

Some seniors worry about alarm systems when the need arises

Neighbours of elderly couple found dead in Jurong flat fret over long wait for help

Andrew Wong

Alone at home on the eve of Chinese New Year in 2024, Madam Helen Teo slipped in the toilet in her rental studio flat in Jurong and hit her head.

When she noticed blood on the floor, the 74-year-old crawled to her mobile phone to call for an ambulance.

Madam Teo said that in the past, she would trigger the Alert Alarm System (AAS) installed in rental flats occupied by seniors at Block 338B Kang Ching Road.

By pulling a red cord, seniors are connected to a 24/7 hotline that responds to callers in distress, or to a nearby active ageing centre.

"I decided to call for an ambulance myself, as I know they will be able to react faster."

"So what if I pull the cord? Sometimes nobody responds or they might take too long," said Madam Teo, who said she did not want to wait for someone to check on her if she could call for help directly.

Fortunately, Madam Teo walked away from the fall with just superficial wounds to her head.

She lives in one of three studio apartments on the 10th floor. These units are rented out to seniors.

Madam Teo has lived alone since 2013. The Sunday Times visited her apartment on Feb 19.

It has one toilet, a storeroom, a small kitchen, a living room and one bedroom. Her block has 60 studio apartments over 20 floors equipped with the AAS.

ST spoke to more than 10 seniors living at Block 338B.

Three said they hope that the system installed in their Kang Ching Road units can be improved. Others have not used the AAS, or had no comments.

"They worry that help might not come soon enough when they are in trouble."

They said they became more concerned after their neighbours, who lived on the 18th floor, died.

In December 2024, police discovered the decomposing bodies of the elderly couple who lived by themselves.

Their remains were found after a neighbour raised the alert about a foul smell coming from the unit.

There are currently around 10,000 seniors in public rental housing with the AAS installed.

Four AAS pull cords are located around the flat, including in the toilet. Residents have access to an electronic panel behind the main door so that they can switch off the alarm in case of accidental activation.

The Housing Board was slated to expand the AAS to reach an additional 26,800 seniors in around 170 rental blocks islandwide from Ja-



Mr Chua Boon Gee and his wife Koh Poh Khim showing the pull cord next to the door connected to the Alert Alarm System, inside their flat at Block 338B Kang Ching Road. Madam Koh has heard the alarm go off about 10 times since moving there about six years ago and would check on the affected unit. ST PHOTOS: LIM WAHJUI



When the AAS is activated, the affected unit number will start blinking on an electronic board at the lift lobby. A siren on the first floor will also be triggered.



Residents have access to an electronic panel behind the main door to switch off the alarm in case of accidental activation.

nuary 2025.

Installations are expected to take five years to complete. The improved system will see the addition of buttons placed around the home for emergencies.

Madam Nancy Lam, 70, said the AAS should be connected to phones.

"They should have phones attached to this system so that if we trigger the alarm, they can quickly call back to see if we need help," she added.

Madam Teo said it is important for seniors to know that there is someone on the other side of the alarm system.

"I also feel that it is important to have someone we can call, so we

know that there is someone out there who cares and shows concern for us still," she added.

The AAS is fitted in 100 studio apartments in Block 338B and 339B in Kang Ching Road. It is connected to the Thye Hua Kwan (THK) Moral Charities active ageing centre at the foot of Block 337, about 100m away.

Aside from offering active ageing activities, therapy and other care services, the centre monitors and responds when the AAS is triggered.

Ms Tracey Tham, lead centre manager at THK Moral Charities, said the Kang Ching Road centre, which serves 97 units, is alerted when senior residents in the two

blocks pull the cord.

THK staff say a board in their office displays the unit numbers of the flats fitted with the AAS.

When the cord is pulled, lights flash on the board to indicate the affected unit.

Ms Tham said that if a call happens during the centre's opening hours, staff there will immediately call the senior in the affected unit to verify if it is a real call for help or a false alarm.

Staff or volunteers will also visit the unit if the senior is uncontactable. But Ms Tham said there have been occasions when the system malfunctioned and the centre was not alerted.

She confirmed there have been

cases of sensor failures, power outages and software glitches, but added that they rarely happen.

"We have seen occasions when the system was not activated in the centre due to technical issues or faults, which only surfaced during the routine scheduled maintenance by the vendor," she said.

She said THK gets vendors to perform regular maintenance and inspections.

