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## Role of Social Work in Responding To Urgent Social Needs for Senior Citizens -Field Study

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# Role of Social Work in Responding To Urgent Social Needs for Senior Citizens -Field Study

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**Abstract:** Social work plays a vital role in containing the corona crisis that has affected millions of people during the last years. This study aims to identify how social work services respond to the urgent social needs of senior citizens. The descriptive-analytical approach was adopted with 50 social workers who work at senior citizens centers at Ajman & Al Sharjah Emirates. The study results reveal modifications in senior citizens' policies and strategic partnerships. Introduction of new high technology instruments for implementing online social work interventions. Health Care mobile unit was suspended, and more emphasis is placed on using sustainable and high-quality medical and social services. Social workers' roles have accommodated participation in the implementation and supervision of new initiatives of online club models-Assala, receiving and responding to requests, supervising subsidies, home nursing, and providing social and psychological care. Also, coordination with relevant institutions, executing research work, reports writing, and adopting WhatsApp group, telephone, Zoom, and other intelligent devices.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Senior Citizens, Social Needs, Social Work.

## 1 Introduction

As of 31 (December) 2020, the World Health Organisation report presenting the latest data, indicated that in 2020 the total number of coronavirus deaths reached 3 million globally, in 2021, with dramatic increase in the number of people affected by a coronavirus that reached 190 million. In July 2021 the World Health Organisation reported that globally the deaths caused by COVID-19 reached more than 4 million. In United Arab Emirates the total cases infected by COVID-19 reached 8721 and 535 total confirmed death (WHO, 2021). The situation is critical for older adults of age 60 years and is predictable to reach more than 366 million people in highly developed countries; despite this increment, many countries are not equipped to meet the complications of the age alteration and do not take action to safeguard older people' welfare (Dixon, 2021). However, governments worldwide continue the efforts to contain the COVID-19 crisis and respond rapidly under dangerous conditions. Many types of research indicated that various countries have started issuing a series of policies to reduce the spread of coronavirus among old people via some institutional guidance, entry and exit management, psychological adaptation, and safety. Such strategies assist in enhancing the service system offered for old people, especially the social work activities.

The success of these policies and strategies requires support from the government and leaders to encourage a healthy environment that facilitates old people to participate in their daily lives as they age. Also, these strategies necessitate creating a partnership with industries and volunteer segments to create innovative technologies that lead to economic and social gains. COVID-19 has tremendous effects of creating social isolation and loneliness conditions. This issue has recently stimulated some countries to consider revising their public policies, such as Japan and the United Kingdom. And priority should be given to problems of social isolation and loneliness by all governments and resources that they merit to ensure that all society sectors gain from collaboration, alliance, and cohesion (WHO, a2021). Globally, COVID-19 also put pressure on social workers working face to face with their target groups with devastating feelings as of being working in unsafe environment trying to satisfy the needs of the people in indefinite situations, respect people rights, and be involved in making rapid decisions, assessment and guidance without deep consultations with their managers.

The UAE government is keen to harness all potentials and efforts by developing and implementing many policies and legislations that concern all members of society, including the family and the senior citizens, to ensure meeting their

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rights and achieve decent livelihood for them in a positive, happy and stable family environment that contributes to building and developing UAE society. It is now being among the best countries in the world in terms of social development, the golden jubilee of the union in 2021 A.D., and to achieve the goals and vision of the Ministry of Community Development in promoting family solidarity and social cohesion that are in line with the state's national agenda.

New policies have been adopted by March 2020 and implemented effectively by the Ministry of Community Development by establishing social care homes, providing home care services, protecting the vulnerable, providing social support, rehabilitation for needy groups, preparing and implementing social studies and research. The department also undertakes multiple societal responsibilities towards all categories of society, including children, women, senior citizens, and people with disabilities, in addition to providing quality services concerns with those in exceptional circumstances that require social protection, such as people with emergency crises, abused mothers, children of inmates of penal and correctional institutions, person living with a mental health issue, and other groups of society with its citizens and residents. All of them are covered by the umbrella of social services. Consequently, coronavirus caused senior citizens to experience social and psychological impacts that led governments to transform their policies and strategies to accommodate these problems. Social workers' professional practices require bringing expertise, theoretical background, and practical skills in addition to the systemic understanding of work institutions to assist and satisfy the urgent social and psychological needs and coordinate with the related institution. In addition to the requirements of quickly transforming their professional practices to adhere to the supervision of their target groups, to follow the rules of social distances and adapt themselves to the user of appropriate new technology suitable to senior citizens.

### *1.1 Terminology of the Research*

**Social Work:** has been defined as involving individuals and structure to handle their daily life's challenges (IFSW, 2018).

