

Welfare card: Chaos reigns

The government distributed welfare cards to low-income earners last month with no clear instructions on how to use them and seemingly few benefits.



One of the controversial government welfare cards. (Photo: Somchai Poomlard)

Since last month, all registered low-income earners in Thailand were issued a state-subsidised welfare card to help ease the burden of everyday expenses. The card promises to cover basic needs costs, from groceries to transportation and cooking gas.

While the concept looks to be able to lend a big hand to the poor, worry looms as people are still confused by the card's conditions and usage.

"I've had my welfare card for nearly a month now, but I haven't used it at all," says 61-year-old Eed*, her disappointment with the government scheme clearly marked.

Under the scheme, the government transfers 200-300 baht a month to each welfare smart card. Recipients earning under 30,000 baht a year get a monthly allowance of 300 baht and those with annual earnings of 30,000 baht to 100,000 baht receive 200 baht a month to buy low-priced consumer products at Thong Fah Pracharat shops and other designated stores.

Each cardholder also receives 1,500 baht a month for subsidised transportation, breaking down into 500 baht for inter-provincial public buses, 500 baht for third-class trains, and 500 baht local public buses and electric trains.

Despite all these benefits, the lack of information surrounding the card system, poor implementation and lack of practicality make it impossible for many cardholders, including Eed, to benefit from the scheme, she explains.

But how effective is this government's subsidy measure really? Life talked to two cardholders, who share their experience.

Eed manages a small convenience shop -- a roughly built hut filled with water and soda bottles, and a few soap bars -- located deep in a soi near Bangkok's Rama VII bridge. Although she earns up to 3,000 or 4,000 baht per month, nearly all of her income goes into her shop's rental fee. Each month, she is left with less than 1,000 baht to cover rent for her room and daily expenses.

With the new welfare card, she is entitled to 300 baht of groceries available at designated Thong Fah Pracharat stores. Still, she hasn't been there yet, preferring to buy items at the local market or mall.

"I just don't know where these Thong Fah shops are located. Nobody told us anything," she explains. "All we know is through word of mouth, neighbours and friends who have been there once or twice."

According to one such neighbour, a som tam vendor who frequently visits her, many cardholders in the neighbourhood have been going to the Thong Fah stores in Kasemrat or Bang Sri Muang, both of which are far away from Eed's home.

The shops also are situated on sub-sois and larger sois rather than main roads and cannot be accessed directly using public transportation.

While she may get near the store by bus, on the way back, she must call a taxi or tuk tuk to drive her home, due to the amount of groceries she is carrying.

While she would receive 300 baht of items, she would also have to spend the same amount on cab fares.

"I'm over 60 but still healthy. But how exactly does the government expect elderly and disabled people to shop there?" Eed asks.

Why there are so few Thong Fah Pracharat stores mystifies her -- about 20,000 nationwide, hardly enough to serve all 75,000 villages and 2,000 municipal areas in the country.

"Why can't more stores take part in the scheme? We could go there in groups of three or four and share the taxi," she adds.

"At the moment, nobody wants to go with me to a shop that's located so far away from home. Everyone is concerned about the travel expenses."

More and more people have become wary of the Thong Fah shops, she says, since several cards holders have complained that the store is not fully stocked and that there is a shortage of items.

While Eed doesn't want to travel so far and come back empty-handed, she cannot benefit from the subsidy scheme.

Noo*, an 80-year-old retired worker, received his welfare card a week ago. As soon as he had his card in hand, he decided to go explore the closest Thong Fah store in Bangkok's Pracha Chuen area.

"You can't imagine how disappointed I was," he exclaims. "It's tiny and very crowded," he says, pointing to Eed's shack as he tried to give an idea of the shop's size.

Noo soon discovered that many of the items on sale were more expensive than in regular stores. While a bag of rice usually costs 150 baht, the Thong Fah Pracharat store sells it for 200 baht. The laundry detergent he regularly buys for 40 baht cost him 69 baht with the welfare card.

"To whom can I complain?" he asks. "I still use the card to buy commodities, it's better than nothing. But if I exceed the 300 baht I'm allowed to have, I need to top up with my own money."

Noo has a monthly income of about 2,500 baht, including the allowance he receives from the government's scheme for the elderly and a little stipend from his son. Still, he finds himself fortunate not having to pay any rent.

The store sells a little bit of everything -- rice, sugar, eggs, fish sauce and oil, you name it -- but all come in small-sized bags and bottles, Noo says, which isn't very economical for the buyer.

Furthermore buyers who come in after noon are in for a surprise, he adds. The shelves are often empty, as there is not enough stock.

Since the start of the month, public transportation systems such as trains and Bangkok Mass Transit Authority (BMTA) buses have in theory been equipped with electronic readers that scan low-income earners' welfare cards.

Each cardholder is entitled to 500 baht of bus rides and 500 baht of train rides per month. The scanner deducts the fee from the card every time the service is used. In practice, however, the process isn't as smooth.

"Every day on television, I hear that BMTA buses are free for welfare cardholders," Eed says.

However, when she tried to get on a BMTA bus -- No.50 -- the controller told her that the card only works with red buses -- several of which were previously free buses. The next day, she woke up at 4am to go to the market and waited for a red bus as instructed. Once she hopped on the vehicle, she was told that the machine doesn't operate at night.

She had to pay a reduced fee after showing her identity card to prove that she is over 60 years old and therefore entitled to a discount.

Noo had a similar experience, only in his case, the machine wasn't working yet.

According to the transport ministry, 600 buses with stickers indicating that they are free for cardholders are now circulating in Bangkok. One hundred of these buses are equipped with card-reading machines. On 250 other buses, controllers can scan the cards with their phones while on the remaining 250, free paper tickets must be issued.

"If the system works correctly, that would be perfect," Noo said. "But for the moment, it's chaotic."

While Noo and Eed don't regularly take the train, they both were deeply confused when they saw a news report showing masses of people queuing to scan their cards and get a free ticket at Hua Lamphong station.

If authorities don't increase the number of scanning machines, they're in for a nightmare during the new year or Songkran holidays, Eed adds, when many workers living in Bangkok will return to their hometowns and visit their families.

Since she makes no use of the 500 baht dedicated to train expenses on her card, Eed is disappointed that she cannot be given the amount in other forms. The same goes for the unused bus rides or leftover money from groceries purchase, which cannot be withdrawn or transferred to the next month.

"Is it our fault, that the shops and card-reading machines aren't convenient? Yet we are losing our benefits and rights every month with this system."

Earlier this year, Eed received 1,500 baht from the government as part of another subsidy scheme to help the poor.

"I think that's much more practical," she says. "It's not so much that I want cash or a lot of it, but this way, I can use it in ways that suit my lifestyle. And so can everybody else."

The scheme doesn't target low-income earners' actual needs, says Somchai Jitsuchon, a researcher at the Thailand Research and Development centre.

"Authorities must start anew and find the real low-income earners and give them money that they can spend in the way they see fit," he said.

Authorities and the middle-class don't trust low-income earners to be responsible with this money, which is why they came up with this card system. However, the scheme in its current form is restricting and not adaptable to the country's diverse population.

"How will hilltribe people who live in remote areas go to the Thong Fah store?"

* Real names withheld.



A woman buys a train ticket at Hua Lamphong station using her welfare card. Photo: Worrapon Phayakum

(Bron: *Bangkok Post*, 7 november)