

## News



The sparse flat and an unbearable stench of death were all he left behind when he died



**SPARTAN:** Facing page: A fan whirs in Mr Goh's flat to clear away the smell of death, scattering old newspapers (right). Scene utensils sit on the kitchen shelves (above) and clothes are left hanging to dry.



Said the 65-year-old, who is single and lives alone in Hakkim: "I feel safe with this thing around. It's full and I can't lift up, at least someone will know."  
Another trial user is Madam Mally Zhou Yuet, a 79-year-old widow. Although she has a daughter and two grandchildren, she lives alone.  
Said Madam Zhou in Mandarin: "My daughter is very busy and my other relatives seldom come, too, so I have few visitors."  
"With the system installed, I feel more at ease."

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# Our lifeline for the old & alone

REPORT: **GAN LING KAI**  
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**D**RIED blood and strange fluid stain the floor of the sparse one-room flat.  
An electric fan is turned on. Old newspapers follow in its breeze. Along with some utensils and furniture, they are the only reminders that the flat was once Mr Goh Poh Heng's home.

It is also where he died — alone, at 86.  
The fan in the flat, at Block 8 North Bridge Road, is turned on for a purpose to clear the air of the stench of death.

Across the room is a foldable table and four chairs.  
Other signs of Mr Goh's life: A pot, plastic cups, a bottle of soy sauce, a mirror, a pair of slippers and some clothing left to dry on a line.

This was the scene that greeted The New Paper on Sunday when we were alerted to Mr Goh's death in August.

His death highlights a grim reality in ageing Singapore — the elderly who die alone and are discovered only when neighbours can no longer bear the stench of rotting flesh.

Alerted by a neighbour, the police discovered Mr Goh's body on July 24.

Just how frequently do such deaths occur?

There are no official numbers because no one is keeping track.  
Past studies suggest that there were at least seven cases of people whose decomposing bodies were found days after their deaths last year and in 2008, with at least 43 elderly people dying alone in their homes in 2007.

As in Mr Goh's case, not much is known about the lonely elderly who died.  
Neighbours said Mr Goh was probably dead for a



## THE NEW PAPER Project Helping Hands

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few days before his body was discovered.

Mr Lim Chew Kai, 49, who lives a few units away from Mr Goh's 11th floor flat, said: "For several days, there was a rotting smell floating across the corridor."

"He lived alone and usually kept his door closed. Who would know that he died?"

Another 11th floor neighbour, electrician Lim Yong Kee, 59, said: "There are many old folks here who are sick and are just waiting for their time to come."

And it did, for another elderly resident.

### Another body

Exactly a month after Mr Goh's body was discovered, the police were called to another unit in the same block. There, they made another similarly grim find.  
The police have asked for the next of kin of Mr Pang Kia Seng, 85, to contact them. At press time, it is unclear whether anyone has come forward.

Appeals made by the police for next-of-kin whom elderly people die alone in their homes are common.

There were at least 10 such appeals this year. There were 11 appeals last year and 13 in 2008.

Can we help prevent more of such tragic deaths among the lonely elderly?

We can, with a bit of compassion and ingenuity.  
The New Paper is embarking on a community project in partnership with voluntary welfare organisation Liens Befrienders Service Association and Ngwe Ann Polytechnic.

It is called Project Helping Hands and it involves installing wireless motion sensors in the homes of senior citizens living alone.

The system tracks the resident's movements and sends an SMS to a caregiver or volunteer if it detects unusually long motionless periods — for example, if the resident stays moving due to an injury or illness.

This technology, known as the NP's Elderly Monitoring System, was developed by the staff and students of Ngwe Ann Polytechnic.

With the number of those aged 60 and above and living on their own projected to rise from 25,000 last year to 61,000 in 2030, the system has a high potential of meeting the needs of Singapore's ageing population.

The New Paper editor Dominic Nathan, 46, said Project Helping Hands is just one way of trying to meet the needs of a generation that helped build modern Singapore.

He said: "The golden years of these senior citizens should not be spent waiting for a lonely and sometimes premature death. The technology developed by Ngwe Ann Polytechnic is key to raising the alarm in an emergency."

He said: "It is not possible for our volunteers to be with our seniors round the clock. These sensors can complement our befriending efforts."

Ideally, with the alert system installed, the elderly can receive medical attention quickly, Mr Goh said.  
"Even in cases where death cannot be prevented, at least the body will not be left unattended," he added.

The alert system has been successful in trials at two apartments in Mei Ling Street since December.

For wheelchair-bound Sun Suk, 84, one of the trial users, the system acts as an important safety net because of her limited mobility.

More details about this project: PAGE 10

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## Sensors help keep tabs in between volunteers' visits

From PAGE 9

Liens Befrienders has identified 1,000 needy elderly Singaporeans who live in one-room flats as potential beneficiaries.

