thrive
SOCIAL CONSULTING

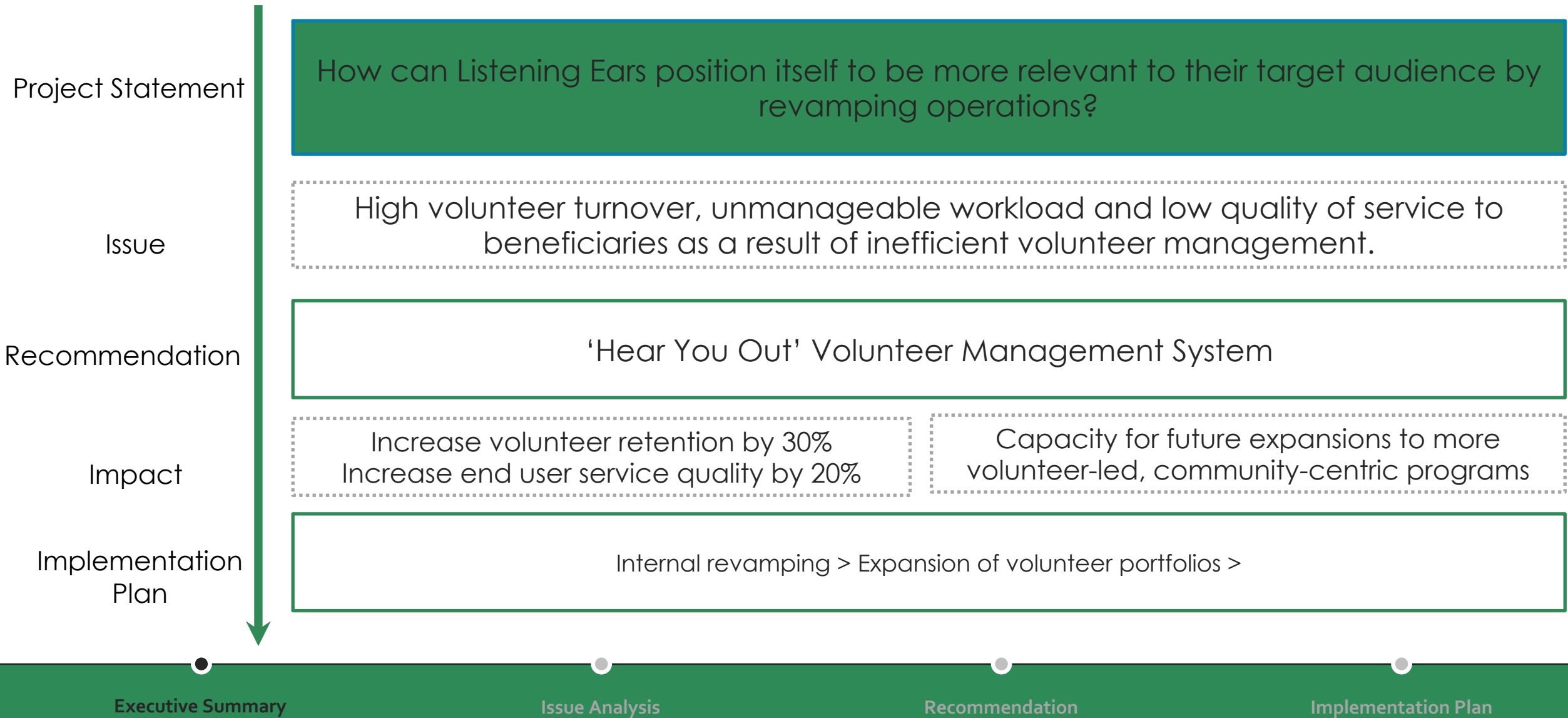Listening Ears Case

Cheng Wenqi

Executive Summary

Project Statement

How can Listening Ears position itself to be more relevant to their target audience by revamping operations?

Issue

High volunteer turnover, unmanageable workload and low quality of service to beneficiaries as a result of inefficient volunteer management.

