Middle class seniors lack welfare. S. Indramalar. Sunday Star 19-June-2016

PETALING JAYA: Senior citizens, especially those from the middle class, have difficulty getting access to programmes offered to the elderly by the Government.

For example, even though the Government held programmes for the elderly through the Welfare Department such as counselling services and training workshops for caregivers, many were not aware of them.

This was one of the recurring comments from the 60 people who attended the Star2 public forum titled: “Seniors Matter: Safeguarding Our Elders”, jointly organised with the Julius Centre of Universiti Malaya’s (UM) Department of Social and Preventive Medicine yesterday.

The problem, said Assoc Prof Dr Siti Zaharah Jamaluddin from the UM law faculty, was that most of the Government’s programmes were targeted at the needy.

“The wealthy can afford to look after themselves and the Government programmes are catered to look after the needs of the poor.

“So, it is the middle-class portion of society that is suffering and badly in need of support.

Worse still is the sandwich generation (those in their 30s and 40s who have to look after their children as well as their ageing parents). Where do they turn to for help?

“The Government needs to revise its policies and look at this group too,” she said.

Dr Siti Zaharah’s research sees her identifying gaps in laws related to the elderly, looking at other countries’ legislation for senior citizens and coming up with recommendations to strengthen our laws, and she cautioned that the law should only be a person’s last resort.

She was among the forum panellists which also included Assoc Prof Dr Noran Mohd Hairy and Assoc Prof Dr Sajaratulnisa Othman, both from UM as well.

Others were Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia’s medical lecturer Dr Tengku Amatullah Maddehah Tengku Mohd and Parameswary Ramanathan, who runs the Mother Care Old Folks Home in Seremban.

They spoke on a wide range of topics that ranged from population ageing, to the need to prepare for the changing demographic, and recognizing symptoms and risks of elder abuse.

During question and answer time, a participant, retiree PC Yeo, 63, said the elderly wanted a mobile app that could help them find the support services they need.

“We have apps for taxi and car services, maid services and even one for parking. What we need is an app that will make it easier for old people to get the help they need, whether it is medical aid, day care services or even if they need someone to talk to them or look after them for a few hours,” said Yeo.

The two-and-a-half-hour session was vibrant with participants actively sharing their views on the issues faced by the elderly as well as that of their caregivers. Some even shared personal experiences.

By the close of the forum, the panellists and audience agreed that apart from government policy, the community needs to play a larger role in looking after the welfare of the elderly.

“We all need to pledge to take better care of our elderly and of ourselves, and make sure we have a network of support and are independent and aware,” said Dr Sajaratulnisa.

The researchers can be contacted at the UM Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, 03-7967 3793.
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