**Senior Citizens:** The Community Development Authority – Dubai (CDA)2014 defined older people above age 60 as the senior citizens who account for 6.6% of Dubai Emirati total population. Gradually, there is an increase in the number of older people due to tremendous health care services offered to them.

**Social Needs:** Many studies have focused on the importance of older people's social needs, mainly social interconnection that becomes critical to their health and survival because it plays a protruding role in preventing social loneliness.

**COVID-19:** Covid-19 has been defined as an acute respiratory illness caused by a novel human coronavirus and causes higher mortality among older, particularly those with underlying medical conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, diabetes, and cancer. (W.H.O b,2020). Ministry of Health & Prevention, UAE defines a person infected with COVID-19 as a patient with severe acute respiratory infections (SARI) admissions regardless of exposure history, especially older people. (Ministry of Health & Prevention, 2020).

### *1.2 Review of the Literature*

The study of Al Ali, Aisha. (2020): Older Adults Social Inclusion: A Scoping Review of Literature indicated that scoping review will assist in studying inclusion as explained in peer-reviewed articles. The findings will help understand the phenomenon of older adult social isolation in Dubai. It is essential to study this phenomenon from a qualitative perspective for Dubai. The Scoping review will help design future research on older adults' inclusion. For this scoping review, two research questions were developed; 1) what is the extent and nature of research regarding literature in older adult societal inclusion? 2) what are the gaps in the literature regarding older adult societal inclusion? All findings were grouped under six titles decision-makers, older adult, society, digital technology, research community, and music and art. The literature recommendations for inclusion were grouped under decision-makers, where officials intervention to help older adults is required by the following; a) inclusion by aging in place, b) help older adult transportation and mobility, c) provide opportunities to continue contributing roles, d) older adult identities, e) enable social connections via technology, f) include grandparents in family preventive strategies like childhood obesity and g) good policies in place to remove barriers that limit people accessing interventions.

A study conducted by Saeed, Mohammed Sweidan. (2020) under the title: A proposed program from a preventive perspective for the method of group work to activate the role of the social worker in the medical team to confront the Corona pandemic, shed light on the emerging coronavirus pandemic and the efforts of social workers as members of the medical work team. The study was executed to isolated hospitals for Corona patients from the Ministry of Health. The study population included (35) social workers, and a class sample of members of medical teams amounted to (135) members. The results showed that the social worker's role within the medical team indicated a weak level, the attitudes

of the medical team members towards the role of the social worker came at a weak level, and the study reached a suggested program of isolating the patients.

Research' theoretical, conceptual framework procedures are based on the complexity theory, which is directly focused on the tasks performed by social workers as practitioners during the sudden emerging and continuation of the COVID-19 crisis in which social workers need to apply the knowledge and theories from various disciplines while practicing their professional work to contain the spread of crises. This has been fostered by (Pycroft et al., 2015). There will be great benefit from the continual improvement of applying the theoretical foundations and the ecosystem theories that foster the idea of the interconnectedness of older people and their interaction with the surrounding social environment. This has also led the Author to consider the complexity theory as there is a growing use of complexity theory because it provides a framework for the social workers to organize his/their work practice, knowledge, and research methods when dealing with socially disintegrated senior citizens due to spread of coronavirus and identify their real urgent needs for socially reintegrating them in the society. The study significantly benefits from the theory of complexity as it will enhance the social workers existing approaches, methodologies, and strategies and direct innovations and instruments to satisfy the urgent social needs of the senior citizens. The complexity paradigm is a comprehensive theory for social workers to be more reflective and involved in decision-making processes. (Pycroft et al., 2015).

Accordingly, some previous research studies dealt with broad and general topics concerning social work during COVID-19, covering various disciplines and fields of social work in satisfying general needs. In contrast, this study is specifically directed to the duty of social workers in the field of aging and the satisfaction of urgent needs for senior citizens. Also, the objectives of the study of the previous literature review were general and not limited to specific intervention to solve the urgent social needs as a consequence of social distances senior citizens. In addition to that, comparing the previous researches, there is no steadiness in the theoretical and practical results of the previous results.

The current research seeks to address the study problem by raising the following questions:

- 1-What are the effects of the coronavirus crisis on the senior citizen's social work system?
- 2-What types of initiatives have been developed to assist senior citizens deal with social isolation created by the COVID-19 crisis?
- 3-What kinds of instruments have been adopted during the pandemic crises of coronavirus?
- 4-What are the results and recommendations that can assist in strengthening the social work and social workers' roles to solve the problems of social distances & isolations?

## 2 Methodologies

### Method

The present research has adopted the descriptive analytical approach. This approach is more suitable for executing such research, reflecting the actual situation, and achieving the research objectives.

