



Media Coverage

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HONG KONG

SOCIETY



Fong Yuk-kwan and her husband Ho Foon with a trophy for winning a Cantonese opera contest in 1999 and a photo of the couple at the awards ceremony. Photos: Xiaomei Chen, Handout

STRUGGLING, AILING ELDERLY
BEG FOR BUDGET HELP TO COPE

For city's less fortunate, many of whom are near breaking point, government aid is their only hope

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For Ho Foon, getting three hours of uninterrupted sleep at night is a luxury he seldom experiences.

The 64-year-old typically wakes up four to five times to help his disabled wife, Fong Yuk-kwan, to the bathroom.

With no strength in her left leg, Fong, 80, cannot make the journey on her own. Because she also has dementia, Fong will get up again 30 minutes later to repeat the process, having forgotten she has already been to the bathroom.

Her refusal to use an adult diaper has driven a frustrated Ho to the verge of a breakdown. "Just last week, I told her I wanted to send her to a nursing home," he said, while admitting he had also contemplated worse courses of action.

It may seem like a harmless grumble now, but as the frustration mounts, and the emotional turmoil increases, there is no telling if or when Ho will finally be driven over the edge.

With the government set to announce its budget plans on Wednesday, social workers and lawmakers are demanding help for a section of society that seems forgotten and ignored.

Ho is not the first to feel helpless, nor the first to consider death as his only solution. Wong Kok-man, 81, was jailed for two years after killing his blind partner, who had also lost her sense of taste and was paralysed on the right side of her body.

The former bus mechanic, who suffered from a major depressive disorder, choked Lem Mae-kin, his partner of 30 years,

while she slept. In custody since 2017, he was released earlier this year after a judge decided to "temper mercy with justice". The pair had lost a son previously, after he committed suicide at the age of 24.

While a social worker had earlier arranged to get a subsidy for Lem to stay in a private home for the elderly, space was tight and Wong could not bear to leave her in such conditions. And homes operated by NGOs typically have a long waiting list.

The problems were compounded when Wong was assigned a new social worker with whom he was unfamiliar. Not knowing how else to seek help, he stopped doing so.

Wong told lawmaker Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung that his plight was "a path the poor had to take" in Hong Kong.

The case highlighted challenges faced by elderly living alone or with another senior citizen, especially those in declining health—a situation social workers and lawmakers said should be addressed in the budget.

The stress of taking care of his wife has taken a toll on Ho, who has been referred to a psychiatrist.

While his children pay for a domestic helper, and the couple have subsidised day care for Fong three days a week—allowing Ho to run errands—it does not fill the gap, especially at night.

He struggles to lift his wife on his own. The physical toll leaves him with constant aches and bruises.

The couple also receive help from the Christian Family Service Centre, an NGO, which provides medical and lifestyle advice, and trips to the doctor for Fong. But

the NGO programme will end soon, with the private funding only lasting until next month.

Whether their three children, one of whom is nearing 60 years old, can still afford a helper after the present one leaves next year is unknown.

After raising the family, the couple did not have much left in savings when Ho retired in 1997.

As such, they rely on the HK\$3,585 a month they are each entitled to under the higher old age living allowance (OALA).

Ho has called for a pilot scheme by the Social Welfare Department—on a living allowance for low-income carers of people with disabilities—to be extended to more in need.

The scheme, which gives carers who take care of a disabled person HK\$2,400 a month, presently excludes those on welfare payments such as the OALA, and the comprehensive social security assistance scheme (CSSA).

Tong Choi-yung, programme director for elderly care, at the Christian Family Service Centre, agreed Ho should not be excluded from the scheme, as he was both an elderly person and a carer.

The pair also suggested increasing the amount to about HK\$6,000, which could be used to cover expenses such as hiring a helper, as well as paying for physiotherapy and nursing services.

Tong noted that the cost of a resident care place was between HK\$10,000 and HK\$20,000.

Ho said having a carer subsidy could help him take care of his wife, in turn saving the government the cost of having her enter institutions. He said Fong once stayed in a nursing home for three days, and was not happy.



Ho Foon and his wife on a tour of Sichuan 10 years ago, and at home in Lam Tin (below).

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HO FOON, ELDERLY CARER



The government said its policy towards the elderly was focused on them being able to age at home, with "institutional care as backup", but Cheung said officials did not live up to that objective.

As of last month, the waiting times for subsidised community facilities, such as home care services and day care centres, were between 12 and 18 months.

Those for subsidised residential care services were even higher, between 10 and 33 months, with officials often attributing the problem to a lack of land.

"I'm especially angry about the lack of home care, which by and large does not require much space," the lawmaker said.

"The only excuse is that we have not been willing to support these services financially."

Cheung urged the government to immediately increase home care services by up to three times to get rid of the queue.

To do so, he said the government needed to create more incentives for people to join the elderly care profession, with better pay and career prospects.

According to the 2016 population by census, there were about 107,000 elderly couples living alone. The figure for households with only a single elderly person is even higher, at about 153,000.

For Ho, his biggest worry is that his health will deteriorate and no one will be left to take care of his wife of nearly 60 years.

Ho is hoping the government will do its part on Wednesday. "Even though I'm irritated with her and scold her, she has trusted me since she was 17, so no matter what, I have to take care of her," Ho said with tears in his eyes.

"She worked hard to raise our three children, and when I had my leg injury and another surgery, she took good care of me."





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