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## **Participation of Military Personnel in Providing Companionship to Older Veterans**

Ya-Kuei Liu, Jer-Yan Lin  
1Feng Chia University,  
No.100, Wenhua Road, Taichung, Taiwan  
2Feng Chia University  
No.100, Wenhua Road, Taichung, Taiwan

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### **Abstract**

Population aging is a global challenge, and Taiwan is on the brink of becoming a superaged society. The government has implemented various long-term care policies, sparing no effort in caring for older adults, particularly older veterans, who are cared for by the Veterans Affairs Council (VAC). This study explored the time bank concept, in which military personnel use their free time to accompany older veterans, accumulating service hours that can be redeemed for companionship services when they reach old age. An expert interview was conducted to understand the attitudes of military personnel toward this initiative, revealing the necessity of enhancing the awareness of military personnel about veterans and the care policies of the VAC. The interviewees agreed with the time bank concept, which involved accumulating hours of companionship with veterans for future redemption. Clearer communication must be enforced regarding the rights and responsibilities of military personnel post-service and the veteran care policies of the VAC. A quantitative survey was conducted to assess the willingness of military personnel to participate in companionship programs, aiming to produce findings that can inform policy decisions.

**Keywords:** military personnel; older veteran; companionship; free time participation; time bank

### **1. Introduction**

Population aging is a major challenge worldwide (Chang, 2015). Taiwan, which has already become an aged society, is set to become a superaged society by 2026 (National Statistics of the Republic of China, 2024). Accordingly, the Taiwanese government has implemented a comprehensive long-term care policy, sparing no effort in caring for older adults (Wu, 1998). Among those cared for are veterans who have served and sacrificed for the country; veterans, who are managed specifically by the Veterans Affairs Council (VAC, 2007), currently number more than 330,000 individuals (VAC Statistics Division, 2023). Veterans who reach the age of 61 years are eligible to reside in Veterans' Homes, which comprise 16 facilities spread across Taiwan that provide more than 8,000 beds, making them the largest institutional care system in

Taiwan by scale and resident number. Other veterans live with their families or alone. After serving in the military and enduring the crucible of war to protect their country, these veterans retire and receive support from the state in their later years.

In Western countries and Japan, the concept of “time banking” (Dash, 2018; Gill, 2006) allows individuals to deposit their “time currency” into a “time bank,” accumulating service hours in their youth that can be used in their old age. Veterans, upon discharge and reintegration into civilian life, can access education, employment, medical care, and retirement services provided by the VAC. Similar to other older individuals, older veterans seek the care and attention of their children or relatives.

Military personnel, who can broadly be defined as public servants, undertake the responsibility of protecting the country, engaging in daily combat readiness training and military drills. In the event of major natural disasters, they are deployed to participate in rescue and epidemic prevention efforts (ROC National Defense Report 2023). According to the Ministry of National Defense's vacation regulations (Ministry of National Defense, 2022), military personnel are granted consolation leave on the basis of their years of service (Table 1; up to a maximum of 30 days per year). Thus, in addition to national holidays and regular weekends, military personnel can effectively use their approved consolation leave for leisure activities (Liu, 2024).

Table 1 Days of consolation leave granted to military personnel on the basis of their length of service.

Classification	Year(s) of service	Number of days of consolation leave
1.	At least 1 year	7
2.	At least 3 years	14
3.	At least 6 years	21
4.	At least 10 years	28
5.	At least 14 years	30

Source: Regulations for Leave for Military Officers and Non-commissioned Officers

The present study applied the “time bank” concept in expert interviews (Irving, 2009; Niu, 2024) to explore the feasibility of allowing military personnel to use their free time to accompany older veterans and to understand the potential challenges and solutions. Its findings can serve as a reference for future policymaking.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Population aging

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines a society as an aging society when its older population exceeds 7%, aged society when it exceeds 14%, and superaged society when it surpasses 20% (World Health Assembly, 2017). Taiwan’s older population is rapidly increasing;

the statistics reported by the National Development Council indicate that in 2018, the proportion of the population aged 65 years and over exceeded 14% (National Statistics of the Republic of China, 2024), signifying that Taiwan had become an aged society. Taiwan's older population is projected to exceed 20% by 2026; that is, Taiwan will become a superaged society, where one in every five individuals is an older adult (Chen, 2006; Lin & Huang, 2015; Ministry of the Interior, 2008; National Development Council, 2014). Taiwan's transition from an aging to an aged society is comparable to Japan's; however, its transition to a superaged society is expected to take only approximately 8 years, a shorter period compared with Japan's, highlighting the severity of Taiwan's aging issue (Asian Productivity Organization, 2011).

