

# Burdened and barely coping – caregivers need care too

Many from lower-income homes face issues like physical exhaustion, lack of resources

**Syarahana Shafeeq**

Every night, when Mr Jimmy Lim heads for home after long hours at work, he knows his day is not over yet – he has to buy food for the family, and his mind swirls with the list of household duties that await him.

The 47-year-old single father is a sole breadwinner who takes care of his two secondary school-age children and his elderly parents, who are in their early 70s.

For the last six years, Mr Lim has been his parents' primary caregiver. They occupy the master bedroom in his Housing Board flat.

Five years ago, he left his office job because of its unstable working hours and weekend shifts. He spent the next few months looking for another role that would allow him to carry out his caregiving duties better. Today, he is the head of Blue Cross Thong Kheng Home, which cares for those with disabilities.

Although being unemployed for a few months caused him a great deal of stress, he would still wear a smile, as he did not want to burden his parents with his worries.

He said: "It was a hectic roller-coaster ride for me while I was seeking stability in my employ-

ment. I could not share these things with my parents."

A survey released in 2022 by the National Council of Social Service, which studied those caring for loved ones with disabilities, chronic illnesses or mental health conditions, showed that just over half of the caregivers were "burdened" by or "barely coping" with their caregiving responsibilities, and felt they had less control over their lives.

The survey also revealed that caregivers who received help in caring for their loved ones reported a better quality of life.

A significant proportion of caregivers who did not use caregiving services cited cost as a reason. The other commonly cited reason was the lack of such services.

There is now more support for caregivers from lower-income families who are looking after loved ones with at least permanent moderate disability, with the increase in the Home Caregiving Grant (HCG) from \$200 to up to \$400 a month.

Since March 1, the HCG has been doubled for beneficiaries with a monthly household income of up to \$1,200, or those with no income whose home has an annual value of up to \$13,000.

Beneficiaries with a monthly household income of \$1,201 to \$2,800 now receive \$250, up from \$200 previously.

Dr Kalyani Mehta, the chairman of Silver Caregivers Co-operative Limited (SCCL), said caregivers face multiple struggles, from physical exhaustion to lack of resources.

She said: "If caregivers are themselves ageing, such as spouses, or seniors whose parents are in their 90s, the physical effects lead to poor health in caregivers."

An ageing population and lower birth rate will also put pressure on the number of family caregivers over time.

Families in the middle- and lower-income groups are also faced with limited money, time and manpower for caregiving, as they cannot afford a domestic helper or daycare to assist and give them res-



Mr Jimmy Lim (far right), 47, with his family. He has been a caregiver to his elderly parents for the past six years. He left his office job five years ago because of its unstable working hours and is now the head of Blue Cross Thong Kheng Home, which cares for those with disabilities. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JIMMY LIM

pite, said Dr Kalyani.

She added that some caregivers have also mentioned the lack of family support, such as when their siblings live overseas and do not share caregiving responsibilities.

Singapore National Cooperative Federation's chief executive Ang Hin Kee told The Straits Times that cooperative models can be useful in supporting caregivers.

The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth defines cooperatives as enterprises that are owned and run by members,

operating on the principles of self-help and mutual assistance. Most cooperatives have social missions to benefit the greater society.

Mr Ang said a co-op like SCCL is a good example, as it empowers caregivers and recognises their increasing needs.

The co-op, which has served 500 caregivers since it was established in 2013, provides opportunities for its members to make friends, learn from one another and share tips on

how to cope with managing stress from caregiving duties.

Dr Kalyani said that other than training in physical skills like handling medical needs, it is important for caregivers to have training in self-care, and emotional and social resilience.

SCCL offers workshops for caregivers that cover topics like coping with depression, stress management, and communication strategies.

She said: "The importance of

cooperation and collaboration between cooperatives to meet the needs of the caregiving sector is critical, as it leads to a larger segment of the target population being reached.

"There is a personal touch that cooperatives and other ground-up programmes offer to caregivers, including domestic foreign workers, which is genuine and makes a lasting positive impact."

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