Recommendation

'Hear You Out' Volunteer Management System

Impact

Increase volunteer retention by 30%
Increase end user service quality by 20%

Capacity for future expansions to more volunteer-led, community-centric programs

Implementation Plan

Internal revamping > Expansion of volunteer portfolios >
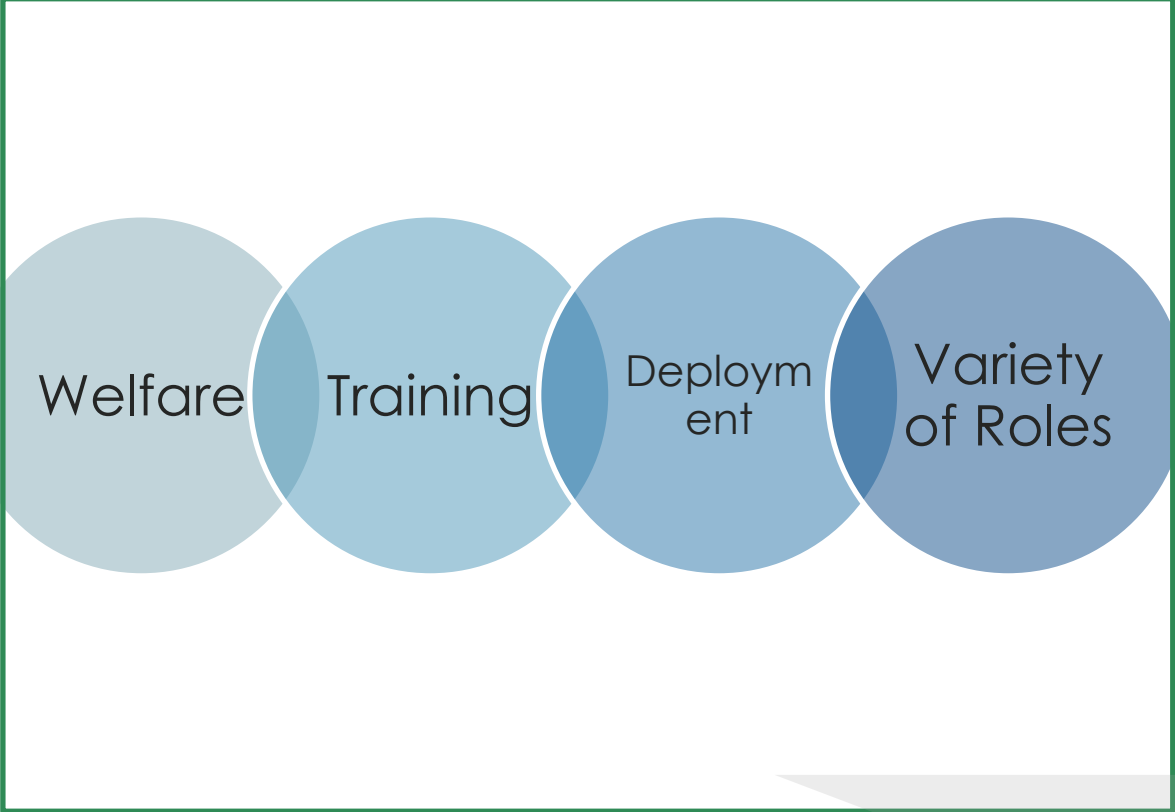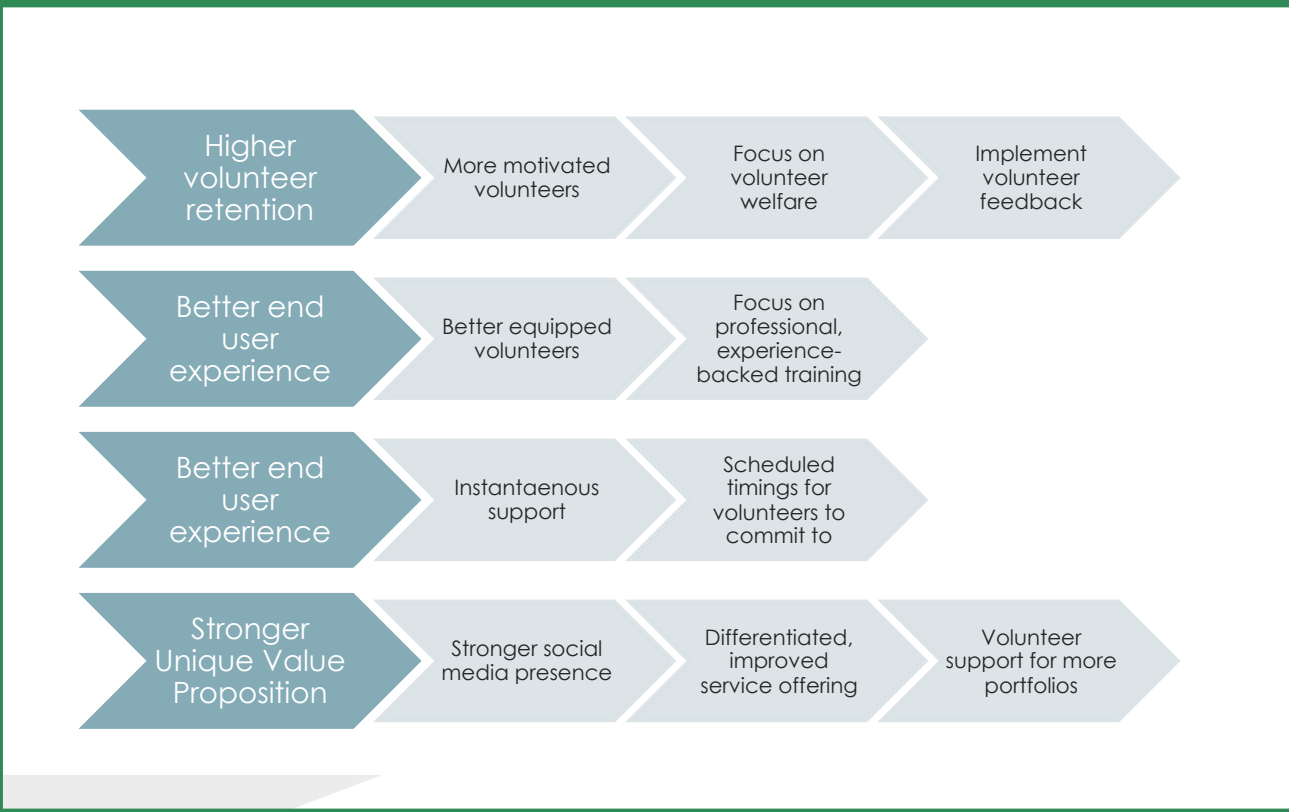
Listening Ears needs to improve its internal volunteer management system to provide better quality service to improve usage rates

