

**Strengthening the Social and Cultural Well-Being of the Elderly
Population: A Review of the Working Model of COMNET
Befriending Service based on the Asset-Based Community
Development (ABCD) Model**

by

Tan Jia Hui

Ng Koon Sing

Abstract

This paper reviews a community-based programme, COMNET Befriending Service, using the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model. The COMNET Befriending Service was conceived at its inception as a community-based approach. Utilizing the ABCD model as the theoretical basis for the programme, this review aims to evaluate the COMNET Befriending Service. The findings from this review show that COMNET Befriending Service has fulfilled various components of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model and is successful in fostering community development within COMNET's service boundary. However, not all the elements of the ABCD model have been entirely achieved by the COMNET Befriending Service. The befriending service can be improved by engaging the community to identify and utilize more community assets and stocks of social capital. Other community resources may also be roped in to complement the befriending service to reduce service gaps.

Introduction

This paper reviews a community-based programme, COMNET Befriending Service, using the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model (Mathie & Cunningham, 2002). The COMNET Befriending Service was conceived at its inception as a community-based approach. Utilizing the ABCD model as the theoretical basis for the programme, this review aims to evaluate the COMNET Befriending Service and explore possible future directions for the programme.

COMNET Befriending Service

COMNET Befriending Service was started in 2007 by a group of social workers from The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres in Singapore. It was initiated and developed to supplement existing social services in monitoring and improving the living conditions of needy elderly residents who experience social isolation and/or mental health issues. The clientele of the COMNET Befriending Service is elderly¹ persons with little or no family support.

Speeches by Mr Chan Chun Sing, Minister of Social and Family Development and Second Defence Minister, have implied that the stance of the Singapore government is that Singaporeans should strive to be independent and self-reliant but nobody should be left behind (Chan, 2013a). This is done so through strengthening the social safety net by utilizing the strengths of the community, private

¹ As defined by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), an elderly refers to a person of 60 years old and above.

sector and the government (Chan, 2013b). In line with the government's stance, the COMNET Befriending Service aims to prevent social isolation and maintain the physical and mental health well-being of the elderly through monitoring and supporting the elderly, and linking them up with relevant resources.

The befriending service provides a combination of home help, escort services and tele-befriending services. Weekly home visits are conducted by COMNET Carers, the term for the volunteers of the COMNET Befriending Service, who reach out to elderly who are socially isolated to gradually build and gain their trust. Through regular outings and structured activities, elderly clients are given opportunities to establish their own social support network. Via observations and feedback obtained from the clients, the Carers alert COMNET staff if more intensive support for the elderly may be required. This may then be followed up by a referral to a social worker for casework support to address the elderly person's needs.

COMNET Carers are recruited from the same community (i.e., Ang Mo Kio estate) as the clients. Seniors are recruited as volunteers for the COMNET Befriending Service as elderly Carers are more likely to have life experiences and cultural backgrounds similar to the targeted clientele. Elderly Carers can also communicate more effectively using dialects familiar to the older generation than youth volunteers. While befrienders and volunteers from other programmes tend to come from higher socio-economic rungs of the society, COMNET recruits Carers from diverse social and economic backgrounds to cater to the needs of its clientele (Kam, 2002).

Training and guidance are provided for the Carers by COMNET to maximize their potential and equip them with skills on home visiting and communication. COMNET provides training and guidance for the Carers to equip them with skills on home visiting and communication. As COMNET recognizes Carers may have their own personal commitments, the Carers are given some flexibility for conducting home visits. For example, the Carers are allowed to schedule home visits according to their availability, as long as they abide to the COMNET Carer's Code of Conduct, which was drafted to ensure the safety of both the elderly clients and the Carers.

