

Premium

Safe Place to shelter distressed mums-to-be



Safe Place director Jennifer Heng at the black-and-white bungalow in the Novena area, which will provide temporary housing for pregnant women in distress from next month. Safe Place, which was officially launched on Sept 1, is an initiative of Lakeside Family Services. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

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New facility will offer temporary refuge to women without financial or family support

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A new home for pregnant women who need a temporary place to stay is expected to open by early next month. It will be Singapore's only dedicated refuge for mothers-to-be in distress.

Safe Place, an initiative of Lakeside Family Services, a charity, will be located in the Novena area.

Housed in a colonial black-and-white bungalow, it can accommodate up to eight women and four infants.

Its director, Mrs Jennifer Heng, 42, explained the need for such a facility: "Some of their spouses, partners or family members do not want the women to carry the pregnancy to full term and the women were asked to leave their homes."

The women may be financially unstable and cannot support a baby, or the family may feel ashamed as the child was conceived out of wedlock or from an extramarital affair, she added.

Besides offering what it calls a residential respite service, Safe Place has since February provided counselling and practical support, including teaching the mothers parenting skills and giving them baby essentials such as milk powder and diapers.

Safe Place staff will discuss the various options with the mother, such as keeping the baby or giving the child up for adoption, and she will decide what she wants.



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Mrs Heng said most of the women keep their babies. And most of them do not need to seek temporary shelter during their pregnancy.

Those seeking refuge do not have to pay for their stay and they can stay up to four months after giving birth. Safe Place is funded through private donations.

Safe Place, which is staffed by five people, is now the only dedicated shelter for pregnant women in distress, after the last such facility run by HCSA Community Services shut in 2016.

HCSA Community Services decided to close its shelter after about two years to move towards providing a wider range of services to single parents, including single fathers, its spokesman said.

Now, its Spin (Single Parents Informed, Involved and Included) programme gives single parents emotional and practical support, such as by befriending them and teaching them parenting skills. It also helps parents care for their children for short periods of time so they have some respite.

The Family Life Society's Pregnancy Crisis Service also ran a shelter but it stopped that service in 2010. Demand for its shelter service varied and there were times when there was no one seeking refuge.

As it had limited resources, it decided to stop running the shelter, its spokesman said. It continues to provide counselling and other support to women facing unplanned pregnancies.

Safe Place, officially launched on Sept 1, started offering its non-residential services, such as counselling and other help, in February.

So far, it has given practical and emotional help to 20 women, of whom only four are married. Half of the women helped are above 25 years of age. Most are from poorer families.

Mrs Heng said: "Financial worries, broken relationships, poor health and a lack of family support can cause some to view a pregnancy as an immense burden, resulting in intense feelings of loneliness, fear, anxiety and hopelessness."

Mrs Heng knows from experience the trauma of dealing with an unplanned pregnancy. She had two abortions as a teenager.

For the past 15 years, Mrs Heng, who is now married with a daughter in primary school, has been counselling pregnant women in distress.

Those helped by Safe Place include Amy (not her real name), a 25-year-old tutor.

When she learnt that she was pregnant, her boyfriend started to distance himself from her as he was not sure whether he wanted the baby. Feeling abandoned and afraid, she called Safe Place for help and support.

Its staff accompanied Amy as she broke the news to her mother, who insisted that she go for an abortion as she felt Amy was not ready to be a mother. Besides, Amy's mother felt it was shameful for her to give birth out of wedlock.

Initially, Amy's mother wanted to throw her out of the house, but relented after Safe Place's staff spoke to her and she came round to accepting the pregnancy.

Amy's boyfriend is also back in her life, and the couple have since tied the knot while waiting for their child to be born.

FEWER BABIES BORN TO TEENS

Traditionally, pregnant teenagers have been one group who used the services of a pregnancy crisis shelter, but their numbers have fallen steadily in the past decade.

Last year, there were 310 babies born to mothers aged 19 and under - fewer than half of the 816 babies born to teen mums in 2008.

The data is contained in the Report on Registration of Births and Deaths 2017 published by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority.

Social workers interviewed say the greater use of contraception among teens has meant that fewer of them get pregnant.

But among those who became pregnant, some of their family members wanted them to stay in a shelter as they wanted to hide the fact from their neighbours and relatives due to the shame and stigma attached to out-of-wedlock births, social workers say.

Singapore Children's Society counsellor Tan Xin Ying added: "Their family members could be hostile to them because of the unwanted pregnancy. They could also have been thrown out of the house as they wanted to keep the baby instead of going for an abortion."

NEED FOR SHELTER

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MS TAN XIN YING, a counsellor at the Singapore Children's Society.

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Take for example a 15-year-old girl that Ms Lena Teo, deputy director of therapy and mental wellness at Care Singapore, which helps at-risk youth, has counselled.

The girl went to ask Ms Teo for help because she was feeling sick and nauseous.

She turned out to be pregnant but by that time, it was too late to abort the baby.

Her father was furious on learning of the pregnancy and wanted her to stay at a shelter. Her boyfriend also did not support the pregnancy.

The girl kept the baby and her father later arranged for her to be married to another man.

Theresa Tan

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