

Cabinet tackles elders’ smartphone woes

Many of China’s 250 million senior residents have been struggling to adapt as more services go digital

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One of the biggest obstacles Zhu Zhongzhen has faced since moving to Beijing from a village in Guizhou province to look after her three-year-old granddaughter is her lack of expertise with a smartphone. She can handle basic functions such as taking video calls and scrolling for updates on video-sharing social networks. But everything else associated with the use of a smartphone, such as hailing a taxi or making mobile payments, is out of reach. “I often find myself needing extra help from staff members to find my health code on my phone,” the 65-year-old said, explaining that even going to a supermarket means extra trouble for her as more cashiers prefer mobile payments to cash. With the help of mobile technology and big data, China is using a color-based QR health code on smartphones to reflect the risk levels of places a person has visited, with a green code becoming a prerequisite for entrance to public spaces such as shopping malls and hospitals in some areas.

Zhu’s experience epitomizes the inconveniences faced by China’s 250 million elderly residents, many of whom struggled as more services went digital during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ease their plight, the government must beef up efforts to solve the difficulties they face due to their lack of competence in using smart technologies, the General Office of the State Council said in a policy document issued on Nov 24. Traditional forms of service in various areas must be retained for elderly residents, and more smart services and products that cater to the demands of seniors must be offered, the document said. It pledged to solve the most pressing problems seniors face in their daily lives, including transport and healthcare, and ensure their basic needs are met.

Zhao Chenxin, secretary-general of the National Development and Reform Commission, told a news conference on Thursday that the key thread of the new policies is to make sure traditional ways of accessing services are preserved as the use of digital technologies becomes more widespread. “It requires joint action from all of society to help groups including seniors better adapt to a smart society,” he said. “We need to fully respect the demand from minorities, which is an indicator of the level of inclusiveness of our society.” To ensure the daily lives of seniors will not be affected by pandemic con-



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tainment measures, the document said the checking of health codes is no longer mandatory except in special places such as airports, railway stations and border ports. Local authorities should not use digital health codes as the sole form of proof that residents have not traveled to high-risk areas, and the elderly must be able to use other methods such as registering their IDs or using written certificates, it said. Authorities will refine ride-hailing services, make it easier for the elderly to take public transport and offer a variety of channels for them to make appoint-

ments with doctors, it added. No units or individuals will be allowed to refuse to accept cash payments, the document said, adding that retailers, restaurants, shopping malls and parks must support payment channels including cash and bank cards. Public spaces such as parks, tourist spots, libraries and exhibition halls must have service windows and telephone hotlines to offer booking services for the elderly. Du Peng, vice-president of Renmin

University of China and a professor of gerontology, said the document pointed the way for the application of smart technologies in the near future. He said service providers shifting reservations online was a trend even before the pandemic. “The pandemic has amplified the plight faced by some seniors who found their basic lives made even more inconvenient by digitalization,” he said. “Digitalization is supposed to make everybody’s life better. As it

turned out, it was not for everybody.” The policy document seeks to rectify the side effect of digitalization that has left many people, especially those not familiar with using a smartphone, unable to access many services, he said. “It also comes as a reminder for the whole of society that the carrying out of new rules should not go against principles of service or even the law,” Du said. Zhou Jin contributed to this story.

POLICY RESPONSE

Consumption upgrade and virus testing on government agenda

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A number of central government departments, including those responsible for commerce, health, information technology, and cultural relics, have responded recently to matters of public concern. Ministry highlights role of consumption upgrade China will press ahead with an action plan aimed at upgrading consumption by encouraging the provision of better quality goods and services to the public, officials and executives decided at a meeting in Beijing on Thursday that was organized by the Ministry of Commerce. More than 120 key commerce offi-



cials and business executives from around the country attended the meeting, at which the ministry urged efforts to upgrade consumption in urban and rural areas. The domestic market has witnessed a sustained recovery by realizing this year’s plan for the upgrading of consumption and that has provided strong support for people’s livelihoods, the ministry said in a statement released after the meeting. It said it hopes that localities and departments nurture more cities to lead the way in allowing international consumption to flourish and enhancing e-commerce development in rural areas. Encouraging the consumption of goods and services — including automobiles, home appliances, imported goods and catering services — should be a priority, and events should be held to stimulate demand, the ministry said.

