances and able to meet their needs, and ensure that policies are effectively implemented [3]. A study shows that a community social work station compiled easily understandable booklets of policies that residents had high interest in and were highly applicable to, and carried out a series of promotional and explanation activities. Some residents with their own needs or who knew about the needs of their neighbors began to proactively report their difficulties to the social work station, including disability assessment and subsidy applications after stroke in the elderly, and low-income assistance applications for people with mental disabilities [2].

Third, Linking Social Resources to Achieve Social Assistance: The dispersion of community resources is a challenge faced by grassroots service providers. Social work stations can play the role of connectors, integrating and exploring existing resources and accurately delivering them to people in need. A study shows that a certain street has created a three-tiered resource network model: a basic resource layer integrating local resources such as community venues and volunteers, a professional resource layer linking public welfare foundations, medical institutions and enterprises, and a strategic resource layer connecting government departments and large enterprises. Within a year, the social work station linked resources worth more than 80,000 yuan, trained 54 volunteers, and achieved a service satisfaction rate of 98% [8]. Some social work stations also carry out special assistance projects for homeless people. The social work station is responsible for the overall planning and allocation of resources, providing homeless people with multi-level assistance from material support to accommodation and medical treatment, and then to returning home or finding relatives [9].

Fourth, Reduce Social Exclusion and Help Service Recipients Integrate Into Society: In the process of social assistance, social work stations not only help vulnerable groups solve practical problems, but also provide comprehensive and full-process assistance and support to service recipients from the perspectives of building self-confidence, social participation and self-development, so as to achieve the goal of reducing social exclusion, enabling service recipients to integrate into society, become self-reliant and achieve sustainable development [3]. A veteran in a certain county has been taking care of his paralyzed daughter for 23 years. Social workers not only contacted professional caregivers to guide him in taking care of his daughter, but also

organized volunteers to help him take care of his daughter. They also encouraged him to participate in community publicity and speeches while the volunteers were taking care of his daughter, helping him to regain his sense of value and self-confidence [10]. A social work station in another location encountered a woman who had just lost her husband. She had been unemployed for years and was disconnected from society. The social workers began by comforting her grief, assisting and accompanying her in applying for minimum living allowance. During this process, they taught her how to use a mobile phone, expanding her access to information.

The social workers' companionship and guidance gradually fostered a sense of control and confidence in her life. Furthermore, the social workers helped her find a job as a cleaner and provided guidance on enrolling in pension insurance, life planning, and improving her financial management skills. This woman, who previously didn't have a cell phone and was afraid of others speaking loudly, now actively and confidently communicates with others after long-term companionship and assistance from social workers. The social workers also contacted volunteers to provide tutoring services for her son, resulting in improved grades and a better relationship between her and her mother-in-law [2]. A social work station in another region identified a child who had lost both parents. He became withdrawn and even dropped out of school due to injury. The social work station gradually built communication and trust with him by starting with his interests. They then provided him with social skills training, role-playing scenarios to simulate school social situations, gradually teaching him skills in speaking proactively, interacting with others, and handling conflicts. Moreover, the social work station organized family meetings to guide grandparents in cultivating communication skills between grandparents and grandchildren. Three months later, the child successfully returned to school, his math score improved by ten points, and he went from having zero social interaction to actively initiating one or two social interactions per week [8]. Numerous cases and studies have shown that individual predicaments do not exist independently, but are the result of imbalances in macro-micro interactions. The role of social work stations is to integrate the concept of empowerment into the process of providing social assistance, not only solving the current predicaments and problems of the recipients, but also focusing on cultivating their ability for long-term development and integration into society [8].

5. Challenges Faced by Social Work Stations in Carrying Out Social Assistance Work

The operation and development of social work stations also face some practical difficulties. First, both internal system governance and external service provision require the participation of professional personnel. In the process of implementing social assistance, the service quality of social work stations depends on the professional competence of social workers. However, most social work stations at present face the dilemma of insufficient professional personnel. One study showed that three social work stations in a certain area had a total of eleven social workers, of whom only one had an educational background related to social work, and only four had obtained social work qualification certificates, with a certificate holding rate of only 36.4%. The stability of employees at social work stations is also not guaranteed. Of the three social work stations in the area, only four have been employed for more than two years, while five have been employed for less than one year. Due to the nature of their services, social work stations need to maintain long-term communication and in-depth interaction with those they are helping. However, the high turnover rate of social workers leads to a break in the initial relationship established between the social work stations and those they are helping, as well as the social resources they have accumulated [11]. Some scholars have found that social work stations also face difficulties when connecting with social resources. This is because, in the process of connecting with external social resources, social work stations themselves lack core resources and value for exchange. This results in limited enthusiasm and investment from some partners, indirectly affecting the efficiency of resource integration and connection, and preventing the service quality and effectiveness from being maximized. Finally, whether it is a government-directly-hired, entrusted-operated, or comprehensive internal governance model, it is largely constrained by government management and support. In this situation, social workers will inevitably be constrained by the administratively-led assessment mechanism, and their work and thinking patterns will be constrained by the administrative performance requirements. This can easily lead to an imbalance in resource allocation and energy input between administrative affairs and professional services. If this is not adjusted in time, it will not only affect the professional development of social work stations, but also cause a mismatch between service supply and residents' actual needs [11].

6. Summary and Recommendations

Social work stations, established under the Party and government leadership as grassroots comprehensive service platforms in townships, are designed to provide professional social services to disadvantaged groups and special-needs groups within their jurisdiction. They provide a safety net of basic living services through precise identification and refined assistance, bridging the ‘last mile’ of public service. Although social work stations face challenges such as a lack of professional talent, insufficient resources, and the influence of administrative control in providing assistance to those in need, their role and effectiveness in four aspects, comprehensive investigation, interpretation and linkage of policies, coordination of social resources, and empowerment of socialization, are significant. They deliver limited welfare service resources more accurately and effectively to people in need, greatly improving people's well-being and promoting social fairness and justice.

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Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the science project.

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