thrive
SOCIAL CONSULTING

Aspects of Volunteer Management to target

Welfare Training Deployment Variety of Roles

Impact of solving

| Higher volunteer retention | More motivated volunteers | Focus on volunteer welfare | Implement volunteer feedback |

| Better end user experience | Better equipped volunteers | Focus on professional, experience-backed training |

| Better end user experience | Instantaenous support | Scheduled timings for volunteers to commit to |

| Stronger Unique Value Proposition | Stronger social media presence | Differentiated, improved service offering | Volunteer support for more portfolios |

To improve its internal volunteer management system, Listening Ears needs a training and deployment revamp.

Volunteer management can be more welfare-focused and volunteer-led to increase usage rates

Situation:

53% of volunteers cited welfare-related reasons for leaving

Feasibility

Financial
- Small increases to short term costs for volunteer welfare/appreciation
- However, saves long-term costs for new volunteer acquisition
- No significant financial costs

Operational
- Needs time for execution
- Expected short term increase in workload for operations staff
- In long term, more trained volunteer leaders would alleviate workload from staff

Actionable steps

- Empower volunteers to actively implement changes based on feedback
- Train more volunteer leaders
- Set up processes to check in and engage volunteer community

Impact on Listening Ear's KPI

Higher volunteer retention → More volunteers to engage with beneficiaries → Higher quality of service

Volunteer-focused volunteer management system can drive Listening Ear's internal revamping and create positive feedback loops for internal change within Listening Ears

Volunteer trainings can be jointly workshopped by professional organisations and experienced volunteers to improve usage rates

thrive
SOCIAL CONSULTING

Internal Interview:

10% of volunteers cited inadequate training as reasons for leaving

"2 day orientation programme…. Teaching volunteers basic counselling skills" -CEO

"Assigned to cases where they don't have personal experienced in" -Ops

Benchmarking

CHAT has trained staff from 6 social services to conduct mental health screenings

Actionable Steps

Engage Professional Organisations for long-term training program

+

SOP from experienced volunteers

=

Higher Quality, Updated Training

Feasibility

Financial
- May not be sustainable to always engage in external organisations
- May be financially costly if organisations engaged require payment
- Needs time for partnerships & execution

Operational
- Is a long-term solution, Listening Ears would still need a short term fix for overwhelmed volunteers
- Requires a tailored programme
- Each case has many nuances, may not be feasible to directly apply SOPs

More professional and experienced-based training has a direct impact on quality of service that beneficiaries receive and an indirect impact on volunteer welfare.

[Straits Times, 2023]

Volunteer deployment can be more structured and guided to improve volunteer and end user experience to improve usage rates

Internal Situation

- Basic volunteer requirements: "Log in once a day…."
- Fact sheet: "Volunteer responds within 48hours"
- 15% of volunteers cited "high workload" as leaving reason

Benchmarking

- "Wait time is a pain point" –imfriendlyco founder
- Imfriendlyco, mindline, IASH.SG, Limitless SG, ec2.sg provide some form of instantaneous text-based support (Web App or Discord community)

Actionable Steps

Set up schedule for volunteers to log in and commit to

+

Attach experienced volunteer as mentor for newer volunteers

=

Time-specific instantaenous text-support

Impact on Listening Ear's KPI

| Managable workload | More guided support for volunteers | Higher volunteer retention | Higher quality of service |

Feasibility

Financial
- Website hosting costs would increase in the short term

Operational
- Scheduling difficulties for volunteers
- May not have sufficient experienced volunteers to mentor new volunteers
- Each case has many nuances, may not be feasible to directly apply SOPs

More professional and experienced-based training has a direct impact on quality of service that beneficiaries receive and an indirect impact on volunteer welfare.

