

# Challenges and Solutions of Community Services for Rural Persons with Disabilities in the Context of Rural Revitalization: A Case Study of Zaozhuang City, Shandong Province

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**Abstract** Under the strategic framework of comprehensively advancing rural revitalization, this study employs Zaozhuang City in Shandong Province as a case study to systematically analyze its practical initiatives in providing community services for rural persons with disabilities. Research indicates that Zaozhuang City has developed a three-tiered service network known as "Rukang Home" and has explored localized models including the "integration of rehabilitation and medical care", "digital empowerment", and "supported employment". Nevertheless, significant challenges persist, such as a structural mismatch between supply and demand, a shortage of qualified professionals, interruptions in sustainable funding, and fragmented institutional governance. To address these challenges, it is essential to shift the conceptual framework from mere "support" to "empowerment", establish an integrated service delivery system, promote localized talent development, create a diversified financing mechanism, and enhance intelligent services through the adoption of digital inclusiveness.

**Key words** Rural revitalization, Rural persons with disabilities, Community service, Rukang Home, Zaozhuang City

## 0 Introduction

The advancement of the rights and interests of persons with disabilities constitutes an integral component of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Within this framework, rural services for persons with disabilities represent the most vulnerable and challenging aspect. Data from the Second National Sample Survey on Persons with Disabilities indicate that over 75% of persons with disabilities in China reside in rural areas, where they encounter numerous difficulties, including a high incidence of poverty, limited access to rehabilitation services, and substantial barriers to social participation. Under the strategic framework of comprehensively advancing rural revitalization, the development of an equitable and accessible community service system for rural persons with disabilities, encompassing both urban and rural areas, not only pertains to the welfare of 85 million persons with disabilities but also serves as a measure of the modernization quality of the national governance system and its governance capacity.

Zaozhuang City, a representative agricultural region in Shandong Province, has a relatively high proportion of rural inhabitants. Services for rural persons with disabilities face common challenges, including an imbalance between supply and demand, fragmented resources, and a lack of professional expertise. In recent years, Zaozhuang City has undertaken various initiatives in the domain of community services for persons with disabilities. Specifically, Yicheng District has developed the "Rukang Home" model, which integrates "rehabilitation and medical care" through village-level clinics; Shanting District has enhanced community rehabilitation for mental disorders by utilizing digital platforms; and Xuecheng District has established a social assistance system aimed

at "supporting vulnerable populations". These practices have not only accumulated valuable experience but have also revealed underlying challenges. This study focuses on Zaozhuang City as a case study and employs a method that integrates literature review and policy analysis to systematically examine its practical efforts in providing community services for rural persons with disabilities, identify the fundamental difficulties encountered, and propose potential optimization strategies.

## 1 Practical exploration of community services for rural persons with disabilities in Zaozhuang City

**1.1 Policy design and institutional supply** The institutional innovation in community services for rural persons with disabilities in Zaozhuang City is primarily demonstrated through policy coordination and resource integration at the county level. In July 2025, the China Charity Federation entered into a cooperation agreement with the Disabled Persons' Federation of Yicheng District for the "Happy Home" village and community mutual assistance project. This collaboration introduced a "national charity team" into the county-level service system for persons with disabilities, effectively addressing the challenges arising from the "misalignment between administrative authority and financial resources" faced by grassroots disabled persons' federations. Additionally, Xuecheng District has advanced the concept of "comprehensive rescue" by establishing a dynamic verification mechanism that combines "big data + foot power", resulting in the distribution of 42.34 million yuan in rescue funds during the first three quarters of 2025.

Regarding the spatial organization of service bases, Zaozhuang City has developed a three-tiered linkage framework encompassing the "district (city), town (sub-district), and village (community)" levels. "Rukang Home", recognized as the unified home brand for persons with disabilities in Shandong Province, leverages grassroots public service facilities to establish a comprehensive serv-

ice institution that integrates functions including day care, supported employment, and community rehabilitation.

