

CHINA

Affordable rental homes a key focus

Local authorities accelerate efforts following State Council guideline

By HOU LIQIANG
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Many young Chinese people prefer to work in major cities because they offer more job opportunities, but high housing prices often force them to live far from their workplaces, with some facing commutes of over an hour on overcrowded subways.

They may soon be spared that daily grind due to efforts to provide cheap but decent rental apartments near their jobs.

After the General Office of the State Council, China's Cabinet, issued a guideline in July, the country's housing authority and local governments have been making efforts to push the development of affordable rental housing, with young people a major target group.

A new type of government-subsidized rental housing, with units often no larger than 70 square meters, will aim to solve the housing problems of new urban residents, young people and other eligible groups by providing housing at rents lower than the market rate, the guideline said.

In 2019, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development launched a pilot rental housing program in 13 cities, including Changsha, capital of Hunan province, and Jinan, capital of Shandong province, that focused on the development of affordable housing.

The guideline included preferential policies such as the simplification of approval procedures and the provision of financial support to help address difficulties the cities encountered in the development process.

Huo Da, a tourist guide in Changsha, was one of the first to benefit from the pilot program, which set no income threshold.

The 28-year-old learned about the program soon after arriving in Changsha from his hometown in Jiangsu province for work. He quickly filed an application, but didn't expect to qualify so soon.

His apartment in a renovated building is located in a bustling downtown area close to many commercial complexes, he said, adding

that it's a good location for everyday life and entertainment, with convenient transportation connections.

His apartment has a bedroom and a washroom, and all the tenants in the 99-apartment block have free access to a shared gym, meeting rooms and kitchens.

"The apartment is not big, but it's comfortable, with decorations that appeal to young people," he said, adding he only pays 1,900 yuan (\$298) a month in rent.

Many more people are expected to benefit from the program as it is extended to other Chinese cities in line with the State Council guideline.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development says China plans to build 6.5 million government-subsidized rental apartments in 40 major cities by 2025, benefiting 13 million people.

The building of such apartments has gained momentum this year, according to the ministry, with 1.9 million expected to be built, up from about 940,000 last year.

Many local authorities have thrown themselves into action, according to the annual work reports of provincial-level governments. Twenty-one of the 30 work reports made fully or partially public by January vowed to ramp up the development of government-subsidized rental housing for young people.

The program in 40 cities with huge population inflows could also provide impetus to the country's economic growth amid downward pressure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

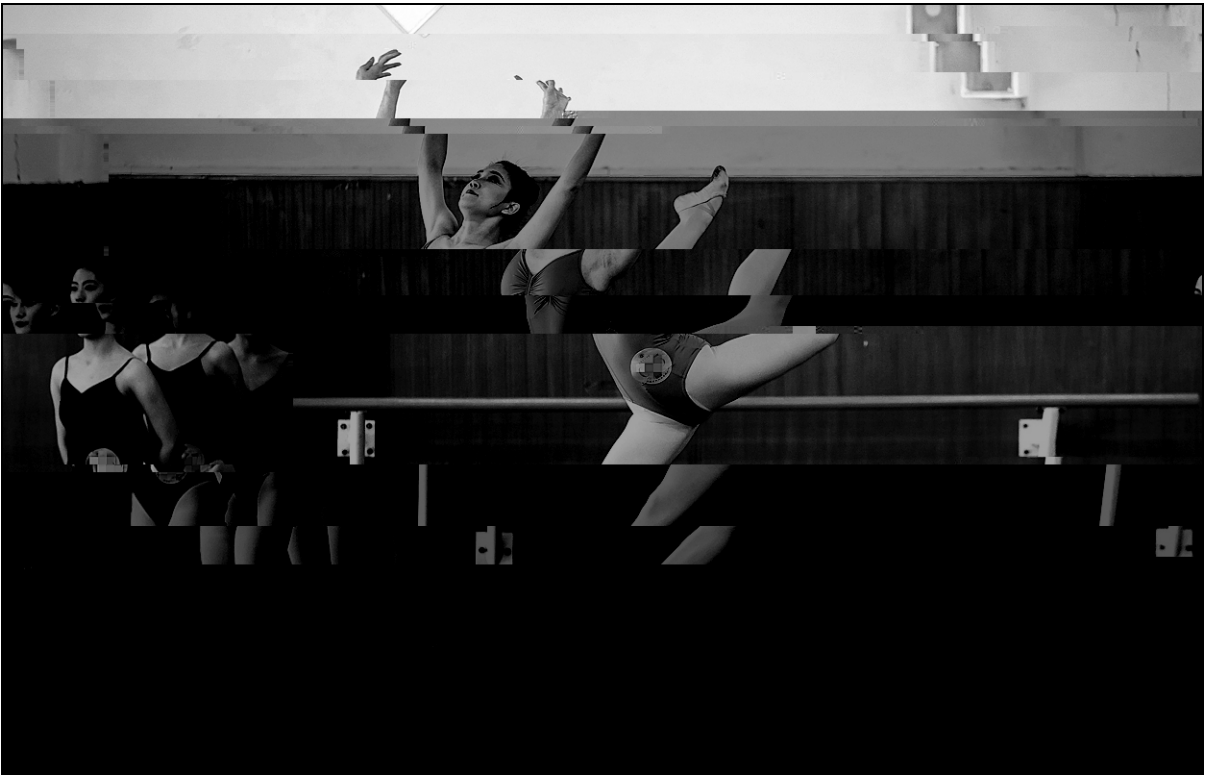
According to a recent report by Shanghai-listed Orient Securities, the program is estimated to involve total investment of 1.3 trillion yuan.