Listening Ears can expand the variety of roles and portfolios available to volunteers , especially in technical operations and marketing to improve usage rates

Internal Situation

- "We mainly promote through… join roadshows….ads for public" -HR
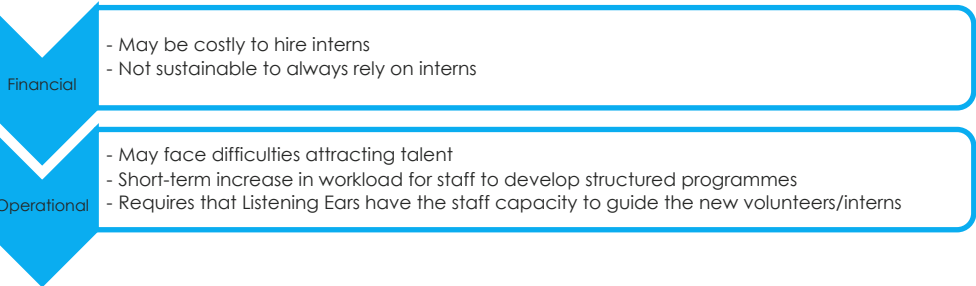- "In light of high turnover….tend to take anyone that applies" –HR

Benchmarking

- Imfriendlyco and IASH.SG run lean teams where marketing and volunteer care are managed by a core volunteer team
- IASH.SG works with CAE to offer a structured programme for intern counsellors to serve practicum
- Youthline recruits volunteers from a variety of backgrounds, such as seniors and church pastors

Actionable Steps

Set up programmes to onboard interns for marketing → Set up programmes to onboard interns for technical operations → Empower experienced volunteers to step up as volunteer leaders → Expand variety of volunteer roles offered → Volunteer-driven operations

Feasibility

Financial
- May be costly to hire interns
- Not sustainable to always rely on interns

Operational
- May face difficulties attracting talent
- Short-term increase in workload for staff to develop structured programmes
- Requires that Listening Ears have the staff capacity to guide the new volunteers/interns

Impact on Listening Ear's KPI

Pool of skilled volunteers → Stronger social media presence → Staff can focus on new growth opportunities → More programmes → Stronger unique value proposition → Increased usage rates

Onboarding more volunteers in a wider variety of roles can lighten the workload on staff whilst

Implementation Plan

thrive SOCIAL CONSULTING

Gradual increase of usage rates
Expected market share: 12%

| 3 months | 6 months | 1 year | 2 years |

Revamp of volunteer welfare management and deployment

Training Revamp through long-term partnerships with professional organisations (SSI, CHAT,etc)

Long-term partnerships with counselling organisations, university CCAs to onboard volunteers and interns

Expansion to other service offerings & programmes

More professional and experienced-based training has a direct impact on quality of service that beneficiaries receive and an indirect impact on volunteer welfare.

- Situational Analysis with Benchmarking – Relevance of Listening Ears

A SWOT analysis was conducted on Listening Ears(LE),

Strengths: - 1-to-1 follow up suits youth preferences, - Low programme execution costs (anonymous, online platform) - Relatively small and lean team made of mostly volunteers (60%) - Financial stability of operations	Weakness: - Ill-equipped volunteers - Not strong enough unique value proposition - Not strong enough marketing - Insufficient volunteers to follow through on cases - Deficit in volunteer hours supplied - Low volunteer retention
Opportunities: - Expansion into other platforms for connecting to more youths at risk - Expansion technologically such as mobile apps & AI chatbots - Expand to other niches to target more segmented groups/different platforms - Collaboration with other mental health organisations, training organisations and education institutes	Threats: - Other non-profit organisations/official ministry coming in to take over/occupy LE's niche - LE's niche (platform/email correspondence) becomes irrelevant

Top-Down Market Sizing was conducted to visualise the entirety of the Youth Mental Help Support niche and the potential user base to be captured.

No. of youths in SG ~1,037,280[1] (A)

Percentage of singaporean youths with mental health-related issues ~21.5%[2](B)

Willingness to seek help from informal support network ~84.3%[3](C)

Percentage of youth with mental health-related issues that are willing to seek help through online chat rooms ~16.3%(D)

Market Size: A*B*C*D=30,644

8 Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) in the niche were chosen for benchmarking to better identify how these VWOs differentiate themselves in terms of organisational structure, volunteer management and service offering.

