

The development of the positive lifestyles of seniors in Australia

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Abstract

The governments of Australia promote the vision of positive ageing where seniors find fulfilment in their later years of life. Their vision is to build a barrier free society between generations. The Office of Seniors Interests is responsible for the activities including research and policy advice concerning this goal. This paper investigates the role and activities of the Office and discusses future growth of the seniors tourism market.

1. Introduction

Social welfare for seniors is often discussed in the context of caring for the older people who have lost independence due to mental or physical disabilities. However, it is also important to investigate the ways to

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improve the quality of life of seniors who are still able to do things and hope to enjoy life. Miyahara (1997) named the long life period after the retirement the Third Age and suggested further study on the improvement of the lifestyles for the period. The retirement village scheme in Australia is one of the choices for seniors to enjoy life independently and to obtain minimum security for a potentially frail body. Another scheme which helps to enrich life after retirement is the University of the Third Age.

This paper examines the Australian government initiative to promote positive lifestyles of seniors leading to a barrier-free society between generations. The government articulates the long term vision towards a society where age is no barrier, where there is acceptance and respect between people of all ages. Western Australia was the first state in Australia which established a government office engaged in such a mission. The office, called the Office of Seniors Interests (the Office), is a Western Australian state government agency which reports to the Minister for Seniors, the Hon Rhonda Parker MLA.

This paper investigates the overall activities of the Office in order to see a variety of paths to enrich seniors' life styles. The development of positive lifestyles of seniors will also influence industrial activities. Its relevance to the tourism industry is a particular focus revealed by recent research conducted by the Office.

2. Government initiative to promote positive life styles

Western Australia first established the Bureau of the Aged in 1986. The primary focus of the bureau was to improve the quality of life of seniors. The seniors targeted were defined to be the aged over sixty

years old. The seniors made up 14 per cent of Western Australia's population and numbered 259,271 as of 30 June 1998.

Western Australia was the first state to create such an office in Australia. In March 1991, the Bureau was renamed the Office of Seniors Interests with a very clear mission and vision. The mission of the Office of Seniors Interests is to enhance life styles of seniors by promoting positive ageing and encouraging the community to plan for its ageing population. The vision of the office is a society where age is no barrier, where there is acceptance and respect between people of all ages, where seniors are valued and where ageing is a positive and rewarding stage of life.

The mission and the vision point to an ideal that ageing is something valued positively rather than an unavoidable unpleasant ending process of life. In fact, the majority of Western Australian seniors live at home. Only 5 per cent are in residential care. Seniors may live the third age for 20 years or more at home or in a retirement village before they enter the fourth age. It is certainly an important period in life just to complete a life cycle in a meaningful manner. The Australian governments find it as a part of the administrative portfolio that the quality and lifestyle of the seniors need to be improved by the government initiative. The following is a summary of our literature review conducted based on the government reports (The Government of Western Australia, Office of Seniors Interests, 1998, 1999).

2. 1 Organizational structure

The executive director is responsible for the day to day administration of the Office. The executive director is supported by four directors, i.e.,

(i) Director, Policy Planning and Research, (ii) Director, Programs, (iii) Director, Business Management and (iv) Director, Special Projects. The Office employs 29 full time staff and is supported by 35 volunteers, mainly seniors.

2.2 Key functions and budget

The expenditure of the Office of Seniors Interests was \$3.6 million in 1998/99. Its breakdown is as follows;

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|---|------------------------------------|
| (1) Information to the community | \$1.5 million (41.6% of the total) |
| (2) Policy, analysis and advice | \$1.3 million (36.2% of the total) |
| (3) Assistance to non government organizations | \$0.5 million (13.9% of the total) |
| (4) Management of Western Australian Seniors Card | \$0.3 million (8.3% of the total) |

Major activities in these functions are described section by section as follows;

2.3 Major activities in 1998/99

(1) Information to the community

Providing information to the community about a range of issues, activities and events is one important way of enhancing the lifestyle of seniors. The Office values the dedication of the volunteers and they play an important role in providing information to the community. The activities in this field include the following;

(1-1) International Year of Older Persons

The Office was responsible for the launch of the International Year of

Older Persons (IYOP) on 1 October 1998 and the delivery of a range of events and services to mark the Year.

