



FAMILY FRONTIERS

Persatuan Kebajikan Sokongan Keluarga Selangor & KL (PPM-011-10-24072020)

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Enduring Old Age and Health Challenges Amidst Residency Struggles as a Binational Malaysian Couple

The journey up the stairs of the Immigration Department was a yearly affair for both Carrie* (pseudonym given to protect her identity) and her non-Malaysian husband. For many, the process of visa renewals and the uncertainty surrounding their ability to remain in the country brings emotional stress and anxiety. However, for the elderly couple, it also brought physical discomfort and pain.

Carrie* is a 65 year-old Malaysian woman married to a non-Malaysian man. They moved back to Malaysia in 2011 due to her autoimmune disease that makes it difficult for Carrie* to withstand winter and cold conditions. When they first arrived, her husband qualified for a five-year spouse visa, which was then discontinued since the COVID-19 pandemic. Following that, he was only given a one year spouse which had to be renewed every year.

This situation is very challenging for both of them because Carrie* is a person with disabilities (OKU). Each trip to the immigration office is an emotional ordeal, and she experiences excruciating pain. Despite being given a priority number due to her status as an OKU and an elderly person, the wait is still long. She struggles with the process, having to stand and sit repeatedly in long queues. Her husband, who has heart complications and has been involved in an accident, cannot physically assist Carrie* during these visits and would face similar health challenges. When dealing with immigration, Carrie* was sometimes required to provide additional documents beyond the initial checklist, which was very difficult due to her excruciating pain.

Carrie* was anxious about her husband's future, especially if she passes away before him. He moved to Malaysia to be with her, leaving everything behind in his home country and has been living here for 13 years. He has friends and a community in Malaysia, and Carrie* has been in and out of the hospital.

"Look at my legs, I have difficulty walking, please have mercy on us. He has been here for over ten years."

That was the sentence she had to utter for her husband to be offered an alternative option to remain in Malaysia: a Residence Pass. Fortunately, their application was successful, allowing her husband to stay in Malaysia for longer. However, since her husband's passport would expire in two and a half years, the Residence Pass was only granted for that duration. Despite this, Carrie* still had to pay the full five-year fee, as there is no option to prorate it. She was also given a form to renew the Residence Pass for another 2.5 years, which may involve separate fees.

Carrie* is currently in the process of applying for PR for her husband, knowing it could take years for a decision. Until then, she faces ongoing uncertainty and instability, highlighting the need for immigration policies to become consistent with concise and accurate instructions, so that everyone, including those impacted by health issues and disabilities, are able to navigate them easily.

Carrie* is not an isolated case. Many elderly binational families struggle with the emotional and physical toll due to immigration procedures, underscoring the need for more compassionate and accessible policies. Their ordeal, marked by long waits, added stress, and the burden of uncertainty, reveals the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and health complications navigating bureaucratic processes.

What has been done and can be done?

As a solution to this, special counters or priority queues should be provided to better facilitate individuals with disabilities, elderly, including expectant mothers and those with young children while accessing immigration facilities. Measures should be in place to ensure expedited processing and dedicated assistance for these groups to minimize wait times and enhance accessibility, without having to wait long or stand in crowded lines. In return, this reduces the physical and mental strain they may face while dealing with immigration procedures.

Family Frontiers welcomes the Ministry of Home Affairs' recent decision to allow non-citizen spouses who are married for three years and hold spouse visas of at least one year to apply for PR, along with the expedited six-month processing time. This is a significant step in addressing challenges faced by new applicants. However, it is equally important to support those like Carrie* and her husband who are already in the system. Many of these spouses remain stuck in limbo, unable to work or plan their futures due to the long processing times and the uncertainty it brings.

A key step forward is ensuring that applicants receive clear explanations when their PR applications are rejected. This would help them understand the reasons for refusal and improve their chances in future applications. A transparent appeals process, with clear guidelines on areas for improvement and required documents, would also prevent applicants from being left in limbo. Additionally, accessible follow-up channels would provide much-needed clarity, reducing the frustration of reapplying without knowing what needs to be addressed.

It is vital that binational families are recognized as an integral part of their Malaysian families, not as outsiders but as loved ones, parents, and spouses who share the same hopes and dreams for this nation. Their ability to contribute meaningfully to society should be nurtured, not hindered, and they deserve the security and dignity that come with being embraced as part of the Malaysian community. A truly inclusive Malaysia is one that values and upholds the bonds of family, ensuring that every spouse and child feels a sense of belonging and a future they can build with hope and confidence.

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