Review of COMNET Befriending service

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) of Singapore has recently modelled the COMNET Befriending Service into a component of the Senior Activity Centre (Cluster Support). The Senior Activity Centre (Cluster Support) has been implemented at selected districts in Singapore at the time of writing, with plans to implement it island-wide subsequently. This review of the COMNET Befriending Service seeks to explore and develop possible future directions for the programme, so that the service can further increase the efficient usage of community resources and tighten the social safety net. In addition, it is hoped that some areas of improvements may be identified through this review.

Asset- Based Community Development (ABCD) Model

The COMNET Befriending Service working model will be reviewed based on the five key ideas of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model. As illustrated in Figure 1, there are five key components that make up the ABCD model (Mathie & Cunningham, 2002).



Figure 1. The Asset-Based Community Development Model.

The first element is a focus on the strengths and past successes of the community. Each community has its own assets: its people, space, culture, objects and relationships. Each community also has its own shared history and successes that can be used to guide its future actions. Under this model, community development can be achieved when the community identifies and utilizes its assets effectively.

The second element is an emphasis on social capital as a community asset. The model recognizes interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships as assets and means to mobilize other assets of the community. Both formal and informal support networks are stocks of social capital. As people form relationships with one another, social networks are expanded. Social networks are enhanced as people form tighter bonds within the community. Social capital, when utilized and/or used to mobilize other assets, drives community development.

The third element of the ABCD model is community economic development. The model stresses community-driven economic development as a more sustainable economic model than other models. Through a community-based approach, community resources are utilized to enhance economic capacities and foster individual and collective empowerment. Overall, the quality of life is elevated and maintained using community resources.

Community participation is also a key element in the ABCD model. For community development to be sustainable, the model asserts that power must be located within the community. The model stresses that all the members of a community, including socially marginalized groups, should be involved in communal matters. Active participation helps foster individual and community empowerment and thereby facilitates community development.

Lastly, the ABCD model aims to contribute to civil society by fostering active citizenship engagement. This element adds to the element of community participation by stating that civil society can be built as active participation occurs in the local, national and international contexts (Mathie & Cunningham, 2002).

Why the ABCD Model?

The ABCD model was chosen as a theoretical basis for COMNET Befriending Service as the two models have similar ideas. Firstly, both the ABCD model and COMNET Befriending Service working model place a strong emphasis on the strengths and utilization of community assets. Other community development approaches that are problem-centred are thus less relevant for comparison with the COMNET Befriending Service working model.

Secondly, both the ABCD model and the COMNET Befriending Service working model focus on social capital. Befriending service is highly dependent on social capital to support the elderly in the community and social capital is one of the key elements in the ABCD model. Interpersonal relationships and networks of social support are valued in community development in both models.

In addition, the ABCD model has an advantage over other models due to its sustainability (Mathie & Cunningham, 2005). The model is sustainable as community development is citizen-driven. The COMNET Befriending Service was developed with the idea of developing the '*kampong* spirit' in urban communities. *Kampong* literally translates to the word, village, in Malay; the term, *kampong* spirit, refers a sense of community that motivates members of the community to actively help one another. Similarly, the ABCD model involves the relocation of power within the community. Ultimately, the mission of the COMNET Befriending Service is to support the elderly to "age in place"² and thus it is important for the review to be done based on a sustainable theoretical model.

Discussion

Community Assets

During the initial conceptualization of the COMNET Befriending Service, the social workers of The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres attempted to identify community assets through discussions with grassroots leaders. Housewives and retirees in the Ang Mo Kio estate were identified as an asset due to their availability

² According to Yap (2010), "Singapore's conceptualisation of ageing in place involves developing strong social networks involving families and friends and providing care and social services so that the elderly can continue to live in the community for as long as possible without institutionalisation."

and willingness to contribute to the community voluntarily and were thus recruited as Carers. In addition, this group of people live in close proximity to the elderly. The Carers are also able to communicate with elderly clients fluently in various dialects, adding value to the service. The COMNET Befriending Service taps on this special group of people in the neighbourhood as a community resource and gives them the opportunity to contribute to their community through caring for the elderly. Over the past few years, the COMNET Befriending Service has continued to tap on the concept of community assets by recruiting more Carers by word of mouth through the existing pool of Carers, staff of The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres, and neighbourhood roadshows.