The rapid aging in Taiwan is primarily due to the swift decline in birth rates and the increase in average life expectancy, compounded by the influx of immigrants from China in 1949 because of the civil war, all of whom are now more than 65 years old (Chien, 2006); additionally, the post-war baby boomers have aged beyond 65 years (Lin & Huang, 2015). Addressing how to maintain the vitality of these retirees and ensuring their dignified retirement is a key challenge for the government.

## *2.2 Long-term care in Taiwan*

Population aging has emerged as a major challenge of the 21st century. In response to the global trend of rapidly aging populations, the shortage of caregiving personnel, and the necessity for older adults to live independently, long-term care has become a major public issue. The WHO has emphasized the importance of focusing on elderly care issues, advocating for countries to strengthen and prioritize the development of comprehensive elderly care policies, resource integration, education for long-term care personnel, and the provision of both home and institutional care services for older populations (Chang, 2015; WHO, 2024).

Taiwan initiated the Ten-Year Long-Term Care Plan in 2007, which was upgraded to the Ten-Year Long-Term Care Plan 2.0 in 2016 (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2016) to address the evolving needs of an aging society. In January 2012, the Executive Yuan announced the Social Welfare Policy Guidelines (Ministry of the Interior, 2012), which promote a care model that prioritizes home-based and community-based services, with institutional services as a secondary option. The aim is to provide older and disabled individuals with accessible, continuous, and holistic welfare services.

## *2.3 Veteran care*

The term "veterans" is a respectful designation for retired military personnel of the Republic of China. In contemporary Taiwanese society, the term "veterans" often refers to individuals who participated in the Chinese Civil War and relocated to Taiwan with the Nationalist government (Li-Li, Yu · 2013). These early retirees, who moved to Taiwan with the government, generally lack a family care system and increasingly require social resources and professional assistance from government agencies and care institutions (Tsai Ing-Wen, 2020; VAC, 1960).

As of December 2023, more than 1.06 million retired military personnel (including veterans' families) live in Taiwan. They can be divided into three categories, including (1) individuals (veterans) with a service duration of more than 10 years (338,211 individuals, average age of 66.3 years (Table 2); (2) veterans' [bereaved] dependents, 686,829) and (3) individuals who served 4–9 years (55,353 individuals, average age of 29.3 years) (VAC Statistics and Information Division, 2023).

Table 2. Current number and age of veterans classified under Category 1.

Item	Male	Female	Total	
Young adults	<30 years	24,908	3,331	28,239
	30–39 years	27,562	3,212	30,774
	40–49 years	27,105	2,858	29,963
Subtotal	79,575	9,401	88,976	
Percentage	25.07%	45.14%	26.31%	
Middle-aged	50–59 years	72,815	3,457	76,272
	60–64 years	51,196	678	51,874
	Subtotal	124,011	4,135	128,146
Percentage	39.07%	19.85%	37.88%	
Older adults	65–69 years	33,746	734	34,480
	70–79 years	43,066	1,122	44,188
	80–89 years	16,094	4,020	20,114
	90–99 years	20,037	1,384	6,458
	≥100 years	854	32	886
Subtotal	112,943	7,260	121,089	
Percentage	35.59%	34.86%	35.80%	
Total	317,383	20,828	338,211	

The Executive Yuan of Taiwan oversees the VAC, an agency dedicated to providing counseling, resettlement, education, employment, health care, nursing care, and pension services for retired servicemen (VAC, 2009; Veterans Assistance Act, 2023). Veterans may access care services as nonresident veterans (who include those who are living with family, living alone, or single) through 19 local veterans service offices supervised by the VAC's Veteran Service and Assistance Division or as resident veterans based in one of 16 veterans' homes operated by the Homecare and Nursing Care Division (VAC, 2007).

