

Loneliness epidemic looms

Better support systems urged to curb isolation among seniors

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysia is ageing, and very fast.

By 2048, just 22 years from now, the country is projected to become an “aged nation” with 14% of the total population aged 65 and above. One in every five people would also be aged 60 and above, according to the Statistics Department.

With the rapid ageing will come another problem – a “loneliness epidemic”.

That is when social isolation and alienation affect large groups of people, often with serious health and societal consequences, says Universiti Malaya demographer Dr Tey Nai Peng.

“This is often manifested in depression and cognitive decline and the prevalence of chronic diseases,” he said.

With such an epidemic looming, better social support has to be put in place to care for the growing number of senior citizens. The current number of care centres is insufficient.

There are now 465 care centres registered nationwide, with 376 managed privately and the rest

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by NGOs.

Poor social support among older Malaysians also increased from 30.8% in 2018 to 33.1% last year, according to the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2025.

“Without stronger social infrastructure, we risk a ‘loneliness epidemic’ that could strain families, hospitals and the economy,” the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry admitted.

Here’s a point to ponder. Malaysia is ageing about 1.5 times faster than Japan.

The country is compressing a century of demographic change into just five to six decades, unlike Japan, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad said in a report.

To offer better support, the ministry said the government

was promoting healthy, active ageing through Senior Citizens Activity Centres (PAWE).

“This is to help older Malaysians remain independent and engaged.

“As of December 2025, there are a total of 217 PAWEs nationwide.

“These centres enable older people to participate in activities and socialise with the community,” the ministry said, adding that 47,020 older persons were currently registered with these centres.

Aside from expanding PAWE, Tey said other community-based spaces like Rukun Tetangga, residents’ associations and places of worship should be strengthened.

“Such spaces can be transformed into elder-friendly support and care hubs.

“These spaces should go beyond basic activities by offering social programmes, inter-generational activities, fitness sessions, telehealth, mini-clinics and digital access to help older persons stay healthy, connected, and engaged,” he said.

Tey, meanwhile, suggested that mobile PAWE units be set up to extend services to underserved

areas, while digital platforms can keep seniors connected through online classes and virtual activities.

“At the same time, old folk homes and care centres must be made more affordable and improved in both services and daily activities, ensuring that residents receive care with companionship rather than isolation,” he added.

Tey said seniors themselves can also remain active through part-time work, mentoring, or voluntary work, ensuring they continue to contribute meaningfully to society.

Age-friendly environments – both social and physical – should also be strengthened, said Universiti Putra Malaysia’s Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing research officer Chai Sen Tyng.

“An age-friendly social environment will enable older people to participate, feel included, remain connected, and maintain dignity and autonomy.

“It has a lot to do with ageism and ageist attitudes, be it for labour and employment, education and training to access health and social care services,” he said.