(1-2) Seniors Awards

The Seniors Awards acknowledge outstanding achievements and efforts in the community by seniors and for seniors. They seek to promote positive ageing through establishing role models to inspire other Western Australians. The 1998 Seniors Awards attracted 105 nominations from individuals and organizations in Western Australia competing for 10 awards such as Cultural Award, Sport & Recreation Award, Business Award, etc.

(1-3) Tuesday Morning Show

The Tuesday Morning Show has become an established weekly variety program. With a regular audience of some 200 people (mostly seniors), this program provides a useful entertainment and information vehicle to further promote the Seniors Card and Seniors Telephone Information Service.

(1-4) Seniors Telephone Information Service (STIS)

Many seniors are unaware of the range of services and concessions available or where to go to access particular information. The Seniors Telephone Information Service, which is staffed by volunteers, provides advice and referral information on issues such as accommodation options, education, finance/business, health and lifestyle. The STIS responded to 23,400 calls during 1998/99.

(1-5) Volunteers Speakers Program

This program provides volunteer presenters with opportunities to

speak to community groups and organizations. In 1998/99, seventy two presentations were given to an estimated audience of more than 2,400 people focusing on information about the Office and issues concerning retirement, concessions and services offered by other government and non government agencies.

(1-6) Display Program

The Office recognizes the importance of maintaining the public profile of portraying a positive image of seniors in the general community. During 1998/99, twenty five displays were mounted to an estimated audience of 17500. These display occasions include Seniors Expo, Seniors Week, IYOP, Seniors Impact Day, etc.

(1-7) Seniors Accommodation Guide

The Office edited the Seniors Accommodation Guide in cooperation with other government offices. It provides information on retirement villages, nursing homes, hostels, respite care and dementia specific facilities. It has been distributed free of charge to seniors organizations, libraries, residential care facilities, retirement villages and other government agencies.

(1-8) Internet

The World Wide Web is a significant communication tool and one which the Office is increasingly using to disseminate information. The Office website has been redesigned and updated to better reflect its target audience and their information needs. The Office established a new across government website for the IYOP in January 1999. This has been a well resourced site with an average of 7000

hits per week.

(1-9) Topic sheets

The Office initiated a project to produce a series of fact sheets on seniors issues which will be useful information for a wide audience. The first topic sheet called Population Characteristics and Trends has been completed and available for the public.

(2) Policy advice and analysis

The Office acts as a catalyst within the government and the community to initiate programs and policies which encourage positive ageing. Positive ageing recognizes that individuals have diversity in health and activity. It also recognizes that individuals have different measures of what ageing is for them. Nevertheless, there are common problems which tend to be associated with ageing, such as security and financial elder abuse.

(2-1) Time on Our Side

The Office has coordinated the development and implementation of the five year plan on ageing called Time on Our Side. The content of the five year plan will be described in detail in the following section 2.4.

(2-2) Positive Ageing Centre

The Western Australian Government is committed to the establishment of a Positive Ageing Centre. The Centre is under planning and is aimed to promote the positive ageing concept among the public with a more professional research activity. A steering committee is working towards the registration of the Positive Ageing Foundation which will

be the basis for the establishment of the Centre.

(2-3) Seniors' safety and security

The Office has been involved in a number of projects to address issues relating to seniors safety and security, including

- (i) Safer Seniors Working Group, comprising representatives of government agencies and prominent seniors' organizations, which reports to the Safer WA Council.
- (ii) The Seniors/Police Consultative Committee on crime against seniors, established by the WA Police Service with representation from government agencies and prominent seniors' organizations.

(2-4) Seniors Ministerial Advisory Committee (SMAC)

The Office has coordinated the operation of Seniors Ministerial Advisory Committee (SMAC) which provides advice to the State Government and the Minister for Seniors on issues relevant to seniors. The Advisory Committee has convened two working groups.