As COMNET recognizes that each individual has his/her personal commitments, the befriending service allows for some flexibility, giving Carers the freedom to arrange their own schedules for home visits and tele-befriending. The element of flexibility encourages more people to commit their time and effort as Carers, hence minimizing turnover in the pool of Carers. In addition, COMNET also provides Carers with training to develop their skills in communication and monitoring, thereby maximizing their potential and ensuring that the elderly gets proper care through the befriending service.

Noting the success of empowering housewives and retirees as Carers, the COMNET Befriending Service can look into further improving the programme by engaging grassroots leaders and the rest of the community as community assets. As more assets are identified and utilized, COMNET can explore how these community assets can be effectively and efficiently managed.

Social Capital

When COMNET Befriending Service first started, social capital was created by involving grassroots leaders as they had ample social connections to mobilize the community to address the needs of the elderly. A number of Carers in the befriending service are former and current grassroots leaders.

In the COMNET Befriending Service, stocks of social capital are increased and enhanced by Carers and COMNET staff over time. Stocks of social capital are created as Carers form support networks within the community by befriending the elderly. Social capital is also increased as more Carers are recruited. Carers assist in this process by recruiting friends by word of mouth. The Carers also engage the neighbours of some elderly clients to assist in the monitoring of cases requiring more intensive assistance, thereby expanding the social support network between the neighbours and the elderly. Social relationships are enhanced when Carers and neighbours are highly involved in the care for the elderly.

However, not all Carers are able to engage neighbours, and this limits the growth and enhancement of social capital. Since the process of increasing and fostering social support network is not able to occur organically and efficiently, more efforts will have to be invested to bond the community. Addressing this issue, COMNET has started hosting a structured activity programme through which the elderly are able to exercise together at the void deck below government-built residential blocks (Housing and Development Board flats). The structured activity programme enables elderly from the same community to interact socially with each other. This helps the elderly expand and enhance their social support network and reduce social isolation.

Community Economic Development

The COMNET Befriending Service was developed to supplement existing social services in monitoring and improving the living conditions of needy elderly residents, enabling them to age in place and remain in the community for as long as possible. Mulvihill (2011) asserts that the benefits of befriending include allowing the elderly to (a) gain independence as befrienders assist them in overcoming barriers, (b) receive preventive support through weekly home visits and monitoring, and, as befriending is a personalized form of care, (c) have more control over their care options and personal choices.

The regular monitoring of the elderly's physical and mental health allows for early detection and intervention. With early intervention, health-care costs for the elderly are reduced as the number of hospital stays is reduced and institutional care is minimized as the elderly are able to remain in the community (Mullvihill, 2011). Thus, by reducing health-care costs and the burden on the national health-care systems and the economy, the COMNET Befriending Service has facilitated the process of community economic development.

Reviewing from the perspective of the recruited Carers, the COMNET Befriending Service has also facilitated community economic development. The Carers are well-equipped with the training provided. As they conduct home visits, the Carers gain field experience as well. Some of the Carers were former clients of family service centres in the community. They gain confidence as they learn new skills and coping strategies through the befriending experiences, thus boosting their economic capabilities and enhancing their employability gradually.

Admittedly, community economic development generated by the programme currently is limited. The economic capabilities of the elderly remain weak and most of

them are reliant on financial assistance. More options have to be explored to involve the elderly in meaningful work to keep their minds actively engaged.

Community Participation

Active participation has been observed at various levels within the community. Grassroots leaders have been actively involved in the COMNET Befriending Service since the programme's inception. Grassroots leaders are regularly consulted with regards to the identification of community assets and recruitment of Carers into the programme.