---

[1] Source: https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/population/population-trends

[2] Source: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/poor-mental-health-stable-2020-national-health-young-adults-2322476

[3] Source: https://hpb.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/nphs-2021-survey-report_v6-(cleaned).pdf?sfvrsn=f9d12295_0
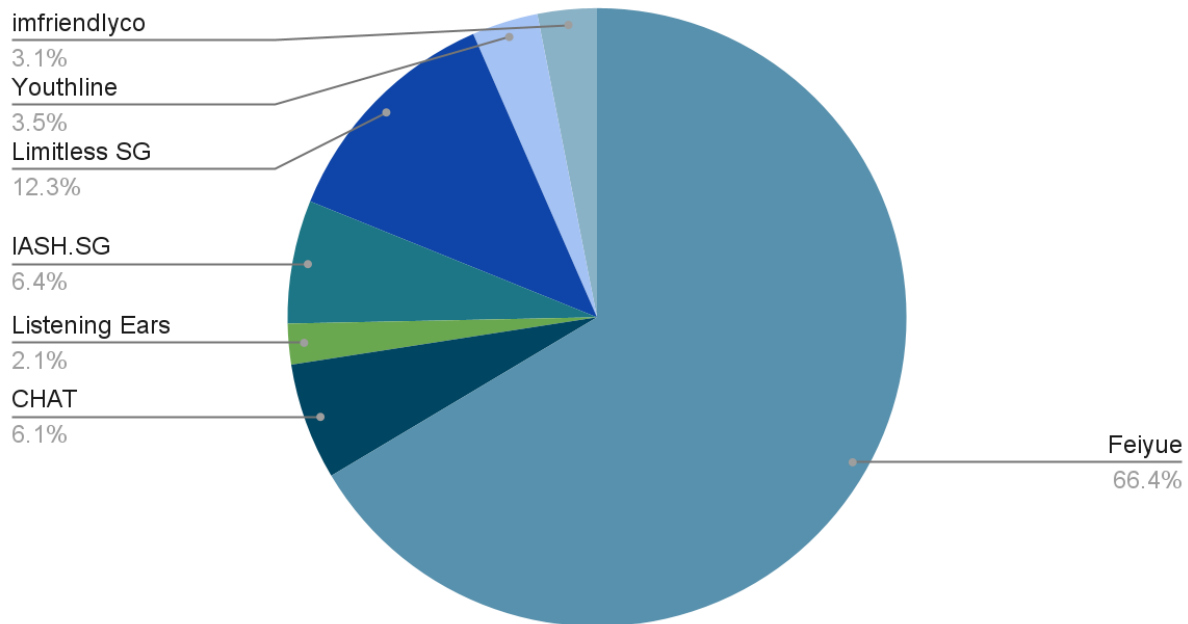
Number of Youths engaged in past year

imfriendlyco
3.1%
Youthline
3.5%
Limitless SG
12.3%
IASH.SG
6.4%
Listening Ears
2.1%
CHAT
6.1%
Feiyue
66.4%

Figure 1: Number of Youths engaged in past year [4]