- (i) Technology for Seniors Working Group is very active in keeping abreast of current seniors technology programs. Recent issues include the millennium bug and the future availability of banking facilities.
- (ii) Multigenerational Working Group is identifying priority areas for action on multigenerational linkage and developing a database of intergenerational programs.

(2-5) Elder Protection policy development

The Office is developing a policy relating to elderly protection. An Elder Protection Policy Forum was held in March 1999 to promote further public debate concerning elderly protection. Three hundred and seventy service providers participated in the Forum. Policy issues raised by participants included the need for increased public awareness of abuse, particularly into financial abuse, and the need for more coordinated responses by agencies on a regional level.

(2-6) Western Australian Carers Strategy

The Office is working with other state government departments to develop a comprehensive government strategy for Western Australia's carers. In cooperation with the Health Department of WA, the Disability Services Commission and Family and Children's Services, a carers issues briefing paper is being prepared.

(2-7) Skills register

As an initiative of the five year plan, the Office assisted with the development of a SkillsBank register to tap into the skills, knowledge and experience of older people and apply this talent to community projects. The data base is maintained by Volunteering WA.

(2-8) Ministerial liaison and support

The Office provided support for the Minister's role as advocate for the seniors of Western Australia with the preparation of 1003 Ministerial correspondence items throughout 1998/99.

(2-9) Planning, research and evaluation

The Office commissioned a number of research papers during the year. One of the reports reveals that while Australia's 2.9 million seniors spend \$986 million annually on domestic travel, the seniors' tourism market is relatively untapped. Some of the findings of the paper will be discussed later in section 3.

(3) Assistance to non government organizations

The office has an important role in working with non-government agencies to improve their capacity through funding and other supportive measures.

(3-1) Smoke out Western Australia

Smoke out WA (Western Australia) is a program designed to reduce the risk of loss or injury from home fires. The program is sponsored by GIO Australia, and the Office provides support through special mailouts to Seniors Card Members. During 1998/99, 1500 smoke and fire alarms were installed by the program.

(3-2) Helping Hands

Helping Hands is an intergenerational program funded by the Office and administered by Anglicare. It matches seniors (volunteer men and women over 55 years of age) with families or individuals wanting the involvement of an older person in their lives as mentor, friend, helper or substitute grandparent. During 1998/99, 38 volunteers were matched with 36 families.

(3-3) Senior Partners

Seniors Partners program provides support and friendship with socially isolated and lonely seniors. Through this program, a volunteer visiting service is offered to older people who have lost contact with the community or have no family to support them. On average, each month 37 seniors receive help and friendship from a senior partner. The program is run by Wesley Mission and supported by the Office.

(3-4) Carelink

The Carelink personal alarm scheme enables the older people who live in their own home to summon help in case of an emergency. The alarm is a pendant worn around the neck and is linked to a person's home telephone. The alarm scheme is provided by the Silver Chain Nursing Association on a fee for service basis. The Office provides support in the form of safety net funding for financially disadvantaged clients.

(4) Western Australian Seniors Card Management

Seniors cards provide seniors with state government concessions and discounted goods and services. This system helps the seniors financially, and encourages them to be more involved in the community. The annual cost to the government for the power, water, drivers' licence and spectacles concession is about \$7 million. Western Australia was the first state to introduce the seniors card in 1988. It was introduced as a mark of the community's care and respect for seniors and in recognition of their contribution to the community.

As of 30 June, 1999, there were 171,855 Western Australian Seniors Card members. This means that two in three seniors over 60 years old in Western Australia are the members of seniors cards.

To be eligible for a Seniors Card, applicants must be 60 years of age, a permanent resident of Australia and not in the full time workforce, i.e., 20 hours or less per week.

2.4 Five year plan

A five year plan for Western Australia's maturing population, titled Time on Our Side was launched on 3 November 1998 as an important first step in an across-government coordinated strategy to prepare the state for its rapidly ageing population.

