

CAP: Incorporate suicide prevention in MCO plans

GEORGE TOWN: The government needs to incorporate suicide prevention in the Movement Control Order (MCO) plans, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) said today.

Expressing concern over the escalating cases, CAP president Mohideen Abdul Kader said the reported suicide figures were just the tip of the iceberg.

He said, as such, the government needed to incorporate suicide prevention in its MCO plans.

According to the Health Ministry, between March 19 and Oct 30 last year, some 266 people took their own lives while there were 1,080 suicide attempts.

Government agencies were flooded with a total of 145,175 distress calls between March 25 last year and May 20 this year.

A breakdown showed that 85.5 per cent of the calls were related to mental health issues requiring emotional support and counselling pertaining to acute stress, anxiety, depression, abuse, and suicidal behaviour.

About 25 per cent of these cases were attributed to debts; 24 per cent to family problems; and 23 per cent to marriage problems that affected their mental health.

"Never has Malaysians witnessed the despair of so many jobless, hungry and homeless people, having to depend on soup kitchens for their meals. According to the Department of Statistics, as of February this year, there were 777,500 Malaysians unemployed.

"Such a situation causes despair and hopelessness besides the feeling of loneliness during the pandemic that has driven people into suicidal tendencies.

"Such a worrying trend is the consequence of the various forms of MCO since the start of the pandemic last year," he said today.

Besides the effects of isolation, Mohideen said, the majority of Malaysians were left to survive on their own since businesses and jobs were badly affected by the MCO.

He said there was little financial aid reaching those in need during the current MCO.

He added that Prihatin Rakyat 1.0 was announced in March 2020 and Prihatin Rakyat 2.0 in January this year. The RM40 billion Pemerkasa Plus financial aid package for MCO 3.0 was insufficient considering that some of whom have already depleted their life savings and are jobless.

"As such, CAP proposes a multi-prong approach to the problem. The government should coordinate in compiling a comprehensive list of counselling hotlines of government agencies and NGOs such as Befrienders.

"The list can be sent as viral messages in different languages through social media. It is because, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC)'s 2020 report, the frequency Malaysians share online contents is astounding: 19.2 per cent on a daily basis; 49.1 per cent on a weekly basis; and 18.9 per cent on a monthly basis.

"The government should also try to involve psychologists to assist or advise during this pandemic. Malaysia is grossly lacking psychologists as the Malaysia's Mental Health Advisory Council revealed that there is only one clinical psychologist to every 980,000 of the population.

"Government ministries and their agencies should proactively work together with NGOs in preventing suicides," he said.

Mohideen said the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM); Ministry of Education (MOE); Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE); and Ministry of Youth and Sports should use their machineries and contacts to facilitate counselling or help people under their respective portfolios.

"For example, MOE and MOHE can engage the participation of teachers to counsel students who are distressed or put them through to appropriate counsellors because students are more likely to trust their teachers than a stranger.

"Also, economists are needed to input creative ideas on how to stimulate the local economy. One proposal is for the government to create online platforms for job seekers and the marketing of food/products since people are home-bound during MCO. Such marketing platforms may help to promote local businesses.

"Currently, a sizable amount of online transactions involve overseas purchases and this means draining our Ringgit from the country while local businesses are competing for whatever market share remains," he said, adding that the people should take the initiative to visit Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM)'s website such as <https://www.bnm.gov.my/covid19> for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to see how they can seek assistance.

For individuals, they can seek advice about restructuring their debt from the Credit Counselling and Debt Management Agency, commonly known as Agensi Kaunseling dan Pengurusan Kredit (AKPK) at <https://www.akpk.org.my/about-us>

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Similarly, Mohideen said government agencies should also work with various NGOs that either provide dry rations or operate soup kitchens for the homeless and the poor.

He added that some of the food could be obtained from the existing food banks and NGOs could assist in food distribution to needy families.

Many of these NGOs, he noted, have invaluable grassroot contacts that they have been working with, some for decades, or through their own contacts.

"The government does not need to reinvent the wheel.

"Finally, the government should also re-look at the entire National Recovery Plan (NRP) because Malaysia has been holding onto the belief that we can develop herd immunity if 80 per cent of the population is vaccinated. The 80 per cent is just an estimation by scientists.

"Although it would be good to achieve that for individual protection, it appears now that 'herd immunity' may not even be possible based on three factors: emergence of new variants, waning immunity and whether vaccines can actually prevent transmission," he said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that "the percentage of people who need to be immune in order to achieve herd immunity varies with each disease".

To achieve herd immunity against measles requires about 95 per cent of a population to be vaccinated; polio, about 80 per cent; and Covid-19, unknown.

'Herd immunity' was cautioned by Nature in its March 18 issue that it might elude scientists' expectation.

According to Mohideen, the government should be pragmatic in its approach.

"Speed up the vaccination process as of June 28, only 15.96 per cent of the population received the first dose and 6.22 per cent the second dose. At this rate, it is impeding an early achievement of protecting the people through vaccination (even if it is not for herd immunity), without which the people will remain unprotected.

"The government having known that at least 25 per cent of the suicide attempts are debt-related, it should not allow community credit companies or money lenders registered under the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT) to operate during phase one of the MCO.

"Such a decision is not a solution as it will drive people deeper into debt.

"As such, we call upon the government to effectively help to bring suicide rate down since it is known that it is the resulted of an economic plight during the current pandemic," he added.

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/07/704026/cap-incorporate-suicide-prevention-mco-plans>