Pedestrian crossings with kerbs, narrow walkways, open drains can be improved

BY LEE HUI CHIEH & THERESA TAN

UNDERGRADUATE Liew Chong Choon, 21, hardly goes out without his parents.

He suffers from spinal muscular atrophy, a condition where muscles weaken and waste away, and is wheelchair-bound. His younger brother, 20, has the same problem.

Their father ferries both brothers to school at the Singapore Management University (SMU) and back home. Other than that, and the occasional meal out with his family, Mr Liew is usually home-bound.

Cabs are too costly and buses are out of reach, for now.

The MRT, with its lifts and ramps, is now somewhat wheelchair-accessible, but the near-est station, Choa Chu Kang, is a 15-minute walk from home.

Even if he could get to an MRT station, Mr Liew would face another problem: The gap between the platform and the train. Mr Liew’s wheelchair got stuck in that gap on his first and possibly last trip on the train last year.

His dad pushed the wheelchair out, but the undergraduate confessed he is “scared that the doors will close on me and the MRT will move off.”

Getting around is one thing. But even if he could get to places like Orchard Road and Chinatown, roadblocks are rampant. Moving from one building to another, for example, is difficult, because of stairs or other barriers such as kerbs.

He said: “I yearn to go out, but all these hassles add up, so I think it’s better if I just stay at home.”

Singapore is much more accessible now compared to about five years ago as newer buildings have entrance ramps, special toilets and other amenities for the handicapped, say the disabled and those who work with them.

But there is still much room for improvement, they add, especially in links between buildings and public transport.

Their bugbears include pedestrian crossings with kerbs, walkways that are too narrow for a wheelchair-bound person to pass through or are obstructed by fire hydrants, open drains and gratings with wide gaps.

Said Ms Judy Wee, vice-president of the Handicaps Welfare Association, who uses a wheelchair: “I’ve flown off my wheelchair when the small front wheels of my wheelchair got caught in drain gratings.”

The authorities are taking steps to rectify obstacles to make Singapore more accessible to its growing elderly population, who may have trouble walking as they age.

The Government announced last week it will spend $60 million over the next three to four years to upgrade road facilities and another $21 million to make public buses wheelchair-accessible over the next 17 years.

Since 1991, footpaths have to be at least 1.2m wide, while kerbs at traffic junctions have been lowered to a 2.5cm drop.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) said most footpaths here are already at least 1m wide — wide enough for a wheelchair user. Where they are narrower, the LTA said it is “exploring various options to overcome obstructions to provide the minimum width, where possible”.

As part of the upgrade, the LTA will also do away with the 2.5cm drop of the kerb and put in a kerb-cut ramp — a gentle slope that is flush with the road surface. Ramps will also be installed to connect bus interchanges to adjacent buildings.

Of about 450 pedestrian overhead bridges islandwide, about 75 built since 1999 have steps that are wider by 5cm and lower by 2.5cm. Steps with a bigger floor space and smaller gaps between steps are generally easier for seniors to use.

Eight polyclinics under public health group SingHealth will also implement more elderly-friendly measures by August. This includes fitting all toilet cubicles with grab bars and support rails, among other things.

Priority queue numbers will also be given to those aged above 80, as well as those who are frail and are using wheelchairs or walking aids.

Meanwhile, newer buildings are fairly accessible, as all buildings built since 1990 are required to have basic facilities that cater to the disabled and elderly under the Code of Barrier-Free Accessibility in Buildings.

However, older housing estates present problems.

For example, the entrances to some flats are a step higher than the common corridor and wheelchair users may find it hard to get into the flat, said Dr Mary-Ann Tsao, chief executive officer of the Tsao Foundation, which runs home medical and care management services for the elderly.

She said: “These are the little things that unless we face, we don’t realise how big a problem they can be.”

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