### Limits

*Human Limits:* Sharjah and the Ajman Emirates social workers.

*Spatial Limits:* The research was applied to the social workers of the Ministry of Community and Development.

*Temporal Limits:* The research was conducted in the first semester of 2020/2021.

### Participants

All social workers enrolled in social work institutions in Ajman and Sharjah Emirates.

### Sampling

A purposively selected sample consisted of 50 social workers who enrolled at senior citizens Centers of the Ministry of Community Development in Ajman & Al Sharjah Emirates.

### Instrumentations

The qualitative method of data collection is adopted using electronic semi-structured interview questions consisting of three central questions: What are the effects of the coronavirus crisis on the social work system for senior citizens? What types of initiatives do they develop to assist senior citizens cop with social isolation created by the COVID-19 crisis? What instruments do they adopt during the pandemic crises of coronavirus? For data collection and analysis, the

study adopted the thematic analysis method.

### 3 Results and Discussion

#### *Discussion and Finding of the 1<sup>st</sup> Question*

The study reveals the real implementation of vision 2021 and the seniors' citizens policy & strategy to achieve a decent happy life for the UAE community. Social work system requires to focus on achieving integration and unifying roles and efforts between different institutions in their various sectors in consolidating social responsibility, to have a clear imprint in contributing to community initiatives and projects that have a long-term societal impact, and contributing to support the state in promoting the concept of sustainable development. As mentioned by the social workers from the targeted sample: “such integration and unifying roles help strengthen the cooperation and consolidate the strategic partnership between the Ministry of Community Development and other concerned partners like the Ministry of health” (date: 20-7-2021). The aim of this strategic partnership is “to provide medical care for every senior citizen in various parts of the Sharjah and Ajman Emirates and provide all kinds of necessary tests innovatively and permanently (date: 20-7-2021). The targeted sample of the social workers indicated that the effect of COVID-19 on the social work system could be explained in the following dimension: effect of Coronavirus pandemic on health home care system. As revealed from the study, social workers indicated that (In both Sharjah and Ajman Emirates, the main initiative that has been affected by the COVID-19 crises is the Mobile Health Unit, which is equipped with all medical equipment and provide its services to senior citizens who are registered with the Ministry to be tested for blood pressure, diabetes, periodic check-ups, memory enhancement, physical therapy sessions, and others.) (date: 20-7-2021). The health unit services are expected to reach senior citizens at their houses, and the medical staff of the mobile unit is expected to conduct 1900 annual visits. Senior citizens provide sustainable medical and social services of high quality and use modern devices and innovative technologies to ensure that senior citizens receive intensive care. It aims “to provide them with the appropriate treatment at their residence in the Emirates, in line with the directives of the UAE government and its wise leadership” (date: 20-7-2021).

#### *Discussion and Finding of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Question*

The study has revealed that “the competencies entrusted to us as social workers have been characterized by participation in the implementation of the development of new initiatives to control coronavirus spread and supervising their implementation” (date: 20-7-2021). This can be illustrated in “carrying out continuous rapid parasail, research and social studies in line with the needs of the elder people to enrich the initiatives services provided by new project of Assala social clubs” (date: 20-7-2021). In addition to the role of “receiving requests for subsidies, aid and social pensions for those in need, researching and studying them, and making recommendations in their regard” (date: 20-7-2021). Also “providing subsidies, aid, and social pensions to those who are entitled to them in accordance with the rules, regulations and procedures in force in the department” (date: 20-7-2021). “supervising the nursing home for the senior citizens and providing them with social, health and psychological care, and suggesting new target to join the social clubs in order to achieve the advancement of the family and social and psychological welfare of elder people” (date: 20-7-2021). Also the targeted sample involved in administrative role of “cooperation and coordination with other similar institutions, with the aim of sharing society and family guidance to serve, develop family relations and support sound social values, with customs and traditions in line with the teachings of the tolerant Islamic Sharia” (date: 20-7-2021). In addition to the task of “preparing periodic reports on the initiative's achievements and submitting them to the managers. (date: 20-7-2021).