Sixteen veterans' homes with a total of 8,307 beds have been established across Taiwan (four in Northern Taiwan, three in Central Taiwan, six in Southern Taiwan, and two in Eastern Taiwan), providing care mainly for older and dementia-affected veterans. These homes currently serve 6,527 residents (78.6% occupancy rate; Regulations on Home-care of Veterans, 2023), as shown in Table 3. Scholars have posited that the Veterans Home is a public institution that receives

government funding. In the face of the trend towards privatization of social welfare, it should adopt appropriate management strategies to enhance operational efficiency in order to meet future competition. (Shyr Juh Chang, 2013) °

Table 3. Number of beds and current occupancy in veterans’ homes.

No.	Name of Organization	Number of beds	Current occupancy
1.	<u>Banqiao VH</u>	787	709
2.	<u>Taipei VH</u>	718	596
3.	<u>Taoyuan VH</u>	755	597
4.	<u>Bade VH</u>	574	446
5.	<u>Hsinchu VH</u>	574	446
6.	<u>Zhongzhang VH</u>	343	265
7.	<u>Changhua VH</u>	471	366
8.	<u>Yunlin VH</u>	446	302
9.	<u>Baihe VH</u>	504	319
10.	<u>Jiali VH</u>	211	158
11.	<u>Tainan VH</u>	388	270
12.	<u>Kaohsiung VH</u>	463	353
13.	<u>Gangshan VH</u>	599	465
14.	<u>Pingtung VH</u>	507	386
15.	<u>Hualien VH</u>	482	382
16.	<u>Malan VH</u>	436	436
合計		8,307	6,527

Source: Statistics and Information Division, Veterans Affairs Council

To promote long-term care, the government advocates the Aging in Place policy (Kort, 2018; Wiles et al., 2012), The Veterans Home is categorized under the institutional care model within the long-term care system. which regards each veterans’ home as a miniature community. Veterans residing in these homes play roles similar to those in a community (e.g., dorm heads and ordinary residents), fostering a supportive environment with the assistance of social workers and living healthy, happy, and dignified lives in their later years. (Ju, 2013) ; Additionally, scholars have suggested that the concept of “aging in place” extends beyond the familiarity of one’s past locations. It is about the ability of the elderly to form a sense of place within a space, where they feel safe, respected, and maintain their personal space. Furthermore, the scheduling of institutional life should allow the elderly to lead a stable and regular life, maintaining a certain level of social participation (Shih-Feng Hung, 2023). Therefore, in addition to its own social work, care services, and nursing, the Veterans Home could enhance the diversity of its care services if military personnel spend their spare time accompanying the elderly veterans.

The VAC extends its services beyond the confines of veterans' homes, deploying staff, community service systems, and volunteers across 397 service areas in Taiwan on the basis of regional size, transportation, available human resources, and the veteran population. Their services, include home visits, emotional support, emergency aid, and social welfare resource links, which are provided on the basis of the health, living conditions and care needs of veterans (VAC, 2007).

Local veterans service offices provide meticulous care, encouraging single veterans who lack self-care ability or access to personal housing to reside in veterans' homes, thereby addressing their living inconveniences. For veterans who are unwilling to move into veterans' homes, service personnel and volunteers ensure regular visits and prompt problem resolution through these local offices.

#### *2.4 Time banks*

The time bank is a non-profit concept that was introduced by Edgar Cahn, who holds a PhD from Yale University Law School. This concept originated in the 1980s in the United States and has since been expanding globally (Dash, 2018). The concept of a time bank involves treating service time as a valuable currency, enabling individuals to accumulate currency by providing services to others; the acquired currency can then be exchanged for services that they need at a future point in time; that is, it functions as a conventional currency, acting as a medium of exchange, a unit of account, and a store of value (Lin & Huang, 2018).

In 1995, Cahn founded TimeBanks USA to promote the concept of time currency, enabling community members to bank hours of mutual services and subsequently withdraw them for access to services, thereby fostering community cohesion. The initiative led to the establishment of more than 70 time banks across the United States, and it has expanded to other countries, including France, Mexico, and New Zealand, operating a database that has recorded more than 4 million service hours worldwide (Cahn & Gray, 2015; Dash, 2018).