At a news conference last year, Ni Hong, vice-minister of housing and urban-rural development, stressed the role of the program in helping to stabilize China's property market.

The program will further improve the country's housing support system, he said, with expansion set to play a key role in stabilizing market expectations and land and housing prices.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

Dance-off



A candidate performs during a pre-enrollment test for students wanting to major in dance at the Shandong College of Arts in Jinan, Shandong province, on Saturday. Applicants from outside the province exhibited their skills online, with nearly 4,000 competing for 56 spots, while candidates from Shandong performed at the college.

Center offers interpreting in 21 languages for Games

By YANG WANLI
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University volunteers are offering real-time interpretation services in 21 languages via a call center during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, the first time such services have been provided on such a large scale during the events.

The services, which are provided on a mobile app, My2022, are targeting athletes and other members of delegations during the Games. Through the app, users can make free phone calls and obtain language support from interpreters.

The services are being provided by a team of interpreters at a multilingual call center based at Beijing Foreign Studies University. A total of 96 students and teachers comprise the team at the center, which was established during the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games.

Interpretations for 21 foreign languages are being offered. Seven languages — English, French, Japanese, Korean, Russian, German and Spanish — can be interpreted 24 hours a day.

For the other 14, the call center provides services from 6 am to midnight.

Both the service hours and the number of languages covered are historical highs for interpretation services offered during Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, according to the organizing committees of the two Games.

Since operations began on Jan 23, the center has provided interpretation services more than 500 times, according to Song Ge, deputy secretary of the university's Communist Youth League Committee.

"Inquiries covered a wide range of issues, from media interviews, COVID-19 prevention and control methods, and transportation and hotel services," she said, adding that the university has offered courses on 101 foreign languages and has plenty of interpretation experience.

Before the Games, Song said the center conducted special training for the volunteers on Winter Olympic sports terms and created a list of terms used in the events to serve as a reference. The list will continue to be updated as needed, she said.

Li Jingjing, the university's Norwegian language teacher, is a volunteer at the center. On Feb 4, the day of the Olympic Games opening ceremony, Li received an inquiry about the pronunciation of a Norwegian athlete's name.

“Although not participating on site during the two Games, to serve the athletes and staff members involved through phone calls has made my winter vacation unique and very meaningful.”

Xiao Jingdou, volunteer at a call center providing translation service for the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games

wegian athlete's name.

"I was called by a journalist who wanted to interview the athlete," she said. "I learned the next day that the first gold medal of the 2022 Winter Olympics was secured in the women's 15-kilometer skiathlon by Norwegian athlete Therese Johaug, the person the journalist had inquired about the day before."

