
VOICES OF OLDER PEOPLE (VOP) PROGRAMME 'CREATING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CONVERSATIONS'

12 November 2008- **Tsao Foundation** unveiled a programme providing seniors with a platform to have a voice in the community. Called **Voices of Older People (VOP)**, the programme began in January 2007.

VOP is allowing seniors to participate in focus group discussion on issues that are close to their hearts. The Foundation believes that one way to help seniors stay active in the community is giving them the opportunity to participate in community activities. This is very much in line with its vision of promoting successful ageing. The Foundation hopes through these discussions, our seniors' voices will be mobilized and heard and will be seen as contributions to make our policies and programmes more responsive to the aspirations and dreams of our seniors.

The report below, '**Housing for Seniors: Growing old at home in Singapore**' was presented at the programme launch.

For interested seniors, age 50 and above, you can email **Angela Leow** at angela@tsaofoundation.org or call **6593 9515**.

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Housing for Seniors: Growing old at home in Singapore

From May to October 2008, the Tsao Foundation, through its Voices of Older People (VOP) Programme had organized focus group discussions amongst seniors in different communities and housing estates. More than 300 Singaporeans age 50 and over participated in these community conversations that were moderated by seniors who are volunteers of the VOP programme. They discussed among themselves 'housing' from different aspects: financial, physicality; lifestyle and values; lease buyback/reverse mortgage schemes; and ageing in place.

The following were the themes that were gathered from the opinions, suggestions and recommendations shared during the community conversations.

1. Changing perspective in living arrangement

Older Singaporeans desire to live alone and independently. In contrast to their parents, the current older Singaporeans desire and look forward to growing old in the same house with their spouse or living alone. Having grown up in a developing Singapore and living now in a highly developed country that promotes or encourages a lifestyle that is more in keeping with being independent and less reliance on children, they value privacy, comfort and the ability to do whatever they want to do.

They are also more respectful of their children's need to pursue their own career wherever they would like to go and be able to raise their own families without interference from them. Most of them feel that living on their own would also be beneficial in maintaining good relationship with their children and their children-in-laws as they only see them on a regular basis rather than everyday. Having different lifestyles and language differences with their grandchildren are making them less able to appreciate and connect with them so staying in the same house does not really give them more opportunities for family bonding. They would rather be able to decide what they can do with their time and go out and participate in community activities.

Most seniors desire to have more choices in rental flats being offered by HDB. Downgrading is a choice and an option that is being seriously considered by many older Singaporeans. They recognize the need to unfreeze their asset and to live within their means in retirement years. However, the current choices of either renting directly from HDB at a

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subsidized rate or renting from the open market that are expensive are options that seem not to respond to the needs and desire of middle class older Singaporeans who values privacy, safety, security and comfort in their homes. They are also being hampered by the 30-month waiting period before being allowed to rent from HDB. Many had expressed strong view on the long waiting period and appealed to policy-makers to review this seemingly rigid time restriction in view of changing demography.

Reverse mortgage and lease buyback schemes are not that widely accepted and understood. Majority of the seniors have very little awareness and understanding of reverse mortgage and lease buyback schemes. For those who have considered these two options, reverse mortgage is least accepted whereas lease buyback as a scheme is least understood. Moreover, most seniors would rather deal with HDB than with banks if they were to buy into this scheme. There is a need to have greater public awareness and education campaign on lease buyback scheme for it to be seriously considered as an option by seniors.

To afford living independently and on their own, some seniors would like to continue working on a part time basis to keep them busy at the same time provide them with the means to support their monthly living expenses like utilities without dipping into their savings. Some seniors, particularly the more skilled and educated one, also perceived the current fiscal measures to encourage seniors or the economically-inactive to re-join the workforce as suitable only for those with low education or unskilled. A more comprehensive programme that could align different skills-set and competencies with suitable employment opportunities should be considered in view of changing socio-economic and educational level of baby-boomers generation of seniors.

2. Ageing in place

Growing old at home is a desire for most seniors who own their house.

They have stayed in their community and neighborhood for more than 20 years and would like to continue to stay there and grow old in familiar, secure, safe and comfortable homes. They look at their houses as something more than a roof over their heads. To them, it is very important that their houses are located near MRT or bus stops/interchange; has a market nearby; near hawkers' centres and

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food centres; near banks; and near facilities for paying utilities and other regular monthly bills.

What are lacking in some areas are clinics and other healthcare facilities that are accessible to all and are elder-friendly as well as home help services for cleaning, laundry and repair and maintenance of their houses. Some have suggested transforming part of the current hawkers' centres into 'elder-friendly' canteens, meaning food served are nutritious and considerate of dietary restrictions especially for those with chronic conditions but at affordable prices.

They also know that remaining healthy is the key to remaining independent and growing old in their own homes. Once they become sick or in need of care, they would like to have some communal support in terms of services to help them manage and continue to take care of them at home (home nursing or home care).

However, mobility is both a function of physical status as well as living environment. Half storey stairs in some blocks continue to be a struggle for older Singaporeans now. Having a lift in every floor landing in all estates is a must now and therefore tying it with voting as part of upgrading of HDB estates and costing it in current market prices is a concern for seniors who need it but may not have the money to pay for it as well as for younger families who may not see it as a priority at this point and time and therefore would not be willing to pay for it.

Toilets need to be widened for wheelchairs and lifts should allow more than one wheelchair. Other wish list includes balcony for hanging clothes inside; elder-friendly main door for those living in older estates; and elder-friendly taps.

But even for those who stay in one room rental flats, they too look forward to continue to stay there and live on their own rather than with their children. They too seem to have been staying in their rental flats for more than 10 years and also feel familiar with their neighbors and their communities.

Look overseas for other models is what seniors are proposing to be able to have choices in terms of 'retirement village, assisted living types of housing; and urban renewal practices that may be more responsive to the needs and desire of seniors. They would like to see how the successful 'HDB housing model' can be transformed into an elder-

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friendly housing model that is very cognizant of the changing demographics of highly developed societies like Singapore.

3. Community Participation

Most seniors reminisce and miss the Singapore of before where the 'kampong spirit' was very much alive. Today, they see and live in a community that does not seem to be friendly, much less to older people, like them, who have different needs from the younger population. Most seniors also expressed a latent need for social interaction in structured activities so as to be engaged and lessen their feelings of isolation and alienation that resonates with ageing.

The seniors are proposing that the 'kampong spirit' be transformed or re-created in twenty first century period by creating more platforms for them to participate and contribute in community development. They would like to see more activities organized at the void decks by the RCs that take into consideration the different interests of seniors. They would like to see more of them able to volunteer in programmes that would be beneficial not only to other seniors but also to other members of society.

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