Air-con a need or a want?

Evolving expectations require fine-tuning of social support

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In Singapore’s sweltering heat, air conditioning is an essential need among the elderly, especially for those with chronic health conditions.

As the SMU-ISH Foundation Symposium held on July 13, a social worker highlighted that it was not always possible to draw a clear distinction between needs and wants, for instance, in the case of elderly people who sought air-conditioning for some festivities, but it is a necessity for those susceptible to skin conditions in the hot weather, which can in turn also affect mental health.

A recent survey showed that 88 per cent of Singaporeans perceive air-conditioning as an essential need, according to the Singapore Management University (SMU) study on household needs presented at the symposium. The study noted that during the summer months, air-conditioning was essential for a normal standard of living in Singapore, recognising that needs fit personal sustenance and should also encompass psychological safety and social inclusion. A comprehensive study by the Singapore Ministry of Health (MOH) in 2015, called MOH’s Assessment of Housing Needs (MOAHN) study, revealed that while the public held social support to be essential for each of these needs – whether it was the Government, the community, the individuals themselves, their relatives or friends.

While all these are important, the social support system can be fine-tuned by channeling community efforts in a systematic way to provide support that is both meaningful and most people can be meeting identified needs. This could be achieved with government given the limits of government support.

The findings from the MOH and IFSC studies can help by identifying essential needs and clarifying roles for different support system stakeholders.

SUPPORT SHOULD BE CUSTOMISED AND FLEXIBLE

The example of air-conditioning highlighted that social support systems, especially those that must be flexible and transparent to ensure support to individual needs, remain flexible is provided for through the “many helping hands” approach, which has been shown to be a minimum of cost-effective social support system.

Under this approach, the Government partners the community or people to deliver social services to address social services needs of disadvantaged households. At the same time, it’s a considerable resource of goodwill, resources and expertise that can be deployed to support social work in the community for good, rather than have the Government shoulder the burden of delivering help too.

A further advantage of decentralising support, for example, by community organisations, whether non-profit organisations or social service agencies, are well placed to assist needs within the local community. Social workers, who work closely with community organisations, can provide additional, context-specific help that may not be covered by the Government.

LIMITATIONS OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Currently, the state provides basic financial assistance through various Community Care (C-Care) schemes, along with a range of non-governmental health, housing and public transport support schemes. However, there is a need for the Government to do more for Housing Development Board (HDB) residents, especially the elderly, who are most likely to be affected. The elderly often live alone and are more susceptible to the effects of the heat.

For instance, in the heatwave of 2018, elderly persons with chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and respiratory ailments, were more likely to be affected. The elderly also need to be assisted in their daily lives, such as in the preparation of meals or in the management of their medication.

EFFECTS SHOULD BE SYSTEMATIC AND PREDICTABLE

The benefits of support should not only be for the elderly but also for their families. Support schemes such as the Central Provident Fund (CPF) can be made more effective by improving the administration and distribution of benefits.

The CPF is a valuable asset for elderly Singaporeans, and it should be used more effectively to support them in their later years. Support programmes for elderly Singaporeans should be designed to be more effective and to ensure that they meet the needs of the elderly.

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