

Speech by Second Minister for Manpower Josephine Teo
At the SafeYouth@ Work Dialogue
at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre
on Tuesday, 5 September 2017

Ms Nancy Leppink, Chief of the Labour Administration, Labour Inspection, Occupational Safety and Health Branch (ILO)

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to the SafeYouth@ Work Dialogue of the XXI World Congress on Safety and Health at Work.

2 For the first time since the Congress has been organised, we have a dedicated segment focusing on youths. Singapore very much welcomes this special arrangement because youths can do much to help develop safer and healthier workplaces. It is not yet a big gathering – just about 120 youth participants, compared to the more than 3000 delegates at the Congress.

3 But they represent a diverse collection of nearly 30 countries and went through a stringent selection process by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Among other things, they had to articulate why you want to be part of this Congress. For example, Raden Wirano from Singapore said “I hope not only to spread the message of the importance of safety to my peers and family, but cultivate the love of life through practicing safety at work, at home and even on the road.” Stephanie Claus from the United States shared “I believe that if we teach young workers today safe working practices, we can end the cycle of unsafe working behaviors and decrease the amount of workplace deaths every year”.

4 It gives me a great sense of hope that the Youth Congress participants such as Raden and Stephanie are confident and eager to be part of this discourse. Vanna Sean from Cambodia sums up the sentiments well when he declares “Together, we can make change to this world”. Well, you have already made your presence felt at the Opening Ceremony, so I have no doubt you have the potential to make an outsized contribution to important initiatives such as Vision Zero.

An OSH segment dedicated to youth

5 For those who are still wondering, why the focus on youths? ¹ILO has estimated that young workers are 40% more likely to suffer occupational injuries at work compared to adult workers. There are several reasons for this. Many youth workers are temporary, part-time workers or apprentices. Quite often, they lack workplace experience, having recently left school or perhaps, are still pursuing their education. They are capable of many things, but health and safety concerns are usually far from their minds.

6 That was what happened to “Jenny”², a 22-year old worker who accidentally injected her palm with fish vaccine. It was just her second day of work and Jenny did not realise the seriousness of what had happened. Although she felt some pain, it was only hours later that she reported the incident to a supervisor.

7 Even after plucking up the courage to report the incident, no one offered “Jenny” any first-aid. She was told to monitor her condition and she continued working despite the pain. Little did “Jenny” expect that the condition would develop into a bacterial skin infection and she was hospitalized, not once but twice! As a result of this unfortunate incident, “Jenny” also had to withdraw from an overseas training programme and missed a good learning opportunity.

8 From my Ministry’s investigations, three things went wrong for “Jenny”. First, the company did not provide immediate medical attention, which they should have. Next, it did not give any safety briefing to workers on their first day at work. This was a gaping hole. Thirdly, there were no risk assessments nor safe work procedures in place at all.

9 You can appreciate that what happened to “Jenny” was completely preventable. The case highlights the need for us to better prepare workers, especially those who are younger and less experienced, for the hazards and risks they will encounter at work.

10 But let us not wait till our youth join the workforce before inculcating in them the right safety and health mindsets. This dedicated SafeYouth@ Work Congress therefore provides

¹ The United Nations defines ‘youth’ as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years.

² Not her real name.

the opportunity for you, as members of our youth workforce to play a part to shape the future of OSH.

11 I hope you will brainstorm, discuss and develop meaningful initiatives that can be brought back to your workplace and community to raise awareness on the importance of health and safety, especially for young workers.

Singapore supports our youth in co-creating the OSH future

12 In Singapore, we support efforts to promote a strong safety culture among youths, starting from when they are still in schools. This is so that safety and health awareness becomes ingrained as they are growing up.

13 For example, in 2016, the Workplace Safety and Health Council developed an interactive online e-learning tool called “Safety First with Ken and Friends” suitable for the young in the age range of 8 to 14 years to learn about basic safety and health. To date, the WSH Council has shared the modules in the e-learning tool with over 5000 students through roadshows and school assembly talks.

14 Over the next three years, we will do more to reach out to students at both the primary and secondary levels. There are about 400,000 such students in total. To reach them, we will use animations and other safety and health- related videos produced by WSH Council that are targeted at the young. It is a tall order but we are committed.

15 The WSH Council has also integrated safety and health training into our tertiary education curricula and activities. Today, risk management is offered as a module in the course curriculum in various tertiary institutes and ITE College for students to learn to identify and mitigate workplace risks.

16 The ITE College, for example has incorporated 12 workplace safety and health courses into its curriculum. Earlier this year, its 706 graduates were the first batch to receive their WSH certificates which means they are WSH-ready even as they enter the workforce.

WSH Champion Programme to raise WSH awareness

17 To further strengthen our outreach efforts to the youths, I am pleased to announce the launch of the Singapore WSH Youth Champions Programme. This is a stepped-up effort to enhance safety awareness in the wider community through cultivating individuals who are passionate about safety and health. And I met them earlier before we started the session. I am very encourage by their enthusiasm and the energy that they have. The pioneer batch will be the local youth champions in this Congress – about 40 of them.

18 I hope our WSH Youth Champions can translate the ideas and initiatives discussed at this SafeYouth@Work Dialogue into practical and engaging activities for their peers through school events, safety roadshows and social media platforms like Facebook.

19 As our safety and health ambassadors, you can do your part by practising good safety and health behaviours, share your knowledge with those around you and speak up if you see poor practices at workplaces, and at schools such as in laboratories.

Conclusion

20 The SafeYouth@ Work congress is a useful platform to nurture young leaders around the world to support occupational safety and health. It is also an opportunity for youth participants to share your ideas and renew your commitment to serve your community to advocate safety for young workers.

21 I hope that you have formed new friendships with like-minded peers beyond your home countries. This friendship will prove invaluable as your support network to keep up the conversation on the importance of OSH and to promote greater awareness among youths. I wish you a fruitful afternoon. Thank you.