Unremitting efforts to control pandemic urged Nucleic acid testing for COVID-19 will be ramped up to cover more vulnerable individuals who need to be

tested and the frequency of regular testing will also be increased. Unremitting efforts are required to maintain COVID-19 containment measures to guard against a resurgence of the pandemic this winter and next spring, a video conference held by the National Health Commission on Nov 22 was told. The teleconference highlighted the need to guard against infections brought into the country by people arriving from overseas and imported goods and packages. It called for tougher controls on illegal entry at borders and better use of protective gear by individuals at higher risk of infection. The commission urged local authorities to step up pandemic monitoring and the reporting of related information. Hospital fever clinics should make sure monitoring, reporting and transferring of COVID-19 cases is done properly, the commission said.

Plan for cultural relics ‘gene bank’ released To bolster the study of cultural relics, improve information sharing

and nurture more talent, the National Cultural Heritage Administration will team up with Peking University to build a national “gene bank” for cultural relics of the Chinese civilization. It aims to collect and preserve typical specimens of archaeological discoveries across the country, according to a strategic cooperation agreement signed in Beijing on Thursday. The bank will promote the development of comprehensive research and will be open to archaeological research institutions throughout the country. The administration and university will jointly build a high-level cultural relics protection and archaeometry laboratory, a national cultural relics database and an archaeological big data research center. By doing so, a comprehensive scientific research service platform will be established.

5G creating new range of services in China The booming buildup of telecommunication infrastructure for 5G is catalyzing new services based on the technology in China, with the



country launching more than 700,000 5G base stations, with over 180 million terminal connections, by October. The figures were unveiled by Liu Liehong, vice-minister of industry and information technology, at the World 5G Convention, which opened on Thursday in Guangzhou, Guangdong province. Liu said China’s 5G technology is integrating more quickly with the real economy, with an increasing number of terminals being put into use, and the technology is being used in sectors including smart manufacturing, health, energy and agriculture. He said 253 types of 5G terminals have been licensed in China, including 218 types of 5G mobile phones.

Policy Digest

Plan boosts wildfire fighting capacity

A new national emergency plan for forest and grassland fires has been introduced to boost China’s capacity to fight wildfires and avoid tragedies brought about by authorities’ failures or errors. Issued by the State Council’s General Office on Nov 23, the plan, which replaces a contingency plan approved in 2010, will serve as a guide in organizing fire-fighting, rescuing and evacuating people, protecting civilians and important military establishments, transferring important supplies and ensuring social stability. It grades forest and grassland fires into four levels: general, large, serious and particularly serious. To avoid problems with access to firefighting equipment and resources in extreme conditions, the plan said a centralized production and allocation mechanism will be set up in response to supply shortages. To ensure efficacy, fire alarms must reach departments concerned and the public in areas at risk through alarm information platforms, radio, television, newspapers, the internet, official WeChat accounts, and emergency broadcasts, the plan said. Information about fires and the progress of firefighting should be released in a timely, accurate, objective and comprehensive manner through authorized outlets, news releases, interviews, news conferences, professional institutions’ websites, and official Sina Weibo and WeChat accounts. To safeguard law and order where a wildfire breaks out, the plan said management of public security and road traffic in fire-affected areas should be strengthened, and those committing any illegal acts must be punished. When a fire occurs, departments concerned should study the weather, terrain, and environmental conditions and determine whether the fire is threatening populated areas or key facilities vulnerable to major hazards such as nuclear power plants.

State Council hails 43 policy initiatives

The State Council General Office has commended 43 excellent policy initiatives from across the country for representing local wisdom and innovative efforts in tackling social, economic tasks and challenges. Listed in a circular issued on Nov 20, the policy initiatives were first identified during a recent inspection by the State Council that covered 14 provincial-level regions and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. The inspection, the seventh of its kind, was conducted to make sure Central Economic Work Conference requirements and Government Work Report targets and goals are being met. Most of the commended initiatives are linked to improving people’s livelihoods, optimizing the business environment, expanding domestic demand, securing foreign trade, or COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control. At the forefront of bolstering employment and foreign trade amid the global financial downturn, Dongguan, Guangdong province, a city known for electronic products manufacturing and assembling, was hailed for upgrading its administrative services for enterprises and effectively securing its major foreign trade markets. In light of the fight against the novel coronavirus, Hubei province was hailed for carrying out large-scale training, drills and supervision to improve COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control capabilities, while Zhejiang province built a pandemic prevention and control mechanism featuring QR codes, a shared database, platform and index. To help businesses, Beijing pushed ahead with the streamlining of administration and improving regulation and services to build a world-class business environment, while Zhejiang reduced the time it takes enterprises to gain approval for investment projects, the circular said. It called on all localities and departments to learn from the commended initiatives.

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