Getting the sensors fitted at 1,000 homes will cost about \$1 million - the community project's initial target.

But the sensors are just half the solution in Project Helping Hands, said Ms Nathan.

Family members or getting volunteers to sign up to raise the alarm if the sensors detect that the senior citizen may be in some trouble.

## Isolated

Ms Sally Gai, 39, an executive of Liens Befrienders Service Association, said: "Some of these seniors are isolated socially, and most of them are single males - not married, divorcees or widowers."

Ms Gai supervises the befriending services for 190 seniors living in Kampong Glam.

She is also in charge of the volunteers befriending another 90 seniors living in Islan Tower.

The biggest challenge faced by the volunteers is that many of the elderly - about 30 per cent - are uncontactable because many of them don't own a phone.

"Some may have had mobile phones, but the service was terminated because they had no money to pay the bills."

The volunteers visit the seniors weekly, but Ms Gai said it is not an effective arrangement.

She added: "In between our visits, the seniors may get into accidents, especially for those who are frail and unstable."

"It becomes even more challenging when the seniors are not at home when we visit them."

This is where Project Helping Hands can make a difference, said Ms Nathan.

"It's a marriage of technology and volunteerism."

"Ngie Ann's husband and the chairman of a volunteer network managed by Liens Befrienders may well make the difference in the lives of senior citizens living on their own."

Ms Gerard Ho, 61, chairman of Council for Third Age (CTA), applauded the project.

He said: "I hope to see hundreds of such projects springing up. Every project will address the ageing issue in some aspect. What you want is for people to get involved and succeed in it, so that you have a model."

"I think this merging of the media, of volunteers on the ground and of the citizens - the students - is the way to go to form a partnership. It brings together different skill sets and contributions. It is this team work that makes it very exciting."

For more information on Project Helping Hands and exclusive videos related to the news coverage, visit [top.sg/helpinghands](http://top.sg/helpinghands).



**CONSTANT WATCH:** Madam Mary Zhou at home, with the round, white sensor installed on the ceiling above her.

THE PICTURE: BELLAJIAN SEETAN

## Help us to reach out to 1,000 living alone

## THE PROJECT

## DESIGN

It involves installing wireless motion sensors in the apartments of senior citizens living alone.

The system tracks the resident's movements and sends an SMS to a caregiver or volunteer if it detects unusually long motionless periods - for example, if the resident stops moving due to an injury or illness.

## IMPLEMENTATION

To get the hardware portion of the project up and running, at least \$1 million is needed by the end of the year - \$1,000 for every home.

Equally important is the hardware.

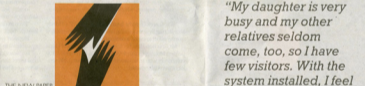
Volunteers are needed to adopt seniors living on their own.

Their main responsibility is to receive and act on the SMS alerts that will be automatically sent out if the seniors detect any unusually long motionless periods.

## HOW TO HELP

Any amount is welcomed. A donation of \$1,000 will pay for sensors to be installed in one flat. You can donate more if you wish to adopt more than one household.

We hope students in the same class, colleagues in a department or neighbours on the same street or community group will come together to adopt a home.



THE NEW PAPER

## Project Helping Hands

Cheques of any amount, made payable to "Liens Befrienders", can be mailed to:

Liens Befrienders Service Association (Singapore)  
818, 130, Bukit Merah View, #01-350,  
Singapore 190130

Please indicate on the back of the cheque:

- Project Helping Hands
- Your full name
- NRIC number
- Address
- Contact number

Corporate donors should also indicate their company's name (as registered with Acri) and their business registration number.

Donations can also be made by cash at the Liens Befrienders' office during office hours (Mon-Fri) on weekdays.

All donations are tax-exempt.

## HOW TO VOLUNTEER

To sign up as a volunteer, please call 1800-375 8600 or visit [www.liensbefrienders.org.sg](http://www.liensbefrienders.org.sg)

All funds raised for the project will be handled and disbursed by Liens Befrienders.

"My daughter is very busy and my other relatives seldom come, too, so I have few visitors. With the system installed, I feel more at ease."

-Madam Mary Zhou (above)

## Greying Singapore

Singapore has one of the fastest ageing populations in the world

## THOSE AGED 65 AND ABOVE

This year  
About 300,000  
In 2030 (projected)  
About 900,000

## THOSE AGED 60 AND ABOVE AND LIVING ALONE

Last year (estimated)  
35,000  
In 2020  
61,000  
2030  
83,000

## SENIORS SHOWING SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

Live alone  
26%  
Live with their spouse or family  
9%  
With weak social networks outside the home  
16%  
With strong social networks outside the home  
8%

## APPEALS MADE BY THE POLICE FOR NEXT-OF-KIN TO COME FORWARD WHEN ELDERLY PERSONS DIE AT HOME

2008	2009	2010 (to date)
13	11	10

Sources: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore Police Force website