Xiao Jingdou, a third-year stu-

dent from the university who is also volunteering at the center, said she is proud to use her knowledge to help others during the two Games.

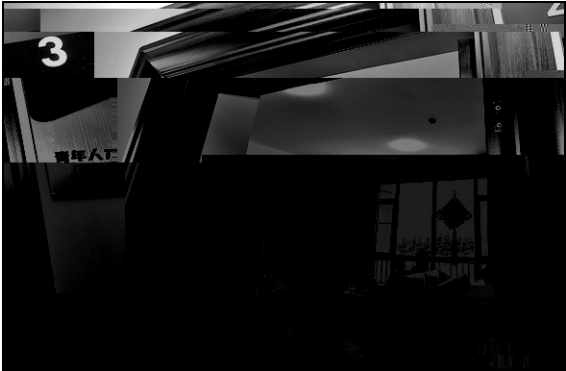
"Although not participating on site during the two Games, to serve the athletes and staff members involved through phone calls has made my winter vacation unique and very meaningful," she said.

Apart from real-time interpretation, high-tech translation supported by artificial intelligence is also available during the events.

For example, iFlytek, an artificial intelligence company based in Hefei, capital of Anhui province, has provided a variety of high-tech translation gadgets to athletes and staff members aimed at facilitating international communication.

As the exclusive supplier of automated translation software for the two Games, the company has developed many devices that feature technologies including automatic translation, multilingual speech conversion and speech recognition.

To ensure accurate translations, iFlytek's products are packed with vocabulary and terminology related to the two Games. Its dual-screen translator can support online voice translations in 60 languages.



A rental apartment for young people opens in Luoyang, Henan province, on Dec 31. Forty people became the block's first tenants.

FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Badaling capitalizes on resources to realize prosperity

By XIN WEN
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Wang Shuyue, a 52-year-old resident of Badaling town's Shifosi village, said her family spent generations herding livestock and planting fruit but were never able to earn a decent living.

Wang said her family of five decided to turn their house into a homestay in 1995, in response to the central government's efforts to develop rural tourism.

Badaling — in Beijing's northwestern Yanqing district, which is hosting some 2022 Winter Olympic Games events — is home to a section of the Great Wall of China.

The government's efforts soon led to change, benefiting not only Wang's family but also the village. Other villagers began promoting the distinctive Great Wall culture to outsiders and attracted tourists by providing better accommodations and dining areas.

"Badaling is a historical town rich in natural resources, and its cultural belt of the Great Wall, ski resort, zoo and forest park are unique rural tourism highlights. They've helped our villagers make a better living," said Wang Zhenlong, Party chief of Badaling.

The town is currently holding a rural tourism festival that will run through March 4, attracting visitors

with both traditional Chinese and Winter Games-themed activities.

Badaling is expected to receive 100,000 travelers during the festival, which began on Jan 9, according to the town's scenic area management committee. Arts and crafts and performances, including a dragon and lion dance, are among the activities.

Paper-cutting, an intangible cultural heritage in China, has also been introduced to the homestays in Badaling. Gong Guofang, an inheritor, offers one-hour folk culture lessons to show visitors how to cut Winter Olympics-themed patterns.

Gong said she studied pattern design and paper-cutting techniques for more than 40 years and

began learning how to incorporate Winter Olympics elements at the end of last year.

"From paper folding to cutting, the skill can not only help people enjoy the vibe of Chinese Lunar New Year but also strengthen connections with others," the 57-year-old craftswoman said.

A paper-cut of Bing Dwen Dwen, the mascot of the 2022 Beijing Olympic Winter Games, is one of Gong's proudest creations.

"I hope our paper-cutting artistry, as a long-lasting folklore culture, can achieve more global acclaim through the Winter Olympics and become a bridge to make China and other countries closer," Gong said.

Horsing around



Herders compete in a horse race in Yuli county, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, on Saturday. A total of 127 herders tested their skills in horse riding and buzkashi, a Central Asian sport in which players on horseback try to place a goat carcass in a goal.