

Home on the Beach

Even as I approached my office on a Monday morning, I could hear the phone ringing. I darted to pick it up and was aghast at what I heard at the other end of the line. “I really don’t know what to do to help so I decided to call your department to check if you could help my colleague with her situation,” the caller implored and launched into her story.

The Human Resource (HR) Department had a colleague who was seeking help from her supervisor to find lodging for her family. The supervisor was stumped by the request and sought help from us.

It was an unusual call for help. At least to me, because it was not a patient that was seeking help, but a colleague. It took me a while to collect myself before I could respond to the HR staff. I paused to gather my thoughts. “Could you please arrange for the employee to see me at my office today? We need to understand her situation and explore how we may assist her,” I replied.

My first meeting with Ella was awkward as she was our hospital employee. I could sense her unease as well. Looking at Ella, no one could have known that this employee — who was reporting to work as usual — was actually carrying a baggage of worries with her. She appeared calm as she told me about her situation. As her story unfolded, I felt a tiny tear forming at the corner of my eye. I felt sad yet at the same time, I admired her fortitude.

Ella was a young mother with three children, the oldest being seven and the youngest, four. The divorce cost her the matrimonial flat

and she faced a lot of difficulty trying to arrange for any long-term housing for herself and her children. She was not able to get a rental flat immediately due to the extremely long waiting list. After a year of seeking temporary shelter in different places, her luck finally ran out.

Schemes targeted for the relevant individuals commonly have gaps or access barriers. A long waiting list is one example.

She found herself in a dire situation — no shelter for herself and her three very young children. Her family of origin had their own hardships. Several members were homeless themselves and could not offer help.

A divorced person with custody of the children is able to apply for a rental HDB flat. He/she must show documents pertaining to divorce and custody of the children. However he/she has to serve a debarment period of 30 months if he/she has disposed of a HDB flat within the last 30 months. There are other eligibility conditions that need to be met (for example, income ceiling of S\$1,500 per month, citizenship).

Ella made sure that the children attended school no matter how dismal the situation. She had to juggle a rather demanding job, care for her children, find a roof over their heads, plan for the future, and entertain an inundating litany of worries. She sought help from various sources, and had followed the procedures and protocols laid down for families in her situation, but to no avail.

“Children, let’s camp at East Coast Park tonight,” Ella suggested to her children.

“Mummy, can we go to Pasir Ris Park instead? We already camped at East Coast Park last week,” her elder son asked with pleading eyes.

“Of course we can,” Ella replied, with the burden of guilt and fear over their unknown future resting on her fatigued shoulders.

“Yeah! The stars are brighter at Pasir Ris Park,” her children exclaimed.

Whenever she could not find a place to stay, they would camp on the beach. The children were coping relatively well and found living on the beach and under the stars rather enjoyable. When she had a little extra money, she would rent a small chalet to give herself and the children some respite.

I looked into Ella's case. What followed were many phone calls to various government bodies, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), and to various shelters to secure a roof over the family's heads. I hit a brick wall each and every time. A kind lady volunteered her shelter though it was not meant for displaced families. However, the shelter was on the verge of being evicted and the conditions were not adequate for a single mother with three young children.

Finally, I started to see a light at the end of the tunnel when I made a call to a person at the HDB Rental Housing unit. He demonstrated compassion towards Ella's plight but expressed his limitations as the queue for the rental units was extremely long and each application seemed as needy as the next. It was clear: there were simply insufficient flats to meet the demands of the needy and those with a lower income. This gentleman's compassion and empathy drove me to follow up with him day after day. Ella, on her end, did not give up and made many trips to HDB. She also sought help from her Member of Parliament.

Then one day, at six in the morning, my mobile phone beeped. The text message read: "I have been allocated a rental unit and my family can move in tomorrow! Thank you for your help."

As I read the message, I had a visceral sense of a great load being lifted from Ella's shoulders. I was overjoyed for her and the children. I admired her resilience and perseverance that enabled them to find a shelter. I silently gave thanks as well to the officer from HDB, whom I was sure played a significant role in her getting a unit.

Little did I expect that an unusual phone call from the HR Department would lead to a series of events that reiterated the service gaps in our community. Many people around us are compassionate and helpful but there are times when their hands are tied and they are unable to help. Thankfully, Ella's great love for her children and strength of character helped her persist and prevented her from giving up or becoming too dependent on others to help her. I fear that there are many such people who, through no fault of their own, end up homeless due to insufficient resources to support them. Many may not be as blessed with the strength and resilience as Ella. They may slip through the cracks and end up suffering alone in this small island of ours.

Guidelines and criteria are needed for all schemes and services to prevent abuse and to promote optimal utilization of resources. However, guidelines and criteria can become barriers for individuals in unique situations and with genuine needs. Programmes and systems require structure but they must also be adequately pliable to sensitively and promptly respond to exigent needs.