



Media Coverage

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WELFARE

DESPAIRING OLD CAN ONLY WAIT AND HOPE

An NGO allows ailing elderly people the dignity of receiving care in their homes, but thousands more are left to struggle alone without any help

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Bowls of hot rice, soup and two Cantonese dishes are laid out on a low table in the flat of Lun Ming-fong, 79, and her husband Lee Tak-kwong, 88.

The couple receive regular deliveries of food, as well as occasional help cleaning the flat and therapy for Lee, who has Alzheimer's disease and has been in frail health for a decade.

Life is tough, but they are considered among the lucky ones, receiving government support via an NGO that allows them to stay in the familiar surroundings of their public rental flat.

Such schemes citywide offer 27,193 places, but more than 4,700 elderly people are on the waiting list – while many more may be unaware of the possibility of receiving such support. And despite the city's ageing population and the government's stated aim of helping people grow old in their homes, years of lobbying from NGOs has not resulted in any extra resources.

"We're very lucky to have help like them," says Lun, as the worker from the Christian Family Service Centre helps her transfer food into bowls and cover it before leaving for the next delivery.

Lun says caring for her husband, who has several other conditions as well as Alzheimer's, is tough even with such support.

"It's still hard... the whole day revolves around him. I don't really have time even to sleep."

Each day, Lun dresses and feeds her husband, helps him into his wheelchair and takes him outside for fresh air. At night, she stays awake to bring him water and change his diapers. In the past year his speech has deteriorated and Lun often relies on instinct to work out what he needs.

Tong Choi-ying, head of integrated services for elderly people at the service centre, says the government has been increasing –

Lun Ming-fong tends to her frail husband. Photo: Jonathan Wong

ONLINE
scmp.com/elderlycare
Check our website to see a video on life for the elderly couple and learn about the help they receive

albeit slowly – resources to help extremely frail seniors stay home. But the huge need among those who are less frail has not been addressed.

"We've stretched our resources to the maximum here," Tong says. "If we provide the simple support to elderly people who can live in the community with just a little help, it will keep them from entering care homes prematurely."

This will be a particular help to people like Lun – sole carers to relatives frailer than themselves.

Two tragic cases this summer have involved sole carers and relatives reliant on their help. Last month an 84-year-old man who was confined to a wheelchair and could not feed himself died days after his 61-year-old son-in-law passed away in the flat. In the second incident, a 60-year-old man tried to set his paralysed wife on fire to "end her suffering".

"There are many whom we don't know of, who need support," Tong says.

A Social Welfare Department spokeswoman said the government had added 1,666 Enhanced Home and Community Care Services places – for the very frail. But there has been no increase in places in the Integrated Home Care Services – which benefits people like Lun and Lee.



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Tong Choi-ying, head of integrated services for elderly people at the service centre, says the government has been increasing - albeit slowly - resources to help extremely frail seniors stay home. But the huge need among those who are less frail has not been addressed.

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Lun Ming-fong tends to her frail husband.



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