

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

General correspondence

Pivoting volunteer engagement activities for older adults in long-term care facilities and day care centres online during the COVID-19 pandemic

The persistence of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic around the world has necessitated the development of telehealth and the delivery of care virtually.¹ Social distancing measures continue to be implemented especially in high risk settings such as long-term care facilities (LTCF)² and day care centres. However, the effects of social isolation on mental health remain a real concern, and actions must be taken to minimise the adverse effects of such measures on older adults.

Singapore has a total of 77 nursing homes and 143 centre-based facilities with increasing demand from an ageing population. To manage the costs of the elderly care sector, the government has adopted a partnership model with voluntary welfare organisations (VWO).³ Volunteer-led activities are an integral part of delivering cost-effective and meaningful programmes to older

adults and have been shown to be effective in improving health outcomes.^{4,5} However, with social distancing measures most LTCF and day care centres have limited or barred visitors and volunteers.

VWO have had to innovate in response to these measures to continue to engage their beneficiaries and volunteers or they run the risk of volunteers losing interest or being diverted to other organisations and causes.

We share some activities that have been adapted by LTCF and day care centres to a virtual format (Table 1).

Pivoting to virtual platforms has drawbacks and limitations. These include not being fully able to replace in-person interaction and limitations on the participation of older adults with cognitive, visual or hearing impairments. Many older adults are not digitally literate and may not have access to digital infrastructure or be used to interacting over a screen.

However, these challenges are not insurmountable and there are many benefits of pivoting volunteer-led

Table 1 Activities that have been adapted from in-person to online formats

Activity	In-Person	Online
Interactive games and activities	Interactive games and activities planned by volunteers such as bingo, charades, crafts and song and dance items	Activities such as bingo, charades and crafts modified for an online platform. Dance and song performances or items can be pre-recorded by volunteers
Befriending	Volunteers come down in person to befriend seniors on a regular basis	Virtual befriending sessions
Skills training programme	Lessons on topics such as use of mobile devices and IT skills conducted in person	Lessons over virtual platform
Reminiscence therapy	In person with physical props and items from the past	Reminiscence over virtual platform. Wider range of media and resources such as mobile applications, videos, virtual tours, songs to engage seniors
Theme parties	LTCF/day care centres organise monthly theme talks, e.g. exploring different countries/cultures/cuisines	Mixed media engagement: "travel" to different countries virtually whilst seniors enjoy cuisine in person or are sent recipes to try
Talks	In-person talks on various topics such as gardening, cooking, travelling, etc.	Talks done over virtual platform can be pre-recorded and involve more participants. Language translations can also be done to allow more participants to benefit
Follow-up engagement	Did not see need for telephone or video call follow-ups as seniors attend centre regularly	Telephone or video call follow ups

activities onto a virtual platform. Some of the benefits include having a wider pool of volunteers who are more available or willing to participate over a virtual platform than in-person. Many busy professionals or working adults who are keen to volunteer with limited pockets of time are more likely to do so over a virtual platform. With the younger generation being very comfortable over virtual platforms and engaging often over social media, virtual means of interaction and connection are likely to draw in younger volunteers. With many interactions and activities pivoting to virtual platforms, older adults have also had to upskill and improve their digital literacy. There are more

programmes teaching older adults to use digital devices and platforms.

While restrictions due to COVID-19 have repercussions on social isolation and mental health, it is also an opportunity to innovate in such challenging times. LTCF and care centres have found ways to adapt⁶ and expand the range of activities offered to older adults.

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