In Taiwan, time bank practices vary among organizations, and these differences are exemplified by the following five distinct models.

##### *2.4.1 Taiwan Time Bank Association*

This model operates on a membership basis, emphasizing mutual service exchange instead of volunteerism. Points are accrued for services rendered, with 1 point being earned for every 6 min of service (i.e., 10 points per hour of service). After the provider and recipient of a service confirm the completion of the service, the acquired points are exchangeable for services or items such as salt, coffee, and second-hand goods (Ge, 2002).

##### *2.4.2 Fooyin Time Bank*

This model is part of the Ministry of Education's university social responsibility program. It connects students, communities, businesses, and corporations by offering "Fooyin currency" on

the basis of the number of hours of service provided. As part of efforts to foster sustainable community networks, acquired currency can be exchanged for volunteer services, business discounts, and health promotion courses provided by Fooyin University (Chiang, 2022).

#### 2.4.3 Hondao Senior Citizen's Welfare Foundation

Representing an evolution of the time bank concept, this model employs a “mutual service connection” system instead of a service hours–based system, allowing regular volunteers to request various needs ranging from personal daily living needs to courses provided by the foundation (Lin, 2022).

#### 2.4.4 New Taipei City Bulao Time Bank

Implemented in response to population aging, this model involves volunteers undergoing training to become providers of home services (e.g., companionship, exercise, shopping, meal delivery, and clerical work) for older adults; accumulated hours can be saved for personal use in the future or gifted to others (Huang, 2022).

#### 2.4.5 Time Banking Cloud Services

This model integrates blockchain technology to record and withdraw hours, assisting businesses in quantifying the contributions of employees to societal sustainability, with blockchain technology ensuring secure and permanent transaction records (Yu-Tsui Liu, 2010).

### 2.5 *Soldiers and veterans*

In the context of national defense, soldiers serve active military duty to uphold national security and participate in disaster relief operations. They operate under the authority of the state instead of individual parties, adhering to commands issued by their nation's leader (Ministry of Defense, 2023). Upon completing their service, soldiers return to civilian life, transitioning into the veterans system. The present study focused on those who have served for 10 years or more and became honored citizens under the care of the VAC. Today's soldiers become tomorrow's veterans, and soldiers have the right and obligation to understand their rights and responsibilities as future veterans. The present study employed the concept of time banks to explore the participation of active-duty soldiers in a program that involves accompanying older veterans, with the objective of clarifying the awareness and identification of soldiers with respect to the experiences of veterans.

## 3. Data and Methodology

A qualitative expert interview was conducted (Niu, 2024; Taiwan Network Information Center, 2019) to collect and compile data. Semi-structured interviews were administered to explore the feasibility of active-duty military personnel providing companionship to elderly veterans; notably, the semi-structured interview format combines the advantages of both structured and unstructured interviews, providing interviewees with considerable freedom to express their views (Chen, 2002). In the present study, the interviewees comprised senior active-duty officers and recently retired reservists, totaling seven individuals with backgrounds ranging from officer to

noncommissioned officers in various vocations (i.e., three colonels, two lieutenant colonels, one reserve colonel, and one reserve sergeant major), given in Table 4.

Table 4. Seniority and experience of interviewees.

<u>No.</u>	<u>job title</u>	<u>background and experience</u>
1.	Colonel (1)	Served for 28 years as a military officer and a senior staff officer. Currently serving as a deputy director.
2.	Colonel (2)	Served for 27 years as a military officer and a senior staff officer. Currently serving as a team leader.
3.	Colonel (3)	Served for 26 years as a military officer and a senior staff officer. Currently serving as a director.
4.	Lieutenant Colonel (1)	Served for 24 years as a military officer and a senior staff officer. Currently serving as a deputy director.
5.	Lieutenant Colonel (2)	Served for 21 years as a military officer and a senior staff officer. Currently serving as a section chief.
6.	Reserve Colonel	Served for 27 years as a military officer and a senior staff officer. Retired for 1 year and currently working as a civil servant.
7.	Reserve master sergeant	Served for 22 years as a noncommissioned officer in low-echelon units and as a senior staff officer. Retired for 2 months.