## 1.2 Local exploration of service models

**1.2.1 Integration of rehabilitation and medical care:** the model of Hekou Village, Yicheng District. Leveraging the Three-Year Improvement Project for Village Health Clinics, the village has effectively integrated "Rukang Home" with the renovation efforts of these clinics. By incorporating existing public service facilities, this approach has optimized resource utilization, resulting in cost savings and partially mitigating the shortage of professional personnel.

**1.2.2 Digital empowerment:** smart rehabilitation platform of Shanting District. In 2024, Shanting District developed and implemented a visual service platform that integrated information on disabled individuals from 280 administrative villages across 10 towns and sub-districts within the district. The platform supports login through mobile WeChat mini-programs and offers functionalities including policy comprehension and service demand management. Additionally, smart bracelets were distributed to 80 persons with mental disabilities, facilitating the exploration of a service model combining the "Internet of Things with rehabilitation".

**1.2.3 Supportive employment:** practice in Xuecheng District. Xuecheng District has implemented work therapy initiatives through "Rukang Home" and manages the Zaozhuang Ruchang Disabled Persons' Training and Employment Base. To date, it has provided training to over 200 persons with disabilities, of whom 100 have successfully secured employment. These efforts have contributed to the restoration of self-identity and social integration among the disabled population.

## 1.3 Resource mobilization and multi-party participation

Government procurement of services constitutes a significant policy instrument. The Disabled Persons' Federation of Shanting District has implemented day care services for 40 persons with mental disabilities through service procurement. Regarding social force participation, Xincheng Sub-district in Xuecheng District, utilizing the New Era Civilization Practice Station, organized 52 activities during the "Respect for the Elderly Month" in October 2025.

## 2 Significant challenges of community services for rural persons with disabilities

**2.1 Structural contradiction: supply and demand mismatch and coverage blind spots** Currently, there exists a discrepancy in service provision characterized by an excess of inclusive services and a deficiency in responses to specialized needs. Additionally, while numerous phased activities are conducted, continuous services remain scarce. For example, the lack of professional rehabilitation therapists has resulted in a low utilization rate of equipment, creating a paradoxical situation in which equipment is available but underused. Furthermore, service accessibility in remote mountainous regions and economically disadvantaged villages is limited. Consequently, severely disabled individuals, those with mental disabilities, and other highly vulnerable groups are marginalized due to the high costs and risks associated with these

services.

## 2.2 Professional challenges: talent trough and capability bottleneck

The proportion of certified social workers operating at the grassroots level is notably low. A significant portion of services is delivered by committed personnel from the Disabled Persons' Federation, village cadres, or volunteers who generally lack systematic professional training. Low remuneration and limited opportunities for career advancement hinder the "recruitment and retention" of qualified professionals. Rehabilitation services often adopt a "uniform approach", social work is primarily limited to resource coordination, and psychological support is largely absent. Furthermore, the "de-professionalization" of services may result in path dependency, whereby persons with disabilities are "conditioned" to become passive recipients of assistance.

## 2.3 Sustainability crisis: cash flow disruption and operational fragility

The operation of "Rukang Home" relies heavily on government subsidies and project funding, resulting in limited self-sustainability. The project-based supply model exacerbates uncertainty, as the continuation of funding following the conclusion of demonstration projects often depends on the level of attention from local government authorities. Furthermore, the auxiliary employment opportunities primarily involve low value-added labor, characterized by minimal profits and unstable market demand, which hinders the ability to cover operational costs.

## 2.4 Institutional obstacles: fragmented governance and failure of coordination

Services for rural persons with disabilities encompass multiple departments, including the Disabled Persons' Federation, Civil Affairs, Health Commission, and Human Resources and Social Security. However, the coordination mechanisms among these departments remain inadequate, resulting in fragmented service delivery. Typically, the township-level Disabled Persons' Federation is staffed by only one part-time employee who is primarily occupied with administrative reporting. Additionally, issues of formalism persist within village-level disability associations. The current assessment system predominantly emphasizes "hardware" indicators, lacking effective measures for evaluating "software" indicators related to service quality.