Based on the above SWOT analysis and benchmarking[5] against organisations of similar size, Listening Ears has relatively low relevance compared to similar organisations in its niche.
This is given the small percentage of market share that Listening Ears occupies amidst the large number of organisations in the similar niche with overlapping value propositions.
Furthermore, other organisations offer services that more directly target these beneficiary pain points[6] as compared to Listening Ears.
For example, imfriendlyco offers instantaneous text-based support, thereby reducing lag time for beneficiaries that urgently need help. VWOs such as IASH.SG, CHAT and Limitless SG are also able to offer the option for professional support, which Listening Ears currently does not have but can consider expanding to do.
Organisations such as IASH.SG and Limitless SG that offer similar services as Listening Ears also opt to build community on top of their main programmes as a means of regular engagement with their beneficiaries. Moreover, Huddlehumans and Togetherall were able to leverage on the Matthew effect and cooperative, mutually encouraging, always online nature of online communities to achieve higher beneficiary engagement, higher beneficiary retention and higher volunteer retention.
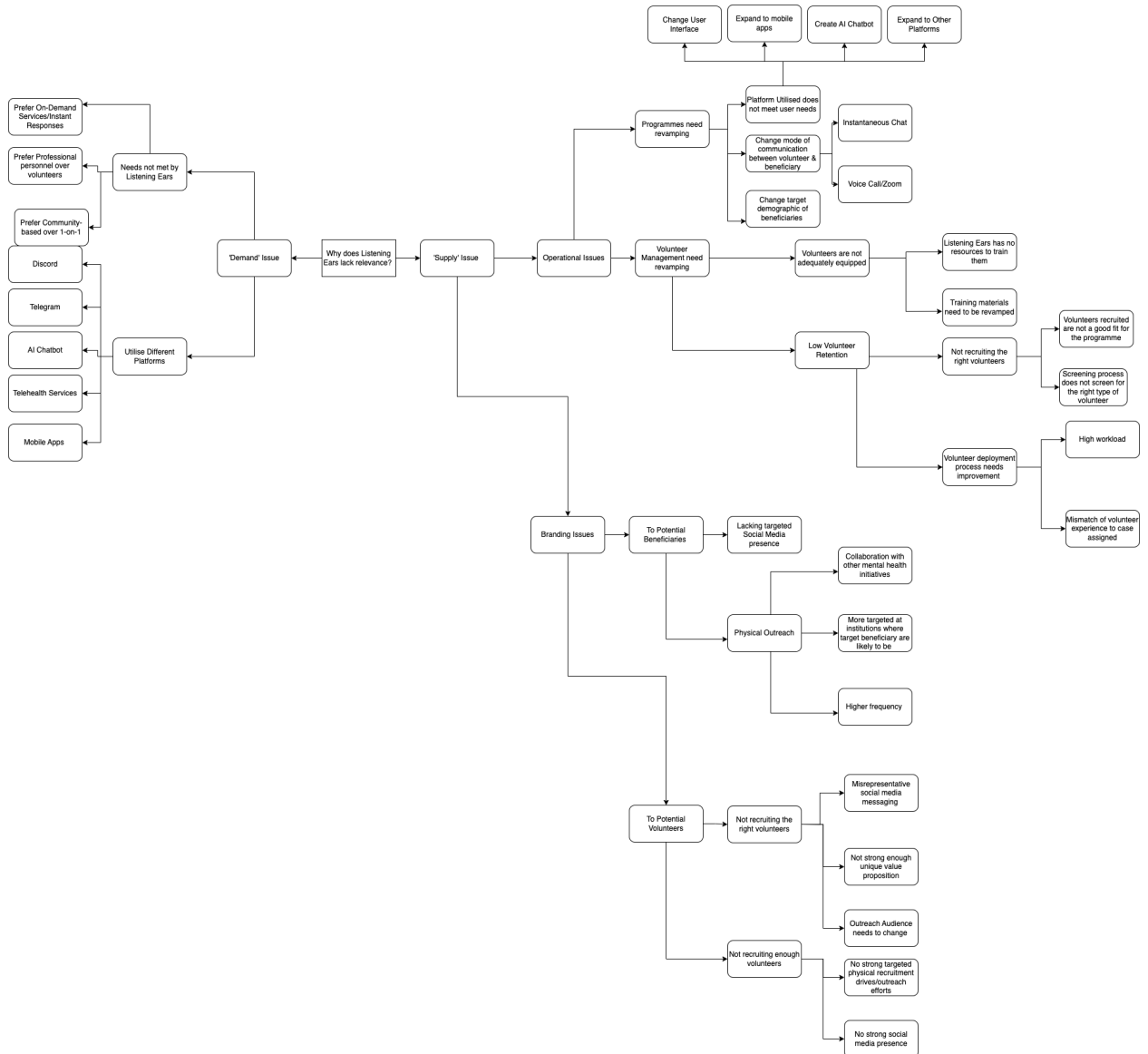
---

[4] Exclusions: Organisations with no published beneficiary numbers. Numbers are taken from number of beneficiaries in the most recent year where published information is available and are not cumulative. Huddlehumans was excluded due to a lack of exact statistics on the number of youths that were impacted in the most recent year. Togetherall was excluded due to its operations based overseas.
[5] See Appendix
[6] These pain points are further explored in the Issue Tree in the next section.

- Issue Analysis – Various issues faced by Listening Ears

Issue Analysis was conducted with an Issue Tree to map out the issues faced by Listening Ears based on the interviews conducted and benchmarking against similar organisations in the areas of operations, volunteer screening, volunteer recruitment, organisation branding and volunteer management.

Why does Listening Ears lack relevance?

'Demand' Issue
- Needs not met by Listening Ears
  - Prefer On-Demand Services/Instant Responses
  - Prefer Professional personnel over volunteers
  - Prefer Community-based over 1-on-1
- Utilise Different Platforms
  - Discord
  - Telegram
  - AI Chatbot
  - Telehealth Services
  - Mobile Apps

'Supply' Issue

Operational Issues
- Programmes need revamping
  - Platform Utilised does not meet user needs
    - Change User Interface
    - Expand to mobile apps
    - Create AI Chatbot
    - Expand to Other Platforms
  - Change mode of communication between volunteer & beneficiary
    - Instantaneous Chat
    - Voice Call/Zoom
  - Change target demographic of beneficiaries
- Volunteer Management need revamping
  - Volunteers are not adequately equipped
    - Listening Ears has no resources to train them
    - Training materials need to be revamped
  - Low Volunteer Retention
    - Not recruiting the right volunteers
      - Volunteers recruited are not a good fit for the programme
      - Screening process does not screen for the right type of volunteer
    - Volunteer deployment process needs improvement
      - High workload
      - Mismatch of volunteer experience to case assigned

