

# Successful Aging in Singapore: A Vision for our Future

By Gan Kim Yong

Singapore is no stranger to the aging phenomenon experienced by countries worldwide. By 2030, one in four Singaporeans will be aged 65 and older. Today, Singaporeans have a life expectancy of 84.8 years, of which 74.2 years are lived in good health. While longer life expectancies may come with increased disease burden and frailty, they also offer opportunities. Translating longevity into longer years of continued learning, active engagement and contribution to society will delay the onset of cognitive and functional disability. This benefits both the individual and society-at-large, by adding not just more years to life, but more life to years.

I shared with AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins and her team when they visited Singapore in 2019 that Singapore had started planning for aging back in the 1980s, when we anticipated this demographic shift. We formed inter-agency committees to holistically coordinate our responses. We still adopt this holistic approach to planning today. Recognizing that aging is a multi-faceted issue and that the aging experience is different for everyone, in 2015 we consulted Singaporeans from all walks of life, as well as diverse stakeholders, including non-government organizations, unions and private sector companies, for their views and aspirations on ageing. These efforts culminated in our Action Plan for Successful Ageing, which aspired to transform the aging experience and make Singapore a better place to age. I am happy to share that the range of strategies in areas such as health and wellness, employment, learning, volunteerism and transport, have benefitted not only the older persons but also the broader population in Singapore.

### **Turning "Silver" into "Gold" for the Future**

While we started decades ago, the journey is continuing. Future seniors will have different interests, priorities and motivations compared to seniors of today. We are also seeing shrinking family sizes and an increasing number of single elderly

and empty nester households. We must be nimble and continually adapt our strategies so that we can support both current and future generations of Singaporeans.

Singapore aspires to be a home where our seniors can continue to grow and develop as individuals, even in their later years. With advancements in public health, technology, as well as the advent of modern modes of communication, age is really just a number. The limits of our world no longer need to be defined by our retirement age or indeed, any age. We are redefining the narrative for aging as one of "turning silver into gold", where Singaporeans can continue to grow and flourish throughout their lives. Our journey is anchored on three "C"s – contribution, care, and connectedness.

### **Contribution: Creating Meaningful Opportunities for Seniors to Age with Purpose**

Many of our seniors have told us that they want to contribute for as long as they can, to maintain a sense of purpose in their golden years. Hence, we are empowering our seniors to stay active and physically well, so they can continue to contribute. Efforts to provide preventive health options in the community, such as regular health screening and one-stop kiosks for basic health and nursing services, will continue to help our seniors take charge of their own health. To support

older Singaporeans to stay active at work, the Singapore government worked with employers and unions to enhance senior employability and promote inclusive workplace practices that value older workers. We will progressively raise the Re-employment age to 70 by 2030. For Singaporeans who would like to stay active through volunteerism, the Silver Volunteer Fund will support community partners to create meaningful volunteering opportunities. We also set up the National Silver Academy to provide seniors with learning opportunities based on their interests, because as the Chinese saying goes, “you learn as long as you live, and you live as long as you learn”!

### **Care: Shaping Community-based Support Systems to Care for Our Seniors**

Our preventive health strategy is aligned to our life-course approach to aging, to inculcate healthy habits from children to seniors, as good health rests on the foundations laid from young. Care needs will invariably develop as we get older, and may be stressful and difficult for many. To help our seniors and their families better navigate the care support system, we are weaving together both social and health services in local communities, which enables us to proactively care for our seniors, pre-empt social isolation, and serve all who are in need of assistance, not just those who are low-income and frail. The Ministry of Health is partnering service providers and senior centers across Singapore

providing day care, rehabilitation services and wellness programs to expand their reach, as well as their quality and range of capabilities. We also launched the Caregiver Support Action Plan in 2019, which enhances financial and workplace support, respite care options, and empowerment and training for caregivers, so that they can more effectively care for their loved ones.

### **Connectedness: Enabling our Seniors to Age in Place and Stay Connected**

Finally, we want to integrate hardware with “heartware” so our seniors can age in place with their loved ones. Social and health needs are closely intertwined and both must be taken care of to age well. We are launching assisted living models that provide seniors with more housing options for independent living, with care available if needed, and curated spaces to interact more with their neighbors and have some good old fun. We also developed the Community Networks for Seniors (CNS) as a uniquely Singaporean initiative to connect stakeholders within a precinct and jointly engage and deliver social support services to our seniors. Community volunteers with our Silver Generation Office conduct outreach to individual Singaporeans aged 60 years and above to proactively understand their needs. In this way, the CNS keeps our seniors well through preventive health and active aging programs, befriends lonely seniors living alone, and sews up social and health support services for

frail seniors or seniors with complex social-health needs.

There is always more to uncover and learn. We leverage research and technology to keep our seniors engaged within the community, as well as ensure our policies are based on evidence. For example, we are incorporating analytics more comprehensively in our policy design, including using geospatial data in the planning of eldercare services to better meet the needs of our seniors. We are undertaking intensive research on aging through the National Innovation Challenge on Active and Confident Ageing, and working with various research institutions to develop an ecosystem that can incubate geriatric technology commercialization. As a small country, Singapore has also been learning from other countries such as China, the United States, and Japan. The trip AARP made to Singapore in 2019 is a good example of how fostering of partnerships can facilitate mutual learning and exchange of ideas, and we hope to continue such engagements with international public and academic stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Planning for aging is a continuous journey. The foundations our pioneers had laid are just starting to bear fruit, but there is still more to be done for current and future generations of seniors as we move towards our vision of a nation for all ages. I

thank the AARP for featuring Singapore's approach to aging in this publication, and hope that this feature will provide readers further insight into our endeavors to co-create an inclusive society that celebrates our seniors.



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