Elderly in distress at home? Get SMS alert

By YEO SAM JO

BEING her mother’s sole caregiver, Ms Doris Oo used to worry constantly when she had to leave the elderly woman alone at home to go to work.

“I used to call back during lunchtime to check on her,” recalled the 50-year-old pre-school teacher. But things changed when Ms Oo and her mother, Madam Mabel Chen, 78, who has high blood pressure and diabetes, had a sensor system installed in their one-room Yishun flat last year, as part of a trial by the Housing Board.

The Smart Elderly Monitoring and Alert System, developed by HDB and four firms, was placed in 12 rental flats in Woodlands, Yishun, Clementi and Marine Parade from June to November last year.

It uses motion sensors to track the living habits of the elderly at home. When irregular patterns occur, such as an unusually long period of inactivity, the system alerts their caregivers via text messages. It also comes with a portable panic button which can be pressed to alert family members in times of distress.

The new technology has proven popular so far, with all 12 households supporting its use, according to an HDB survey.

Ten of them felt that it was elder-friendly and easy to use, while two were neutral. During the test period, eight elderly users triggered the system, and the longest time taken for caregivers to respond was five minutes.

The survey also showed that eight of the households felt the system does not compromise their privacy, while the other four remained neutral. “I’m not at home most of the time, so this really helps very much,” said Ms Oo, who usually works from 7am to 8pm. “I’m much less worried about (my mother) now.”

Her mother, Madam Chen, said: “It’s good to have this in case I fall or something happens to me. I feel safer.”

A two-room flat typically uses four motion sensors to operate the system, while three sensors are needed for a one-room flat.

Commercial firms will provide this service to residents for a fee to be worked out later, said HDB. HDB’s chief executive Cheong Koon Hean said: “Smart technology helps to improve the lives of residents. In this instance, it enhances the safety of our elderly residents and offers their children greater peace of mind.”

The alert system is part of the Smart HDB Town Framework, one aspect of which aims to equip public flats with the digital infrastructure for “smart homes”, so residents can monitor their energy usage, for example.

The first of these homes will be launched in two housing projects in Punggol Northshore during the upcoming sales exercise in May.

Said Mrs Cheong: “Moving forward, HDB will continue to explore innovative ideas and partner the industry to develop solutions that residents can consider adopting for their HDB flats.”

yeosamjo@sph.com.sg