

First shelter for homeless families here opens doors

Families being put up in HDB flats for a few months in pilot project led by MCYS

By THERESA TAN

THE first temporary shelter for homeless families has been started here.

Families without a roof over their heads, such as those whose flats have been repossessed, are being put up in HDB flats for a few months until they find their feet, The Straits Times understands.

The pilot project is spearheaded by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). A charity, New Hope Community Services, runs the service.

Both the MCYS and HDB declined to provide details of the shelter's operations, saying it was early days yet.

But social workers say they have been told that they can refer homeless families to the New Hope shelter, The Straits Times understands.

The number of families which are homeless is not known, but The Straits Times reported in May that an average of 60 repossessed HDB flats had been sold every month recently.

Until the New Hope Shelter for Displaced Families opened its doors last month, households that fell on tough times were hard-pressed to find temporary lodgings if they could not stay with family and friends.

Some went to shelters meant for battered wives and children for help.

One counsellor told The

Straits Times that last year, her shelter for abused women had to put up half a dozen families whose flats had been repossessed by banks or the HDB.

The counsellor, who declined to be named, said that one family had nine young children.

After a four-month stay at the shelter, the family is now trying to get back on track, and is living in a rented two-room flat.

"We have a full house now, but we still get lots of referrals from other agencies asking us to take in homeless families," the counsellor said.

These are the fortunate ones. Those who aren't quite so lucky end up sleeping in places such as beaches, the airport and void decks, social workers say.

There are various reasons families lose their flats, but the most common is failing to meet mortgage payments.

But the number of flats being repossessed is declining with the improving economic and employment situation, said the Housing Board.

And only a "very, very small" number of families who have lost their flats end up on the streets, said Madam Lee Yean Wun, the principal social worker at the Kampong Kapor Family Service Centre.

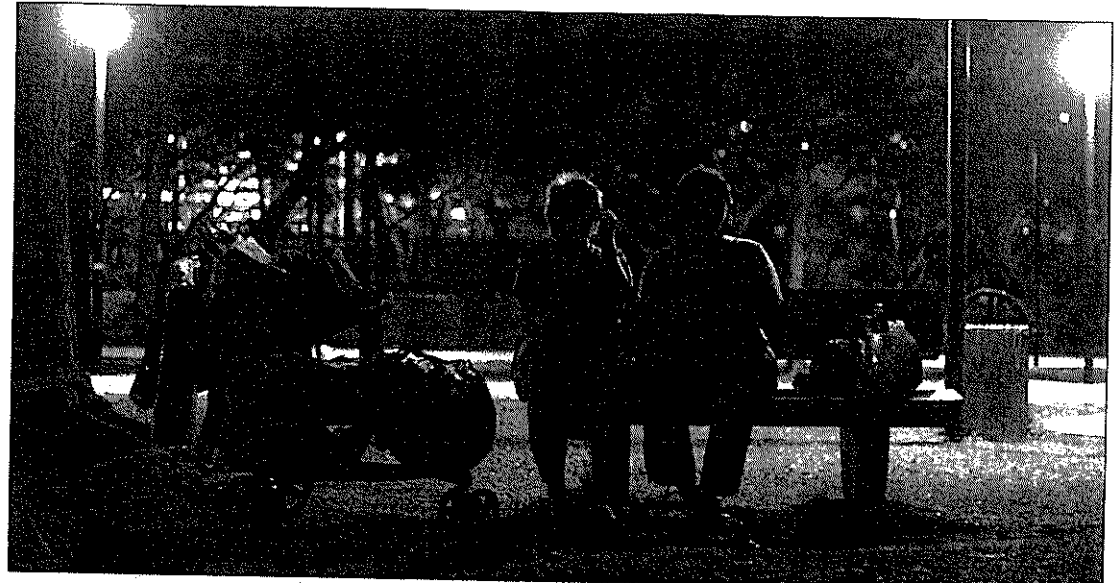
While homelessness is hard on anyone, it is especially arduous and unsettling for families.

Children may be unable to keep up with school, or breadwinners may find it tough to hold on to their jobs, said Madam Lee.

With the shelter, there is a new hope for the most down-and-out families, she added.

theresat@sph.com.sg

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NOWHERE TO GO: Madam Hong (right), 31, her mother and 14-month-old baby have been sleeping on the streets after the goodwill of relatives and friends ran out earlier this month. Homeless, they had been seeking refuge with family and friends for the past five years.

ST PHOTOS: WANG HUI FEN

Two women stay in toilet – with baby in tow

DESPERATE for a place to sleep, a woman, with her 14-month-old daughter and 58-year-old mother in tow, settled for a bench in a public toilet.

The trio had made the beach-front toilet their home in the past week, when The Straits Times chanced upon them.

They have been homeless for the past five years, said the 31-year-old, who wanted to be known only as Madam Hong.

"We have nowhere else to go," she said when asked why she was sleeping in the toilet.

"It's too cold to sleep out on the beach at night, so we fled to the toilet," she said in Mandarin.

Madam Hong's hard-luck tale started about seven years ago, when her husband was axed from his cleaning job.

The couple started falling behind in payments for their four-room flat as the family struggled to make ends meet on his odd jobs.

The debts mounted over the years and they had to give up their Yishun flat, she said.

The family had been staying at the homes of relatives and friends until earlier this month.

Their luck ran out when their last host decided to rent the family's room to other tenants who could pay more than the \$100 Madam Hong gave each month.

So she headed for the beach in the eastern part of Singapore with her daughter and mother.

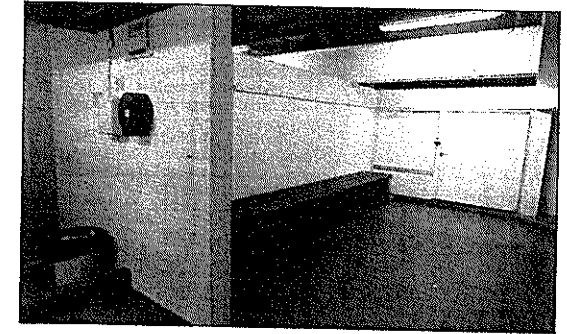
Her husband spends his nights working as a cleaner and sleeps at his workplace during the day. He earns about \$600 to \$700, which goes towards buying food and paying for transport.

Asked if she had considered subsidised rental flats, open-market rental flats, or going back to relatives, Madam Hong said they cannot afford to rent on the open market and have no idea where to seek help for their housing woes.

During the day, the trio roam the nearby malls.

They eat at nearby hawkker centres and return to the beach to sleep, always on the lookout for the authorities.

People who have made public



SLEEPING IN TOILET: This is the public toilet which the trio call home. During the day, they roam the nearby malls and eat at hawkker centres.

HOPE FOR BETTER TIMES
"This is not the end, there are people worse off than me. I just hope for a better tomorrow where I can find a place for us to stay."

MADAM HONG, who has been staying with her mother and baby in a toilet for the past week

beaches their homes, sometimes for months on end, have been evicted in the past.

Aside from being caught for vagrancy, Madam Hong's biggest worry is where her family will sleep next.

"You are always drifting from place to place," she said.

"But this is not the end, there are people worse off than me. I just hope for a better tomorrow where I can find a place for us to stay."

THERESA TAN