The five year plan aims to achieve the following;

- (1) generate government policy and service initiatives to meet the needs of an older population
- (2) raise community awareness about the ageing of our population
- (3) encourage individuals to take a life-long, positive approach to planning for their senior years
- (4) encourage the private sector to view this demographic shift as providing market opportunities for service and product design and delivery initiatives

Aim (4) above is quite important in terms of building a meaningful linkage between the positive life style of seniors and the growth of business development opportunities. This aspect will be discussed further in section 3.

The plan lists more than 120 initiatives to be delivered through 32 state government agencies covering topics such as;

- (1) attitudes towards older people
- (2) policies, programs and services
- (3) information and communication
- (4) health and well-being
- (5) family and carers
- (6) housing and independence
- (7) safety and security
- (8) transport
- (9) mature employment
- (10) education and training
- (11) financial independence
- (12) mature market opportunities

Out of 120 initiatives, some have been implemented in 1998/99 as described in the above section 2.3, but many initiatives remain to be future tasks.

3. Marketing opportunity and the positive life style

As mentioned above, one of the goals of the five year plan is to encourage the private sector to view the demographic shift as providing market opportunities. With this goal in mind, the Office conducted joint research with the Queensland government and other states in 1998/99 concerning the seniors' tourism market. The research report concludes that seniors could be the next boom market for domestic tourism. The rationale for the conclusion is as follows;

- (1) Seniors spend more of their recreational budget on travel than any other age group.
- (2) Last year 75% of seniors traveled, injecting \$895 million into the domestic economy.
- (3) In the next ten years the seniors population will swell from 3 to 4 million. The 15 to 45 age group will experience zero growth.
- (4) Seniors are healthier, better educated and living longer than ever before. Seniors can expect at least 20 years of active life after retirement.
- (5) Australia's primary offshore tourism markets also have the fastest ageing populations in the world.
- (6) Eight out of 10 seniors want to travel now or in the near future.

These positive factors certainly indicate a booming seniors tourism market for the years to come. The expected growth of the market is encouraging the private sector to develop new services and products to meet the requirement of this emerging group of customers.

This research reports the following major findings as market snapshot of Australian seniors.

- (1) Promoting the health benefits of a travel experience will make products more appealing to the seniors market.
- (2) Seniors are more likely to travel in off-peak seasons.
- (3) Tourism operators will need to develop innovative products for ageing Baby Boomers to overcome the 'been there, done that' syndrome.
- (4) Motivations to travel include; new friends and memories; social contact and mental stimulation; maintaining general health and

well-being; and a sense of adventure and the chance to try new things.

- (5) Value for money and quality of experience are more highly regarded than discounts.

These features of the seniors market segment will help the industry people to develop an innovative product. An investment in product development and further market research will be needed to cultivate this huge future market.

4. Conclusion

The governments of Australia promote positive lifestyles of seniors with a vision of a barrier free society between generations. The Office of Seniors Interests is responsible for activities concerning (i) Information to the community, (ii) Policy, analysis and advice, (iii) Assistance to non government organization and (iv) Management of Western Australian Seniors Card. The Office launched a five year plan (1998-2003) which includes many initiatives. One of the goals of the five year plan is to encourage the private sector to develop market opportunities in the growing seniors population. In line with this goal, a market research project concerning the seniors tourism market was launched by the Office in collaboration with other state governments.

The result of the research clearly indicates potentially lucrative market opportunities in the seniors' tourism business. However, further product/service development will be needed to meet the requirements of this particular market segment. The research reveals some of the

features of customers' preferences in this market segment.

Tourism experiences marketed to the domestic senior traveler may also attract international seniors. The development of tourism products and services for seniors will make Australia a more desirable destination for millions of seniors around the world. Japan is one of Australia's primary offshore markets and Japan has an increasingly growing senior population. It implies that the seniors' domestic market developed will also induce the growth of the international seniors tourism markets including Japanese seniors tourism market.

This paper investigated the government initiatives in developing positive lifestyles of seniors in Australia and its relevance to industrial development. The positive lifestyles of seniors will not cost the society very much, but will lead to development of commercial opportunities, if managed properly.

References

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