



Refuge for young women facing pregnancy crisis



Photo: ST

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A new shelter for pregnant girls and women is expected to be up and running by mid-November, making it Singapore's only dedicated shelter for those in distress over an unplanned pregnancy.

The Dayspring New Life Centre, located in a bungalow at 233, Turf Club Road, will be able to house up to 10 women and four babies.

Besides offering refuge, the centre and its partners will also provide counselling and practical support to residents and others who need such help.

This includes linking them with an adoptive parent if they decide to give their baby up for adoption or referring them to post-abortion therapy if they choose to end their pregnancy.

The centre is founded by Ms Jennifer Heng, 39, who had two abortions as a teenager and knows first-hand the trauma of an unwanted pregnancy.

Now a pastor at Good Gifts City Church and married with a young daughter, she has spent the last decade counselling girls and women in distress.

"There are still girls who get kicked out by their parents in a fit of anger," she told The Sunday Times. "So they need a place to stay for a while, to have some quiet time and think about what to do, while they and their parents cool down."

Ms Heng said the shock, denial and fear that come with discovering the pregnancy can be overwhelming.

That is why she hopes the new centre can help in counselling girls and women so they can come to an informed decision about their pregnancy and supporting them, whatever their decision may be.

Those who seek help can stay for a few days or up to four months after they give birth, depending on their

needs.

The last dedicated shelter for mothers-to-be, run by the Pregnancy Crisis Service, closed in 2012 after four years because of "poor demand" and the high cost of running it.

A spokesman said it had just a handful of residents in its final year.

Counsellors interviewed said the number of pregnant girls and women who needed shelter has fallen. This is because the number of teenage pregnancies has plunged in the past two decades and parents are more willing to allow their daughters who are pregnant out of wedlock to live at home.

There were 487 babies born to girls aged 19 and below last year - a third fewer than the 731 babies born in 2003 and the lowest number in at least the past 25 years.

Sister Cecilia Liew, a Catholic nun who oversees the Good Shepherd Centre-Rose Villa, said: "It was a great shame to have an unwed, pregnant daughter at home in the 1960s and 1970s. So parents placed their daughters in a shelter. I feel the shame is not as great today and parents are more open to allowing their daughters to stay at home."

Her order of Good Shepherd Sisters started Rose Villa about 50 years ago for pregnant girls and women, but the number seeking shelter dropped over the years.

There were only four residents last year, compared to an average of 40 a year in the 1980s.

The dwindling numbers and other factors led to Rose Villa merging about 10 years ago with a shelter the Good Shepherd Sisters runs for abused women, to become the Good Shepherd Centre-Rose Villa which takes in abused women as well as pregnant girls and women.

Another centre, the Pertapis Centre for Women and Girls, has been taking in pregnant girls since 2007. It also houses other troubled teens, such victims of abuse and juvenile offenders.

The Dayspring New Life Centre is part of Highpoint Community Services Association, a charity that runs a halfway house for drug addicts and the Dayspring Residential Treatment Centre for abused girls.

Asked about the falling demand for pregnancy shelters, Ms Heng said: "Even though teenage pregnancies and abortions have been falling, there were still over 9,000 abortions last year. We know there's demand for help services.

"Often, these women just need a listening ear as they feel so lost and unstable."

Mum took her to shelter after she refused abortion

The 20-year-old kept her pregnancy a secret until she was five months along and her baby bump began to show.

By then, Yati (not her real name) could no longer deny what had happened when her mother, a cleaner, questioned her.

Her boyfriend of a few months, a waiter in his 20s, had dumped her after she told him the news.

Fearful, lost and feeling all alone, the jobless young woman - who has N-level qualifications - did not know what to do until her mother confronted her.

The news broke her mother's heart, while her father was livid. Her parents are divorced and she has a younger brother.

"My dad took me to a clinic to have an abortion but I refused to do it. The baby is my own flesh and blood," she said.

In desperation, her mother, a Muslim, took her to the Good Shepherd Centre-Rose Villa, where she has been staying for the past three months.

Now eight months pregnant, Yati said: "My mum is afraid that people would gossip about her and me. She does not want others to know that I'm pregnant as she feels ashamed. I also feel very ashamed."

At the shelter, Yati spends her time resting and chatting with other residents, including victims of violence. It is run by the Good Shepherd Sisters, a Catholic order of nuns.

She said: "I feel more at peace here. Everyone has their problems and we talk, joke and help one another. If I stay at home, I'd be scared of bumping into people I know and I wouldn't know what to say."

She plans to give up her baby for adoption.

She said: "I hope my baby can one day forgive me for giving him away. I hope he understands it's best for him."

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