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# \$20m network to help aged beat the cold

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Plans are under way to put in place a \$20 million support network for the elderly by next month before the cold weather arrives.

The network – pledged by Governor Chris Patten in his Policy Speech just two weeks ago – targets 80,000 old people living alone in public estates.

Efforts will also be made to assist elderly people living in other types of accommodation.

The new Director of Social Welfare, Andrew Leung Kin-pong, said yesterday he would get the network ready as early as next month, even if it meant deploying social workers.

“We’re recruiting a team of social workers to co-ordinate work with voluntary groups,” Mr Leung said.

“More needy people will be located by referrals and visits and information about them will be stored in the computer system,” he added.

The cold snap last winter killed more than 100 aged, many of whom were living alone.

The new director visited 77-year-old Soo Ung in Ap Lei Chau Estate and toured a centre for the aged in Aberdeen yesterday, two weeks after his appointment.

Ms Soo, who had been living in a squatter area in Wong Chuk Hang until July, said she rarely used facilities provided by such centres.

“I can’t walk very well, although some social workers tried to put me on the membership list,” she said.

Mr Leung said he was particularly concerned about finding volunteers to work in the support network.

The approach of the cold was partly the reason for the urgent launch of the project, which he hoped would result in more home-help teams being set up to provide cooking, escorts or visits to the elderly.

He added that many people, including housewives and fit elderly, had been recruited as volunteers.

However, social workers said the new project was not adequate for solving the problems of old people living alone.

“The Government will only co-ordinate existing resources. It is unlikely the aged will get the extra services they lacked in the past,” said Iman Fok Tin-man of the Society for Community Organisation.

He said the Social Welfare Department had been visiting elderly people to offer them a free telephone line.