

STRAITS TIMES

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MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS

Caregivers to get some caring themselves

Govt is setting aside \$400,000 each year for programme to help and support this group

By M. Nirmala

THEY look after the elderly and disabled at home. Soon, these caregivers will get some looking after themselves.



Under a pilot project to be rolled out initially at 10 elder-care centres across the island, they will get help from 'care coordinators'.

These coordinators will, among other things, provide information to caregivers about support services they can make use of, arrange for training, and give them counselling if needed.

According to the 2000 Population Census, about 87 per cent of the elderly here live with their families and their needs are looked after mainly by family members.

SOMETHING IN RETURN: Those who take care of the elderly will soon get help of their own.

Some \$400,000 is being set aside annually for the programme, Acting Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said yesterday.

The ministry recognised that 'the labour of love undertaken by caregivers is often difficult and unrecognised', he said. 'Ensuring that caregivers take care of themselves is important in maintaining their personal well-being.'

The importance of looking after the needs of the caregivers themselves was highlighted by Mr Sin Boon Ann (Tampines GRC) and Dr Lily Neo (Jalan Besar GRC).

Dr Neo suggested that they be given some form of respite so they do not 'burn out'.

Mr Sin wanted more done to highlight the experiences of caregivers. He suggested publicising advice on how to provide care, noting that a task as simple as giving a bath 'may be a special hazard for those who are infirm'.

The pilot programme is expected to be especially helpful for those who look after the frail elderly at home. One example of a caregiver training programme is offered by Touch Caregiver Centre, set up three years ago.

It has a mock-up flat with elderly-friendly features in the living room, bedroom, kitchen, laundry area and toilet, and is used in training.

Yesterday, Dr Balakrishnan also said the Baby Bonus scheme will be made more flexible.

Parents of disabled children aged six and below will be able to use funds set aside in the Baby Bonus co-savings scheme for early intervention programmes. These help disabled children fit into mainstream activities and learn life skills at an early age.

Parents can also use the funds to buy health insurance for their children and can top up their contributions to the scheme within a six-year period. This way they will not miss out on getting government matching grants when they are facing financial problems.

Dr Balakrishnan also announced that mothers who adopt babies aged six months and below will also be able to take leave four to seven months earlier than under the current rules.