What Works

Scaling the Walls
How a nonprofit spurred the Indian government to help seniors

By Sejal Shah

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GOVERNMENT-NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS

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Sheilu Sreenivasan was being stonewalled. For two years, Sreenivasan, the founder and president of Dignity Foundation, made the rounds of government offices in Mumbai, India, with a proposal: The state should provide identity cards to seniors.

"Unlike other countries where the identity of a person is validated through the social security system," Sreenivasan explained, "we have no proof of identity here."

Because of this, seniors were having trouble getting senior concessions from government agencies. Senior cards, she argued, would allow seniors to get everything from priority in court hearings to discounts on railways, airfares, telephone rentals, and medical and pharmacy services at central government hospitals. Cards would also help the state maintain records of the number of seniors living in each city, providing information on medical status and voting eligibility.

"Every time I went to the office there was a new officer, and they would give me another form to fill [out]," Sreenivasan recalled recently. "And the demands kept changing."

Scaling the walls of government bureaucracy is a major hurdle for many nonprofits working in developing countries. Nonprofits often get the same response from officials: The government does not have the money or the manpower, and it doesn't want the burden of a new project.

How can nonprofits spur government agencies in developing countries into action? Sreenivasan proposed a radical solution. She met with Vilasrao Deshmukh, the chief minister of the state, and "before he could brush me off I explained to him how this project would cost him nothing," recalls Sreenivasan. "No manpower, no financial resources. I told him that we would do the work, staff his office with our volunteers, and even use our own stationary. He will have no headaches. All he has to do is approve the project." The government would receive all the glory and have none of the heavy lifting, promised Sreenivasan. "The media and the people would appreciate what he had done and it would help him to gain people's support."

Deshmukh approved the project.

And since the program began in 2002, more than 200,000 people have received their ID cards. It is the first and only state program that issues cards to senior citizens in India.

All They Had to Do Was Sign

Dignity Foundation is a Mumbai-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) that provides elderly people with educational and volunteer opportunities. This ID card program is one of several the Dignity Foundation has successfully launched to get around government inaction and provide social services. The foundation strategy is always the same – overcome the government's lack of willpower, manpower, and money by providing trained volunteers and supplies.

Dignity Foundation lived up to its side of the bargain with Deshmukh by ensuring that government workers didn't have to do anything beyond stamping ID cards. Senior volunteers are responsible for the program from start to finish. At Dignity's 25 centers in Mumbai, the volunteers help applicants fill out the ID form. (The applicants pay 30 rupees, just under $1, which covers the cost of the processing and allows the program to be self-sustaining.) The forms are then sent to the foundation's central office, where volunteers verify the documents and sort the verified forms. Volunteers then send the forms to be stamped to government signing officers. Even here, Volunteers are on hand, standing next to the signing officers to flip pages for them. The volunteers then check to ensure officers have placed the stamp in the correct position. (Any errors on a card could lead to it being rejected when presented as ID.) And finally, volunteers enter the record of the ID into a government registry book, on paper provided by the Dignity Foundation. "Our volunteers helped [the government officers] with everything," said Nita Khajuria, program director. "All they had to do was sign."

Leaving nothing to chance, the foundation sends cards and gifts to the government workers each year, acknowledging their support.

Though the program is well thought out, there are challenges to taking on social service responsibilities typically provided by the government. The sheer volume of ID card applications was initially difficult for the NGO to handle. Seniors who walked into the centers to apply for the card often don't have all their documents. "We are first taught how to be extremely patient," said Sheel Pai, a volunteer. Dignity pulls volunteers who don't provide satisfactory customer service. "We replaced some volunteers because they were rude and we received complaints against them," said Khajuria.

Handling the volume of applicants was exacerbated by the fact that the government's process is a complicated one – there are 16 tasks involved just to issue one card. So Khajuria focuses on training the volunteers on each task – from filling out the form to verifying the documents to the final stamping. Volunteers are trained for two months. Quality control is provided by built-in redundancy – at least four volunteers check to see that each form is properly filled out.

The volunteers are also trained in the art of diplomacy when dealing with the government officers. "You can't blame the government authorities if the signing of the form was delayed because they had other work to do and they were overloaded," said Khajuria.

Meanwhile, not only has the program helped the government provide social services needed by seniors, it keeps 250 senior volunteers busy every day in Mumbai.

The ID card program is not the only Dignity effort to follow this path to success. A similar program was put into action recently when a spate of crimes against seniors broke out in Mumbai. Dignity wanted to ensure more security for seniors. The foundation provided 10 volunteers to each of the 83 city police stations. The volunteers visit seniors in their homes, recording information about who lives with them. The volunteers also collect photographs of people who have access to the homes, including the household help – the milkman, the fruit seller, and the maid. "This is a preventive measure," said Kartika Anthony, a psychologist at the Dignity Foundation. "We found that [in the past] the household help [has] committed most of the crimes. Usually they commit their crime and run away to their far-off villages. Now they realize we know where they live and what they look like."

The volunteers also conduct monthly meetings between the police stations and the seniors. Seniors get to know the policeman in charge of their areas, providing them with a chance to voice their fears and problems to the police.

Ultimately, said Sreenivasan, both the ID card program and the senior security program come down to the same basic strategy: "We are ensuring through our volunteers that the government provides protection to senior citizens." □