

# More support when loved ones with dementia go missing

Reports sent by caregivers to Dementia Singapore's app will also be sent to OneService app users in the area

Syarafana Shafeeq

Caregivers of those with dementia can now get more community support to look out for – and return – their loved ones when they go missing.

The initiative, a tie-up between the Municipal Services Office (MSO) and Dementia Singapore, was launched on Monday.

When a report, with photo and details of the missing person, is submitted to Dementia Singapore's Cara app, it will send a push notification to all users of the app.

The same information will also

be sent through a push notification to OneService app users who live in the town of the lost person's last seen location.

Users are also notified when the missing person is found.

The OneService app from MSO has 500,000 users, and is currently used for neighbourhood issues like providing feedback on cleanliness, facilities and pests.

The partnership sees the OneService app complementing the Safe Return and Report Missing Person feature of the Cara app.

Since the feature was soft-launched in November 2022, it has helped facilitate the safe return of seven people.

The Well-being of Singapore Elderly study conducted by the Institute of Mental Health in 2013 found that one in 10 seniors who are aged 60 and above has dementia.

Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and National Development Sim Ann, who attended the launch of the tie-up at Dementia Singapore's New Horizon Centre in Bukit Batok, said: "Families experience much anxiety when their loved ones with dementia go missing."

She added: "By reaching a wider audience and encouraging residents to keep a lookout for one another, I am confident that we can foster a more dementia-friendly Singapore together."

Dementia Singapore's chief executive Jason Foo said its vision has always been to create a more inclusive society.

"Through Cara, we are seeing our friends living with dementia and their caregivers becoming more empowered, involved and supported in their journeys living with or caring for someone with dementia."

Mr Foo added that there has been a rising incidence of seniors going missing in Singapore in the past couple of years, many of whom have dementia.

He said the partnership will effectively help to address the growing concern among families by significantly expanding the reach of the missing person notifications.

"With a larger population reach, the probability is higher that a missing person with dementia will be found more quickly."

syarafanams@sph.com.sg



There has been a rising incidence of seniors going missing in Singapore in the past couple of years, many of whom have dementia. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

## What can be done to help those who forget their way home

Not all of the elderly who go missing have dementia, but it can be reasonably deduced that the condition is a significant contributing factor, said doctors whom The Straits Times spoke to.

Dementia Singapore, a social service agency for dementia, said the risk of going missing increases based on the severity of the person's condition.

Its spokesman said: "For someone with mild or early-stage dementia, they may be still able to recognise places. So they may get confused sometimes, but not entirely lost."

In a February 2022 parliamentary reply on missing-person cases, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said about 15 per cent of the 5,072 missing people reported to the police from 2019 to 2021 were vulnerable people, such as young children and the elderly.

There were 154 cases of missing people aged 61 and above in 2019, 129 in 2020, and 127 in 2021.

A key factor that led to the drop in numbers in 2020 and 2021 were restrictions on movement during the Covid-19 lockdown. This meant that most of the elderly did not wander out of their homes.

But the isolation might have actually worsened things for those with dementia, said the spokesman for Dementia Singapore.

He said: "Safe distancing measures over the past two years meant that persons with dementia and the elderly were encouraged to stay at home more, or avoid contact with too many people. Changes to their daily routines became unavoidable."

"They were unable to go out to meet their friends at the coffee shop, attend daycare centres or have meals with their extended family members. It was and still is stifling for persons with dementia, who need that social and mental interaction even more than others."

This can lead to an increase in symptoms like confusion about places and time, and being unable to retrace their steps. The elderly may also wander outdoors due to the distress caused by social isolation and other Covid-19 stressors, he added.

Despite surveys such as the Well-being of Singapore Elderly study conducted by the Institute of Mental Health in 2013, data on dementia in Singapore remains limited. A second study is under way.

The 2013 study found that one in 10 adults here aged 60 and above had dementia.

About 28,000 people aged 60 and older had dementia in 2012, and this number is expected to soar to 80,000 by 2030.

Dr Phillip Yap, a senior consultant in geriatric medicine at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, said the country can anticipate more of its elderly being unable to find their way home in the years to come.

The number of people with dementia, he said, is also set to rise in tandem with the increase in the proportion of elderly folk.

Here are some ways to help those with dementia, according to social workers and doctors:

### IF THE PERSON WITH DEMENTIA NEEDS CONSTANT SUPPORT

- Always assign an extra pair of eyes to observe these individuals. This could be a domestic helper, or family members on a rotated schedule.
- Family members and caregivers can observe and keep track of when – during the day or night – they are likely to wander. At those times, try to engage them in meaningful activities to help ease their minds and alleviate their restlessness.

### IF THE PERSON WITH DEMENTIA IS ABLE TO GO OUT INDEPENDENTLY

- These individuals should carry with them a form of personal identification and the contact details of their next of kin. The information can be contained in a wallet, or engraved on a pendant or wristband.
- Ensure that they carry a mobile phone so that they remain contactable. The phone or another device can be subscribed to GPS tracking services to allow others to find them.

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