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Appealing for a lifeline

By HARIATI AZIZAN

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IN another life, she would have been surrounded by her family during this festive holiday season, joking and laughing together as they wait for lunch to be ready.

In this life, the frail-looking middle-aged woman sits alone dourly at the drop-in centre of the Pusat Bantuan Khidmat Sosial (PBKS) in the Chow Kit district of Kuala Lumpur, starting into space.

The woman is one of the homeless people from around the inner city area, and has been taking refuge at PBKS since it first opened in 2007.

"She has no family and nowhere else to go. How are we going to tell her that she cannot come here anymore?" says Mitch Yusmar Yusof, the acting executive director of non-governmental organisation Seed Foundation (Social and Enabling Environment Development), which manages PBKS.

Come Thursday, PBKS might have to be shut down as the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry (KPWKM) has abruptly cut its funding for 2015.

"We're in dire straits," notes Seed exco member Lalita Abdullah.

Receiving around RM700,000 a year from the government, PBKS has been a beacon of hope for the disenfranchised community of Chow Kit – from the homeless and poor to the sex workers, HIV sufferers and transgender people. It provides not only a drop-in centre where they can rest, eat, shower and wash their clothes, but also a place where they can get a sliver of humanity, kindness and love in their harsh existence.

PKBS also provides coun-

selling and training for their clients to help them try to get their lives back on track by coaching them through job placements and offering vocational skills training that can help them earn money. Through PBKS, the community members can also get their welfare assistance or Br1M - by using the centre as a correspondence address – and even their identification papers if they need them.

In their outreach and Positive Living programmes, PBKS reaches out to sex workers, drug abuse victims and HIV/AIDS sufferers, among others, to help them get medical services and aid.

In fact, in the last seven years since its inception, the community-based centre has helped more than 35,200 Chow Kit residents.

"These are people who are currently down on their luck, not the scum of society," Mitch throws in.

Most of people who drop into the PBKS use the time to work on some handiwork like making hair bands, plastic flowers or beading

necklaces. On certain days, they can learn some living skills like cooking, baking and sewing from the volunteers at the centre.

Many of PBKS clients who have benefited from their programmes have become the centre's employees and volunteers themselves.

One is 54-year-old Kak Noor, a former sex worker who has been working at PBKS as a cook for three years now.

Before she got help from the centre, Kak Noor was living on the streets, but after she turned her life around, she has managed to rent a small room nearby.

When asked what she would do if PBKS shuts down, Kak Nor goes quiet, before continuing

stout-heartedly to prepare lunch for the PBKS clients; only her eyes betraying her fear of being forced on the streets again.

PBKS also employs another 16 staff who used to be sex workers and drug users, says Lalita.

They have been informed of the impending closure and asked to wait for confirmation on the last day of the year.

"We have received our termination letters and they have asked us to wait until Dec 31. Then we'll know if we can still come to work," says Sara who is part of the team running the transgender programmes.

With around three days left to the New Year, Seed Foundation has no choice but to resort to raising funds online through crowd sourcing at their page <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/help-save-the-pbks-drop-in-centre-in-chow-kit>

"We hope to raise around RM122,000 to sustain the centre temporarily for another six months while we look for a permanent source of funds," says Lalita, adding that the amount does not include the rental of the centre's three floors previously handled directly by the ministry.

"We can't afford this building. We'll have to relocate somewhere around Chow Kit," she adds.

Ironically, PBKS was initiated by the ministry. It was even, at

one point, a poster child for how a government ministry can collaborate with civil society. It is still a model for a community centre run by the community for the community.

According to Lalita, no real reason has been given for the government's decision to stop funding PBKS.

She adds, the ministry had told the Malaysian AIDS Council, who

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is disbursing the KPWKM funds, the decision was made because the ministry felt that the drop-in centre no longer fell under the ministry's "core business".

"The question is, what is your core business? Are we not the community?" argues Lalita.

At press time, the ministry could not be contacted for comments.

Sources, however, concede that this may be a political tiff between the Minister, Datuk Rohani Abdul Karim, and her predecessor Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil. Mitch does not refute the possibility that the PBKS might be a pawn in their party politicking game.

Wanita Umno chief Shahrizat meanwhile has been more forthcoming to the press and has reportedly appealed to her successor to reconsider, and continue its funding to the PBKS.

On whether this could be a backlash for the transgender controversy fired up by the extremist factions of the society after a group of transgender women won their case at the Court of Appeal

against the Negri Sembilan state government, Mitch again declines to comment.

(In a landmark decision, the Court of Appeal recently struck down the state's cross-dressing ban as unconstitutional. Section 66 of the Negri Sembilan Shariah Criminal Enactment 1992 punishes any Muslim man who "wears a woman's attire and poses as a woman" with a fine not exceeding RM1,000 or jail of not more than six months or both.)

PBKS has reportedly 1,345 registered transgender clients (compared to 2,664 women and 5,793 people with HIV/AIDS) while

transgender rights group Justice for Sisters (JFS) activists Nisha Ayub, who has been vocal about the issue, manages the PBKS' transgender programme which provides capacity-building training like grooming and hairstyling to empower transwomen.

Says Mitch, he hopes the issue will not be politicised, as PBKS serves the needs of hundreds of the most vulnerable living in the Chow Kit area, which is also the heart of our capital.

"We sincerely invite KPWKM Minister Datuk Rohani Abdul Karim to come and visit PBKS, and see the work we do at the centre and talk to our clients for herself, before making her decision.

"The crux of the matter is, this is their home and it is in danger of being taken away from them," says Mitch.

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The PBKS in Chow Kit faces closure due to the abrupt discontinuation of government funding after more than seven years of serving the marginalised community in the area.