

Time for Singapore to play mother to its needy kids

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The story of Linda Lee is poignant as much for her already pitiful plight - she was physically disabled and had low IQ - as for her tragic death.

The 12-year-old was found dead at the foot of a block of HDB flats in Hougang on Nov 24. The family's 24-year-old maid, Nurhayati, who comes from Indramayu in West Java, has since been charged with murder.

Short of buying for blood, much more is crying to be done for special little people like Linda.

Maybe my maternal instincts are going into overdrive - I became the mother of a bright and lively girl a year ago.

But more pertinently, I closely identify with the emotional and financial struggles the parents of disabled children face daily - having personally known some of these caregivers.

For the longest time, Singapore has been a father of many policies and programmes, some even worthy of export. It may be high time for Singapore to play the role of a mother too - to needy children.

I couldn't agree more with outspoken former senior civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow's recent call for funds and talent to be channelled towards helping the most underprivileged children.

The 73-year-old said the Government should deploy its funds and the energies of the country's 'social elites' - community and religious leaders - to shelter, feed and educate the bottom 5 per cent of children.

Without such early intervention, these children - most of whom are from broken families - will become a future source of problems for society, he said at the launch of his second book, *Dynamics Of The Singapore Success Story: Insights* By Ngiam Tong Dow, on Nov 20.

Linda may not qualify as a broken-home child. Still, more professional help can't hurt.

Said sociologist Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies: 'What these families need are additional resources, in terms of finances, emotional and psychological support and various kinds of ways by which they can find some respite during seasons where they need to take a break.'

It was a step forward when the Government extended its social safety net

during March's Budget debate - recognising the emotionally and financially draining journey parents face raising special needs children.

Now, all Singaporean special needs children - including those from well-off families - attending an early intervention programme at the pre-school level get a special \$300 monthly payment to offset course fees which are about \$1,000 a month.

Previously, subsidies for those from families earning more than \$3,500 a month were meant to have been gradually reduced over four years to zero by this year.

Last Thursday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Singapore's social safety net was working well and the Government would keep looking for ways to improve it - without creating a handout mentality. He was speaking to 400 community and grassroots leaders and social workers to mark the fifth anniversary of the Community Care Endowment Fund, addressing growing concerns about a widening income gap in Singapore.

It is heartening to know the Government is looking to improve things.

But clearly, there are shortcomings in the current system.

First, the onus is on the families to apply for help with community development councils (CDCs), citizens consultative committees and family service centres. Some cases may fall through the cracks.

Second, special schools that cater to children with disabilities - hearing impairment, autism or low IQ - are run by voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) and private institutions. They are often limited by funding.

Third, demand for space has been outstripping supply at some special schools, especially those for autistic children.

Specifically, more trained teachers are needed, said Ms Denise Phua, supervisor on the boards of the Pathlight School and Eden School for autistic children.

'We don't offer a place unless we have the trained teachers at hand,' said Ms Phua, who is also an MP for Jalan Besar GRC.

Fourth, the Government adopts an arms-length approach in overseeing special schools. The VWOs bear the primary responsibility of running the special schools. As a result, quality is inconsistent, depending on individual VWO board capability and commitment.

Fifth, it is not mandatory for special needs children to go to school.

Moving forward, Ms Phua thinks the Government should be more involved in

special schools' curriculum development and their teachers' pedagogical training. It should also make education compulsory for special needs children, she said.

A Malay family I spoke to recently provides a picture of some of the gaps in the system.

The family were left in dire straits after their sole breadwinner, a 50-year-old part-time cleaner, died in a freak bus accident in July this year. The dead man left a wife - who does not understand English - and four sick sons, aged eight to 21.

Their eldest son has mental illness while the second one has kidney failure. The second and third sons are intellectually disabled, attending special schools, while the youngest son was being tested for IQ and kidney problems.

The family had received occasional handouts from the CDC and various VWOs.

But the children's lot had not improved and their story was almost fading into history until after the freak accident was reported in The Straits Times. Donations poured in for the family after the report, providing them with more certainty about the children's education.

Clearly, arms-length management is not the way forward.

The Government also has to accept the fact that some disabled children will always be reliant on their caregivers. Singapore's social safety system - based on the principle that assistance should boost self-reliance - should not be followed to the letter.

The bottom 5 per cent of children may never contribute to Singapore's economy the way the top 5 per cent will.

Should more funds and the energies of the country's 'social elites' be channelled to these bottom 5 per cent anyway? For a nation with a soul, the answer is 'yes'.

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