

Robo-bear for elderly?

It is one of five new gadgets getting MCYS funding to be tested

■ BY MELISSA SIM

RETIREE Jessie Leong, 68, is excited at the prospect of getting a small stuffed bear, which she plans to display in her Tampines studio flat.

But this is not an ordinary toy.

It is actually a robot that can detect smoke or gas leaks, tell if someone has fallen down and send emergency text messages.

Madam Leong, who had a fall inside her home a few years back, might soon get a prototype of the bear, called the Multi-purpose Elderly Care Robot.

The invention is one of five gadgets that have been awarded a total of \$500,000 by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

The money, which was awarded under the Silver Community Test-Bed Programme launched in January this year, will be used to test the products and bring them to market.

These five winning gadgets were selected from a field of 16 applications. The proposals were focused on home safety, health monitoring and communication for the elderly, among other things.

Some of the other products that will receive funding include the ADT Care Alert, an alarm which connects the elderly to a trained operator at the push of a button.

Another recipient was the InTouch platform. It has a screen which allows the elderly to send messages to friends and family simply by writing on the screen, and then dragging the text to a picture of the recipient.

All five products will be tested by families in 26 selected HDB flats in Tampines, Bishan and Toa Payoh.

The development and testing will take place over six months to a year,



Mr Tony Thong, 81, and his wife Jessie Leong, 68, may soon get to try out the robotic bear that can detect smoke or gas leaks, among other things. FRANCIS ONG/THE STRAITS TIMES

after which the product could be launched.

A second call for proposals will start next month. A panel will be on the lookout for products and services that meet the day-to-day needs of the elderly.

Ms Chong Siak Ching, chairman of the Silver Community Test-Bed Programme Evaluation Panel, said the market for such products will grow over the next 20 years as the population ages.

Within two decades, more than 30 per cent of the population will be

above 60 years old, she said.

Many elderly folk, though, are concerned about how they will be able to afford the gizmos. Madam Leong said she would not go for a product that was expensive to maintain.

She was, however, interested in something that would require only a one-time payment, such as the robot.

But its estimated \$3,000 price tag was not so attractive. "If it was about \$1,000, I would not have to think twice about buying it," she said.

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