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The Star - Include Caretakers In Budget 2018

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Include caretakers in Budget 2018

By NUR SYAHIDAH ABDUL JALIL

MANY Malaysians hope for better opportunities for self-sustained and peaceful living and are leaving their comments on the Budget 2018 official website.

Budget 2018 is categorised under 14 different themes. Even though all the themes are undeniably significant, in terms of inclusiveness, the "social welfare" theme is pivotal in thrusting our nation to a higher level in achieving developed nation status by 2020.

Under the social welfare theme, the disabled, disadvantaged elderly and poor are some of the targeted groups to be given assistance by special programmes.

On the website, many Malaysians have raised the importance of increasing the current allowance for targeted groups, to be commensurate with the cost of living. Others also have highlighted inadequate infrastructure for the group including education, rehabilitation centres, public transportation and job opportunities.

As special needs individuals, they should not be denied the opportunity to enjoy life peacefully, using the same infrastructure and most importantly, to be addressed with love and kindness.

Allah states in Surah al-Fath verse 17, "No sin is there upon the blind, nor is there sin upon the lame, nor is there sin upon the sick (that they

Looking after special needs individuals is a huge challenge, so support from the Government would be most welcome.

turn away from fighting in Allah's cause). And whosoever obeys Allah and His Messenger, He will admit him to Gardens (of Paradise) beneath (whose trees) rivers flow; and whosoever turns back, He will chastise him with a painful torment."

The verse proclaims that special needs groups are neither to be blamed (for their inadequacies) nor are they seen as a burden. Rather, they are to be treated with justice and kindness as the world is merely transient and a place of testing for man.

Their caretakers should not be taken for granted or overlooked either. They are the ones who sacrifice much just so they can fulfil the needs of the special needs individuals.

No longer are they able to earn their own livelihood as their full attention is given to their special needs dependents who may be bedridden, be aggressive to others or to themselves, be suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia, or require special care.

Indeed, it is extremely hard to find any special needs helper or special care centre to take over the responsibilities of the caretakers if they have to spend time to earn a living for their own survival.

In such cases, most caretakers are the next of kin to the special needs individuals. Once the caretakers bear the responsibility of caring for the special needs individuals, many choose to resign from their existing jobs.

Without any source of income, and when their savings are depleted, they will eventually face financial difficulties. Some may work from home but the conditions might not be suitable for each and every case.

In Islam, care and attention for special needs individuals are the responsibility of close family members or the next of kin, unless they are incapable of doing so or unless there are no relatives.

One of the *hadith* by Prophet Muhammad also stresses the responsibility of an individual towards his or her dependents, including family members. When one is incapable of caring for the special needs individual or in the absence of next of kin, the responsibility falls on society and the Government. In many countries, allocations are reserved for special needs individuals.

Malaysia provides allowances for special needs individuals, but none are allotted as "caretaker allowance".

Granted, caretakers may be assisted through other indirect means like tax exemption for income tax returns and special leave or time off during employment.

Such provisions are more suitable for those who are working. What provisions are offered for full-time caretakers?

In Britain, a carer allowance is disbursed for those who care for certain groups of individuals, including those with special needs. Caretakers need not be necessarily related to the special needs individual, but must fulfil several conditions like minimum age and minimum hours of care per week, and the allowance is disbursed on a weekly basis.

Such an initiative can be seen in three different ways. First, to give financial assistance to full-time caretakers so as to allow them to earn some income for themselves. Second, to create jobs for society, especially in looking after special needs individuals without next of kin. Third, to retain special needs individuals within society to live life like any other person, rather than in government care centres.

To come up with such a specific programme in Malaysia requires a

strong and good monitoring system so as to avoid any mismanagement, especially when it is related to special needs individuals who lack the powers of decision-making or justification.

The challenges faced by full-time caretakers for special needs individuals are immense. Not all caretakers succeed in the journey to give the assistance and love needed by their dependents.

Some may suffer from emotional adverse effects due to the lack of social support. Many such cases are played out in the global scenario of special needs individuals who are left abandoned by their own next of kin due to burden and stigma.

In such a case, blaming the next of kin-cum-caretakers alone would not overcome the problem. Most importantly, it's the much-needed assistance and support from the community and Government that will ease them of their huge responsibility.

Indeed, "inclusiveness" in a nation poses not only a challenge to our economy but also humanity. For the impending Malaysian 2018 Budget, we really hope to see a tremendous impact for all, especially the special needs group and their caretakers, for future betterment.

Nur Syahidah Abdul Jalil is a research officer with Iktim's Centre for Economics and Social Studies. The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.



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Ministry of Finance Malaysia
No. 5 Persiaran Perdana Presint 2,
Federal Government Administrative Centre,
62592 WP PUTRAJAYA



☎ 03-8000 8000

📅 03-88823893 / 03-88823894

✉ [pro\[at\]treasury\[dot\]gov\[dot\]my](mailto:pro[at]treasury[dot]gov[dot]my)



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