

Ren Ci revives charity show to boost funds

To avoid dipping into its reserves, it needs to raise \$10 million more

BY THERESA TAN

THE Ren Ci Hospital and Medicare Centre, which could end the financial year \$10 million in the red, is reviving its TV fund-raiser next month to improve its finances.

The Jan 24 show – minus the daredevil stunts – will be the charity's first since 2007, when news broke that the authorities were looking into financial irregularities.

The probe ended last month with Ren Ci's former chief, Buddhist monk Ming Yi, being sentenced to 10 months' jail for misappropriating \$50,000 and lying to the Commissioner of Charities.

But the case is not over, as Ming Yi is appealing against his conviction and jail term.

Before the scandal, Ren Ci collected \$16 million in donations in its 2006 financial year, but donations have since dried up.

In its last financial year, which ended in March, it collected \$3.1 million.

The charity needs \$30 million this financial year to run its community hospital and other services.

After deducting the fees it collects from patients and funding from the Health Ministry, it will still need to raise about \$10 million before the end of the financial year this coming March.

If it fails to do so, it will have to dip into its reserves of \$22 million.

At a press conference yesterday, hospital chairman Chua Thian Poh said the \$22 million would last just slightly over two years without any fund-raising.

The charity's money woes have been made worse by the double whammy of

plunging donations and rising operating costs.

With the opening of its new community hospital, located next to Tan Tock Seng Hospital, in December last year, Ren Ci now has 661 beds in three locations, almost quadruple the 174 beds with which it started when Ming Yi set it up in 1994.

The TV fund-raiser was its biggest money-spinner, with each of the last two shows, featuring daring stunts by Ming Yi, raking in more than \$7 million.

But the stunts also attracted criticism, with viewers accusing the charity of getting artists to carry out dangerous stunts – resulting in some injuries – to pull in donations.

For the upcoming show next month, the charity has decided to rely on "song, dance and talk" items.

Mr Seow Choke Meng, the charity's vice-chairman, said of the decision not to include stunts: "It's a charity show, why bring more agony to the performers?"

The 3½-hour show on Channel U will feature MediaCorp artists such as Zoe Tay, Chen Hanwei and Michelle Chong.

Ren Ci hopes to raise \$4 million from the show, but declined to say how much it would cost to stage it.

Mr Chua said the charity was "very cautious" about expenses and would stick to a fund-raising rule stating that charities cannot spend more than 30 per cent of the donations they collect on fund-raising expenses in a year.

Mr Seow added that the charity hoped to use the show to "rebrand" itself and to tell the public about how it has expanded from caring for the chronically ill to providing a higher level of medical care as a community hospital.

Its other vice-chairman, Dr James Khoo, said: "Our previous chief executive made one mistake and is paying for it, and we ask for your compassion to forgive that and use that compassion to help us raise funds for our patients."

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Taking part in the Jan 24 show will be (back row, from left) Kym Ng, Michelle Chia and Constance Song, together with (front, from left) Desmond Koh, Zoe Tay, Guo Liang and Michelle Chong. The event will be minus the controversial, daring stunts of previous years. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Bleak year for charities but economic upturn is good news

BY MELISSA SIM

A NUMBER of charities have seen a drop in donations this year, with many dipping into their reserves to keep their programmes running.

Five of 10 charities interviewed by The Straits Times said their takings had dropped – some by nearly a third.

This was largely due to the economic crisis, which has also resulted in more people turning to charities for help – further increasing the financial burden.

Expecting a bleak year, many had lowered their fund-raising targets. But they still missed the mark.

The Salvation Army, for example, raised \$6.6 million last year, but had lowered its sights this year to \$5.8 million.

However, the charity's director of public relations, Mr Gregory Lee, said it had probably still missed the target by some \$200,000 to \$300,000.

He said the charity would have to dip into its reserves, and delay spending on

office equipment and vehicles which need to be upgraded or replaced.

The National Kidney Foundation is another charity that has had to tap its reserves, after incurring a deficit of \$845,000.

Chairman Gerard Ee said that more people losing their jobs this year because of the recession had led to a drop in automated monthly deductions from people's pay cheques.

The NKF raised \$18.5 million in the last financial year, which ended in June this year, down from \$25 million raised the year before.

For other groups, takings fell because they scaled back fund-raising activities.

Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society did not hold a fund-raising TV show – which can raise over \$3 million – as it did not think the show would make enough money to justify the cost of hosting it. But it was still able to meet operating costs and did not have to dip into its reserves.

With the economy picking up towards

the end of the year, some charities were optimistic about ending the year with a not-so-unhealthy balance sheet.

Singapore Children's Society executive director Alfred Tan said the charity's income was down by almost 20 per cent in the first six months of the year compared to last year.

"However, with an improving economy, we expect to end this year with the same income as 2008," he said.

The situation was the same for the Children's Cancer Foundation, which saw an upswing in July. "We struggled for the first half of the year," said executive director Chee Wai Yee.

Organising chairman of the Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund, Mr Peter Khoo, said the fund had a chance of doing better than it did last year, when \$4.4 million was raised. Unlike charities which lowered their fund-raising targets, his went up to \$5.7 million this year.

"We have never seen more poor children needing help," said Mr Khoo. The fund is helping about 12,500 children this year, more than the expected 11,000.

Mr Khoo foresees dipping into its \$9 million reserves to make up a \$1 million shortfall by year-end. He said: "Hopefully, the improving economy will stem the rise in the number of needy children too."