The interviewees were informed about the research goals and interview direction of the present study and asked to discuss potential challenges and obstacles, thereby providing insights for further research. The collected expert opinions were compiled and used as a basis for proposing solutions. The interview outline in Table 5 includes questions about the interviewees' understanding of veterans, the veteran care policies of the VAC, their willingness to accompany elderly veterans, and their agreement with the concept of time banks for accumulating service hours.

Table 5. Interview outline.

- Q1. How well do you understand veterans?
- Q2. Given that you will become a veteran after retiring from the service, are you familiar with the veteran care policies of the VAC?
- Q3. Are you willing to spend some of your free time to accompany older veterans?
- Q4. Your hours of companionship with older veterans will be recorded, and you can use them to access services in the future. Do you agree with this policy?
- Q5. Do you have any other opinions regarding this issue?



#### **4. Results and Discussion**

On the basis of the literature review and expert interview results, several findings were identified.

- 1) Enhancing soldiers' understanding of veterans' rights and responsibilities and their knowledge of the services provided by the VAC is necessary. Except for the reserve colonel, who is serving veterans by working at the VAC after retirement, none of the other interviewees demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of their rights and responsibilities as veterans and the veteran care policies of the VAC.
- 2) The interviewees were highly willing to accompany older veterans in their free time and exhibited a positive attitude toward the time bank concept, indicating that they supported the accumulation of service hours for future use.
- 3) Identifying eligible veteran beneficiaries and defining the scope of companionship activities are crucial. Questions that should be addressed include whether services should target single, living-alone, or all older veterans and how service schedules should be organized to facilitate effective coordination between soldiers and veterans. The residences of older veterans must also be considered to maximize transportation time efficiency. Additionally, the specific activities involved in companionship programs, such as chatting, walking, exercising, shopping, meal delivery, and clerical tasks, must be clearly defined. This clarification is necessary to meet the needs of older veterans and ensure their feasibility of soldiers providing companionship to older veterans.
- 4) Military personnel must be required to complete basic educational training, clearly understand how service hours are accumulated, and earn memberships in the time bank before engaging in companionship activities with older veterans. This training, which does not involve caregiving, equips them with basic time banking skills. Subsequent advanced training can be arranged to enhance their professional capacity in roles focused on companionship. Although the concept of time currency exists in Taiwan, it is not yet widespread. A systematic framework must be adopted to manage the hours accumulated by military personnel through companionship activities, and regulations must be implemented for each aspect of companionship activities to ensure their proper implementation in the future.
- 5) Good policies must be effectively promoted by increasing participation incentives. In addition to those who have served more than 10 years and are classified as lifelong veterans, reservists who have served less than 10 years should be allowed to accompany older veterans. This change can expand the number of companionship participants. To attract more military personnel to participate in companionship service programs, policymakers must establish marketing strategies to enhance participation incentives.
- 6) A veterans' memory database should be established. The memories of older veterans are valuable assets that should be stored in the time bank. In addition to autobiographies or memoirs written by veterans, the present study compiled and organized the experiences of numerous veterans through the companionship process, creating a database of veterans' memories. This initiative not only preserves their legacies but also contributes considerably to the research on this topic by acknowledging and honoring their contributions and experiences.

## 5. Concluding Comments

The results of the present study indicated that military personnel's understanding of veterans and the veteran care policies of the VAC must be further improved. The interviewees agreed that the involvement of military personnel in providing companionship to older veterans and the concept of a time bank, which enables the accumulation of service hours for future redemption.

Soldiers, as future veterans, can learn from the experiences of older veterans. Current soldiers, who have not experienced war, struggle to understand actual war experiences beyond their exposure to videos and written works. Veterans can share and pass on their war experiences through personal stories, enabling younger soldiers to understand the challenges of defending a country and the harsh reality of war. In addition to accumulating service hours, military personnel acquire valuable experiences by providing companionship to older veterans.

Military personnel currently in service must learn and understand the rights and responsibilities of veterans and the veteran care policies of the VAC. Future studies should employ qualitative surveys to explore the specifics of companionship (e.g., content, methods) and obtain feedback on the time bank concept. Quantitative data should be collected to serve as a reference for policymakers.

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