The nature of befriending work posits Carers as active participants of the community. They actively reach out to elderly clients and become channels of feedback of the befriending service during the monthly Carers' meetings. The Carers also engage neighbours in the care of the elderly, thereby expanding the social support network of the elderly and getting more people to be interested in communal matters.

While originally on the receiving end, some elderly clients of the COMNET Befriending Service have gained sufficient independence and confidence through the service to be empowered to help others. They learn to care for other needy neighbours and to inform COMNET staff and Carers about their neighbours' situation. Some elderly clients also actively provide feedback about their care options to the Carers and staff during home visits or through the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire.³ As such, some degree of active participation has occurred within the community as a

³ The Client Satisfaction Questionnaire is conducted with every client of COMNET Befriending Service annually.

result of the programme. Notably, active participation comes from various groups of the community, not just the relatively powerful, the grassroots and community leaders, but also the elderly.

Nonetheless, active participation has been observed only in the minority of Carers and elderly. Over the years, contact with the grassroots and community leaders has also gradually decreased. The stake that grassroots and community leaders used to have with COMNET Befriending Service is now transferred to COMNET as they get recruited as Carers. To increase the level of active participation, engagement with the grassroots and community leaders should be increased to obtain feedback from the community. Needs assessments can be conducted to understand the needs of the community.

Active Citizenship

Some degree of active citizenship has occurred since the inception of the befriending service but it has since remained limited. With the implementation of the new programme, Senior Activity Centre (Cluster Support), it is expected that The Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centres will continue to hold a greater stake in terms of power and control. This situation, however, runs contrary to the ideals of the ABCD model, which proposes that the power should lie within the community.

The programme was initially created to bring formal support to the elderly as they were unable to obtain support from the community organically. Using the ABCD model as a basis, there is a need to balance the power and control between the agencies and the community. This issue is longstanding, and COMNET has taken this into account. Community development and active participation should be promoted, and formal support should be accorded whenever the community is unable to.

Conclusion

The review shows that the COMNET Befriending Service has fulfilled various components of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model and has been successful in fostering community development within COMNET's service boundary. Admittedly, some of the elements of the ABCD model have not been entirely achieved by the COMNET Befriending Service. However, COMNET has put in efforts to reduce the service gaps by complementing its services with those of other programmes.

Although the COMNET Befriending Service is a relatively young programme compared with other local befriending services, it has established itself as a service provider operating on its own model. The model has been successful thus far in utilizing the community's assets and engaging Carers to monitor and maintain the physical, mental and social well-being of the elderly. It is encouraging that the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) has taken this model into consideration and modelled the Senior Activity Centre (Cluster Support) after it to be implemented island-wide.

References

- Chan, C. S. (2013a). *MSF-CSC Social Sector Conference*. Retrieved from <http://app.msf.gov.sg/PressRoom/MSFCSCSocialSectorConference.aspx>.
- Chan, C. S. (2013b). *The Ageing Asia Investment Forum*. Retrieved from <http://app.msf.gov.sg/PressRoom/TheAgeingAsiaInvestmentForum.aspx>.
- Kam, P. K. (2002). Senior volunteerism and empowerment. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, 12, 112–133.
- Mathie, A., & Cunningham, G. (2002). From clients to citizens: Asset-based community development as a strategy for community-driven development. *Coady International Institute Occasional Paper Series*, 4. Retrieved from http://coady.stfx.ca/tinroom/assets/file/resources/publications/4_From_Clients_to_Citizens.pdf.

Mathie, A., & Cunningham, G. (2005). Who is driving development? Reflections on the transformative potential of asset-based community development.

Canadian Journal of Development Studies/ Revue canadienne d'études du développement, 26, 175–186.

Mulvihill, J. (2011). The unique and valuable support provided by mentoring and befriending. *Working With Older People*, 15, 34–37.

Yap, M. T., & Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore. (2010). *State of the Elderly in Singapore 2008-2009*. Retrieved from http://app.msf.gov.sg/Portals/0/Summary/research/State%20of%20the%20Elderly_Release%203.pdf.