#### *Discussion and Finding of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Question*

The study indicated that the social workers' roles are based on innovative engagement with digital technology during Corona Virus crises to combat social isolation. This can be explained in the following:

All social workers indicated that during the epidemic, “ we use WhatsApp group with senior citizens to make sure they are staying at home, whether they are healthy, and whether they have special needs” (date: 20-7-2021). Spreading official epidemic prevention information on the WhatsApp group. Additionally, social workers assisted senior citizens and groups beneficiaries to be registered and join online activities of Assala Clubs using zoom meetings, “we transmitted various kind of activities such as entertainment, physical exercises, handicrafts activities and so on (date: 20-7-2021). “we offered social services to senior citizens and their families” (date: 20-7-2021), the study revealed that 311 families were assisted. Their needs had been secured, with a total of 586 beneficiaries during 2021. “the social services included emergency aid, and assistance, according to emergency social services that have been delivered to the homes of families in need of urgent intervention and adequate support. To meet the basic needs within less than 24 hours and in line with the health standards that ensure the safety of families and field team” (date: 20-7-2021). The Sharjah Social Services Department provides the best services to its beneficiaries, especially during the epidemic

period. The department has developed many of its services during the last period to suit the world's circumstances due to COVID 19 pandemic. The service included emergency aid and assistance. Home care implemented telemedicine service via the toll-free number or WhatsApp, for the benefit of senior citizens' case, exposition bedridden, handicapped, and those with chronic diseases, or renew a prescription, in addition for people who are in-home quarantine due to the epidemic. In cases where intervention is required, urgent, immediate intervention is required to provide treatment necessary or transfer the case to the hospital. (Al Wahat Electronic Journal, 2021, P:6).

The study reveals that (these practical digital tools and digital skills are crucial to confronting COVID -19 social work practice. And we need to share data about practical issues within ourselves. Digital tools and skills were the core concern for us and our own and senior citizens' attitudes towards using these digital tools with some difficulties of having Internet connection or with minimal skills to handle these devices. The difficulties related to digital tools and skills concerned not only senior citizens but also us as social workers who had never conducted social work interventions via the Internet) (date: 20/25-7-2021).

The study reveals that all social workers assist senior citizens to cope with the COVID-19 crisis and its social isolation by: ( I adopt a virtual weekly meditation session targeting the senior citizens called Al-Asala Clubs in cooperation with the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum. This club enables 166 members from the national senior citizens to be fully empowered by joining the weekly virtual trips to the Louvre Museum - Abu Dhabi, through several sessions presented by the Louvre museum's management, to create an opportunity to enhance positive experiences of social interaction and cooperation with senior national citizens and with various members of society at the state level) (date: 20-7-2021).

The study reveals that Al-Asala Clubs virtual session provides senior national citizens various opportunities such as the following :

The opportunity to look at the details of creative social work and discover themselves by linking the information to recent memories and personal history of the senior citizens.

The opportunity to communicate with other senior national citizens and social workers during the virtual trips is an essential aspect in promoting the societal integration of parents in light of the current conditions of the corona health crisis. In Sharjah, 166 senior citizens have joined Al-Asala clubs in weekly stages to be organized in succession.

These virtual sessions provide therapeutic reflective moments by interacting with the selected creations within the framework of a systematic, innovative education by the museum's management.

Al-Asala clubs continue to provide its daily services and programs to club members, parents, and senior citizens via "Distance Learning" through the application of the "Zoom" platform and WhatsApp communication groups, in addition to daily contact by phone, in implementing the senior citizens' plan that aim to ensure social integration and preserve their health and safety in light of the current health crisis that imposes on everyone social distancing and sitting at home.

Al- Asala clubs projects are working based on an annual plan and following the vision and objectives of the strategic social services department to develop services provided to the senior citizens in all areas needed by the senior citizens, which include the social, health, sports, professional, developmental, religious, cultural and recreational aspects, which meet all aspirations to achieve a sustainable vision to achieve the strategy of Sharjah City age-sensitive.

The study indicated that social workers divert to online work with senior citizens due to precautions of controlling coronavirus pandemic. Thus they use daily online communication methods to implement their health programs as well as other technical and social programs, religious programs, memorization of the Noble Qur'an, cultural, heritage, and community programs and sports activities, in addition to heritage documentation programs, development programs, as well as informing them of health information and instructions to prevent the virus, in addition to applying physical therapy exercises and instructions through Electronic/ Smart platforms for remote communication. It is communicated to them over the phone to check on their health condition daily and ensure the availability of medicines and health supplies to them, provided that the medicines are delivered if one of the affiliates needs medicines and is provided to them urgently.

#### **4 Recommendation**

Recommendations related to social workers' ethical challenges and responses can be summarized in the following: More attention should be directed to senior citizens who are at risk of being infected by Coronavirus and those living alone need to be registered to the azalea club, assisted as early as possible. Ensure that Corona Virus might disturb many vital services and medical doctors and nurses and they are needed most to meet the physical needs of senior citizens as well as the psychological health and wellbeing that might be the result of social distances and connectivity. It is critical to continue to gain good quality data by tracking senior citizens' health conditions to improve health

outcomes. More assistance needs to be delivered to senior citizens and other vulnerable low-income families, especially residents at the most significant risk of being pushed into poverty. Continue creating strategic partners to strengthen social work systems and support the implementation of interventions like Al-Asala clubs.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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