Branding Issues
- To Potential Beneficiaries
  - Lacking targeted Social Media presence
  - Physical Outreach
    - Collaboration with other mental health initiatives
    - More targeted at institutions where target beneficiary are likely to be
    - Higher frequency
- To Potential Volunteers
  - Not recruiting the right volunteers
    - Misrepresentative social media messaging
    - Not strong enough unique value proposition
    - Outreach Audience needs to change
  - Not recruiting enough volunteers
    - No strong targeted physical recruitment drives/outreach efforts
    - No strong social media presence

- Prioritisation – which is the most pertinent problem+ How did you prioritise

Based on the above issue tree, the issues can be recategorised into a weighted Prioritisation Matrix[7]
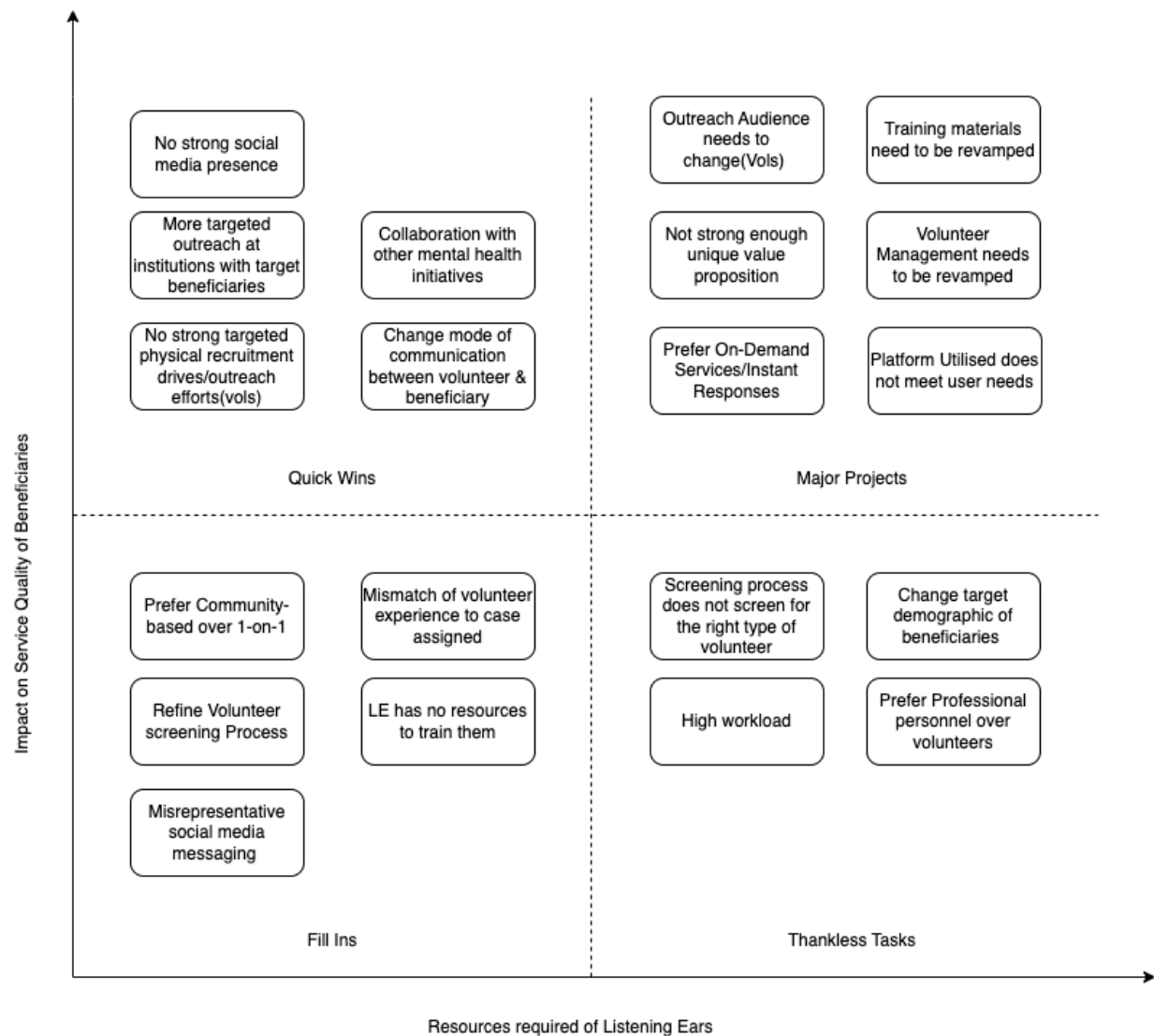
Based on the Prioritisation Matrix, the most pertinent problem identified was the **need for Listening Ears to revamp how they manage their volunteers** because volunteers' training, management of welfare and deployment play a critical role in the quality and frequency of the beneficiaries' final service experience. Other notably pertinent but relatively less significant issues are the need for a stronger unique value proposition and the need for a platform and programme revamp.