Madam Teo said the AAS in her flat is not doing its job. She demonstrated by triggering the alarm four times on Feb 19 between 1pm and 1.30pm.

Her unit number started blinking on an electronic board located at the lift lobby of every storey. A si-

ren - located on the first storey - was also triggered.

A light on top of her front door also started flashing to alert neighbours.

Madam Teo kept the alarm on for about 30 seconds each time. Nobody came to the flat.

Employees at THK said the AAS is manned by volunteers and staff at the active ageing centre at Block 337.

Ms Tham said that it is up to the public and other residents to help the seniors outside of the active ageing centre's opening hours.

This can help in situations where there could be no response as the alarm goes unnoticed, she added.

Residents said it is often their neighbours who respond to the alarm.

Mr Lim Chwee Guan, 78, said he had previously used the AAS when he needed assistance. He did not elaborate on what triggered him to pull the cord. He moved in nearly two decades ago.

"At that time, the response was very good and almost immediate. They used to check on us or get in touch with us almost immediately after we pulled the alarm," said Mr Lim.

But the response time is now slower, he lamented.

He told ST that sometimes, residents get a response in the form of visits from volunteers or THK employees about three to four hours after they trigger the alarm.

"We rely mostly on our neighbours here, not on these systems. Those who are lucky have good neighbours, and they will help you and check on you. If not, nobody will come to help you," he said.

It was Mr Lim who alerted the police to the strange smell which led to the discovery of the bodies of his 18th-floor neighbours, Mr Lim Eng Keong, 71, and Madam Mary Ong, 67.

Madam Koh Poh Khim, 66, who lives at Block 338B with her husband, Mr Chua Boon Gee, 65, said she has heard the alarm go off about 10 times since moving to Kang Ching Road about six years ago.

She told ST that when she hears them, she would check on the affected unit to see if help is needed.

"We are quite close to our neighbours because they are older folk, so we try to look out for them to see if we can help," she said.

Mr Chua added that beyond the AAS, the authorities can explore using more advanced technology such as motion sensors to detect movements in the home.

This is already being implemented by social service organisations such as Lions Befrienders, which uses advanced technology such as motion sensors and mobile apps to keep track of seniors at home.

"If you put sensors in their homes, maybe the agencies or authorities can pick up if an elderly has not been moving for some time," said Mr Chua.

"This could allow them to respond quicker by sending someone down to check on the person."

In the meantime, Madam Teo said she has gone old school.

She leaves her door open in the day so her neighbours who walk past can look in or check on her.

"Most of us close our doors only at night when we are sleeping. This way, we can at least look into each other's house and check on each other."

"We can also call for help if we see anything amiss," she said.

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Summary translation of news coverage

Some seniors worry about alarm systems when the need arises

Currently, around 10,000 seniors in public rental housing have the Alarm Alert System (AAS) installed, with four pull cords located around the flat, including in the toilet, and an electronic panel behind the main door to switch off the alarm if accidentally activated. Starting January 2025, the Housing Board plans to expand the AAS to reach an additional 26,800 seniors in approximately 170 rental blocks islandwide, with installations expected to take five years. The improved system will include emergency buttons placed around the home.

The AAS is fitted in 100 studio apartments in Block 338B and 339B in Kang Ching Road. It is connected to the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities' (THKMC) active ageing centre at the foot of Block 337, about 100m away. Aside from offering active ageing activities, therapy and other care services, the centre monitors and responds when the AAS is triggered.

Tracey Tham, lead centre manager at THKMC, said the active ageing centre, which serves 97 units, is alerted when senior residents in the two blocks pull the cord. Staff say a board in their office displays the unit numbers of the flats fitted with the AAS. When the cord is pulled, lights flash on the board to indicate the affected unit. Ms Tham said that if a call happens during the centre's opening hours, staff there will immediately call the senior in the affected unit to verify if it is a real call for help or a false alarm. Staff or volunteers will also visit the unit if the senior is uncontactable. The public and other residents help the seniors outside of the active ageing centre's opening hours. There may be occasions when the system is not activated due to sensor failures, power outages, and software glitches, but these rarely happen. This may only surface during the routine scheduled maintenance by the vendor.

In the article, residents suggested installing sensors in homes to detect inactivity, enabling quicker responses from agencies or authorities. Meanwhile, another resident prefers a traditional approach, leaving her door open during the day so neighbours can check on her, and only closing it at night. This allows residents to look into each other's homes and call for help to check if there is anything unusual.