## 3 Strategies for optimizing community services for rural persons with disabilities

### 3.1 A shift in conception: from "support" to "empowerment"

The fundamental focus of the conceptual transformation is to shift from a "support-based model" to an "empowerment-based model", and from a "medical model" to a "social model". The social model posits that disability is not an inherent limitation of individual functioning but rather a consequence of the social environment's failure to accommodate differences. Consequently, the primary goal of community services is not to "repair" the persons with disabilities but to "modify" the environment. "Empowerment" entails transitioning services from "acting on behalf of persons with disabilities" to "collaborating with them".

**3.2 System reconfiguration: integrated service supply** Integrated service delivery can be realized through three primary ap-

proaches; vertical integration, which clarifies the boundaries of responsibilities across all levels; integration throughout the entire life cycle, facilitating continuous service provision; and horizontal integration, which establishes a collaborative network among multiple entities. Specific strategies include enhancing the role of the township-level Disabled Persons' Federation as a central hub, promoting the integration of "Rukang Home" with village clinics and elderly care service centers, and developing a "referral" mechanism to coordinate services.

**3.3 Talent breakthrough; localized cultivation and professional support** Regarding "blood transfusion" services, professional social work institutions are engaged through government procurement mechanisms, and a personnel management system characterized by "county-level administration and township-level utilization" is being developed. In the domain of "blood production", priority is given to cultivating local talent; village doctors, family members of disabled individuals, and other "local experts" can be transformed into key service providers through systematic training and certification processes. The comprehensive service team established in Shanting District serves as a valuable model for professional collaboration.

**3.4 Mechanism innovation; diversified financing and sustainable operation** A diversified financing mechanism comprising "government subsidies, medical insurance reimbursements, charitable donations, and service revenue generation" has been established. Government subsidies should transition from a "project-based model" to an "institution-based approach" and be integrated into the county-level fiscal budget. The inclusion of community rehabilitation programs within the scope of medical insurance payments is encouraged. Supportive employment necessitates an industrial chain perspective, making it essential to establish county-level product distribution centers to achieve economies of scale. Furthermore, the government should prioritize the procurement of supportive employment products for persons with disabilities to ensure stable market demand.

**3.5 Technology empowerment; digital inclusion and intelligent services** Digitalization presents an opportunity to advance rural services for persons with disabilities through "alternative channels"; however, it is imperative to address the issue of "digital inclusion". A hybrid approach that integrates both "online" and "offline" services should be maintained. For persons with disabilities who are unable to utilize smart devices, offline agency services should be made available via "digital disability assistants". Concurrently, the establishment of a unified, city-wide service information platform is essential to enable comprehensive process management and to provide data support for evidence-based practices.

## 4 Conclusions

Community services for rural persons with disabilities consti-

tute a systematic initiative that necessitates the integration of top-level planning and grassroots insights, alongside the coordination of governmental responsibilities and social participation. The case study of Zaozhuang City demonstrates that, despite resource limitations, innovations in service models, such as the "integration of rehabilitation and medical care", "digital empowerment", and "supported employment", can partially alleviate the imbalance between supply and demand and enhance service quality. Nevertheless, addressing the underlying challenges requires the coordinated advancement of conceptual transformation, systemic restructuring, talent development, mechanism innovation, and technological empowerment.

Ultimately, the fundamental principle underlying services for rural persons with disabilities is the promotion of fairness and dignity. Within the framework of rural revitalization, the challenge lies in enabling these individuals not only to overcome poverty and hardship but also to thrive and live with respect rather than mere survival and care. This serves as a critical measure of societal civilization and represents an essential issue for advancing disability-related initiatives from mere existence to quality and well-being.

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