Solving this problem would also involve a large scale operations revamp for Listening ears, thereby solving the issues in their platform and programme. Thus, Listening Ears is able to achieve the largest impact on quality of service to its beneficiaries given its limited resources.

---

[7] Issues are ranked and placed according to their degree of impact/resources required.

Appendix:

Organisation	Organisation Size	Programme(s)/Service(s) Offered	Reason for benchmark
Listening Ears	20 volunteers, 2 volunteer leaders, 4 active freelance, 6 full time staff	Anonymous,one-on-one text-based mental health support from trained volunteers.	
Feiyue ec2.sg	700 employees[8]	Physical counselling services free of charge and online chat(QuickChat) for free one-to-one mental health screening	Largest and relatively more well established VWO in the niche.
Community Health Assessment Team[9] (General Population)	55 ambassadors, is supported by Institution of Mental Health(IMH)[10]	CHAT runs a national youth mental health outreach and assessment service for youth and young adults aged 16 to 30 with options for physical, call-in or online chat-based(webCHAT) mental health checks. CHATline is an after-hours text-based non-emergency peer support service available daily manned by a group of trained volunteers[11]. CHAT also offers training for volunteers of social service agencies[12].	
IASH.SG	31 Hearbuds, unknown number of Intern/Professional	Mental health support via zoom video or voice chat by either a trained	Organisation occupies a similar niche as Listening Ears and a similar organisation structure.

[8] Source: https://fycs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2210_FSC_Annual-Report_S.pdf
[9] Source: https://www.imh.com.sg/CHAT/About%20CHAT/Pages/default.aspx
[10] Source: http://www.smj.org.sg/sites/default/files/SMJ-62-225.pdf
[11] Source: https://www.imh.com.sg/CHAT/Get-Help/Pages/CHATline.aspx
[12] Source: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/imh-youth-mental-health-service-trains-social-service-agencies-to-meet-demand

	Counsellors, 7 Volunteer Leaders, 6 core volunteer team, 2 advisors[13]	volunteer(Hearbud) for free or counsellors (choice of intern or resident) for a small fee. Also has an online community on Discord for youths to seek support.	Organisation has partnered up with College of Allied Educators(CAE) to onboard intern counsellors as part of their programme amongst other partnerships, which Listening Ears can consider doing.
Limitless SG	14 staff, unknown number of volunteers	Helpline manned by social workers and counsellors via call, text and WhatsApp. Offers free and paid counselling services. Also has a Discord community, and conducts in-person programmes.	Organisation has a similar structure as Listening Ears.
Youthline[14]	307 volunteers	Call Helpline, Whatsapp support, free professional counselling and youth volunteer peer support	Similar organisation structure and similar niche occupied as Listening Ears. Youthline has the capability to recruit more volunteers and run more extensive programmes than Listening Ears. Youthline volunteers have varied backgrounds (pastor, retired persons, youth)[15]
imfriendlyco[16]	8 staff, 5 professional counsellors, unknown number of volunteers	Website for young people aged 16 to 35 to seek counselling anonymously. Web Application for anonymous, one-on-one, instantaneous text-based support twice a week.	Organisation has the most similar service to Listening Ears Similar organisation structure as Listening Ears. Operates on a similar scale as Listening Ears.

[13] Source: https://www.iash.sg/the-team
[14] Source: https://youthline.sg/
[15] Source: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-youth-counselling-service-gets-over-170-calls-in-first-week-of-operations
[16] Source: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/groups-offer-online-counselling-to-young-people-who-need-help-but-wish-to-remain-anonymous

Mindline[17] (General Population)	Unknown, an initiative by Ministry of Health Office for Healthcare Transformation (MOHT), Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and Health Promotion Board [18]	Clinically-validated self-assessment tool, various carefully curated resources and a 24/7 available Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbot	Organisation has fully automated what Listening Ears is doing.
Huddlehumans (General population)	12 employees, unknown number of moderators and volunteers	Anonymous global community for users to share their experiences and receive support from peers globally	Occupies a potential niche that Listening Ears can consider expanding into.

---

[17] Source: https://mindline.sg/
[18] Source: https://www.moht.com.sg/mindline-sg