

Singapore Government

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**SPEECH BY DR OW CHIN HOCK,
MINISTER OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
AND MAYOR OF TANJONG PAGAR CDC DISTRICT
AT THE LAUNCH OF ACTIVE CITIZEN CARD
ON 27 AUGUST 2000 AT 10.30AM
AT LENG KEE COMMUNITY CENTRE**

I am happy to join all of you today at the commencement of "Check Your Health" in Leng Kee division. "Check Your Health" is a subsidised community health screening programme to meet the challenges of an ageing population. Like the enhanced Eldercare Fund and the payment of basic Medishield insurance premiums announced by the Prime Minister at the National Day Rally, it is a high signature of this Government's commitment to help older and weaker Singaporeans.

Growing the People Sector

2 Singapore faces new social challenges as we transit from the Old Economy to the New. What could divide us are not just race and religion, but varying abilities of our population to adapt to the rapid pace of change.

Structural unemployment, widening income gap and the digital divide are but symptoms of the new social phenomenon.

3 To meet these new challenges, the Government has set the example, and through its policies and schemes, help weaker Singaporeans cope and look after those who lag behind. That is necessary but insufficient. It is not the policy or scheme but the heart of Singaporeans that ultimately provides the social glue that binds us together as one people. We have to look into ways to grow the people sector.

Promoting Active Citizenship

4 A recent national survey on volunteerism showed that the volunteer participation rate in Singapore was only 9.3%, compared with 56% in USA, 48% in UK and 25% in Japan. However, what is more encouraging is that about one-third of the non-volunteers have thought of volunteering and 10% would volunteer if they knew where to go or if they were motivated by friends and relatives.

5 The Active Citizen Card we are launching today will highlight opportunities for community involvement and promote volunteerism as a convenient and enjoyable activity for families and friends to participate in together. Residents will get a list of community programmes, make their choices, have their card stamped for every programme they help organise and receive a souvenir when they collect nine stamps. The card is a fun way to reach out to residents who are not active by providing them an avenue to get involved.

Reinventing the Grassroots Movement

6 The grassroots movement forms a key component of our people sector and has been an important cornerstone of our social cohesion all these years. However, the grassroots movement needs to reinvent itself to meet new social challenges. I suggest three changes.

7 First, the grassroots movement should review its role as the needs of the community evolve over time. When racial and religious divides were our primary concerns, grassroots leaders played an important role in organising community activities which brought Singaporeans of different

ethnic and religious groups together to mingle, interact and promote understanding and harmony.

8 To meet new social challenges, the grassroots movement could move beyond promoting community interaction to providing community service. The CDCs are actively promoting lifelong learning. Tanjong Pagar and Marine Parade CDCs have taken over additional social assistance functions from MCDS. In partnership with the CDCs, grassroots leaders can reach out to residents who need help so as to narrow the new divides and soften the social impact as we transit to the New Economy.

9 Second, the grassroots movement should review its approach to keep pace with the times. Over the years, the movement has built up a valuable community network. New Economy approaches can help the movement better exploit its Old Economy strengths. Like companies in the private sector, grassroots organisations need to try out new ideas as well as forge partnership, exploit synergy and share expertise. For example, an Internet gaming competition or telematch can significantly enhance the quality of traditional Residents' Committee block parties and draw greater participation from residents. A single RC may not have the expertise or resources to try out these new initiatives. However, it may be able to do so if it partners a nearby school or a computer company.

10 Third, a mindset change is necessary. The Prime Minister has encouraged Singaporeans to think and act like insurgents and innovators rather than incumbents in the economic sector. This applies to the people sector as well. It is natural for some grassroots leaders to see themselves as "community incumbents" after serving for many years. But to remain relevant and be more effective, they need to think and act like insurgents and innovators, and embark on a process of creative destruction to replace conventional programmes with new initiatives.

11 In short, Singapore needs insurgents and revolutionaries to win not just the new economic battle but also the new social battle. We need to get more Singaporeans involved. Reinventing the grassroots movement is also critical. A renewed and rejuvenated grassroots movement can provide the social stabiliser as Singapore charts new waters and meets new challenges

ahead. Together, we can work towards building a more active and cohesive community.

12 Finally, I would like to thank all CDC, VWO and grassroots volunteers who have helped out in today's screening. Our efforts would not be successful without the hand and leg work of volunteers who have gone knocking door to door to explain to residents and coax them to come. All of you would definitely qualify for a stamp on your Active Citizen Cards.

National Archives of Singapore