

**ENGLISH SPEECH BY ASSOC PROF MUHAMMAD FAISHAL IBRAHIM,  
PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT, AT  
COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY 2016**

***CARING FOR THE VULNERABLE***

**Introduction**

1 Mdm Chair, over the past few years, my Ministry has strengthened social assistance policies and delivery to better serve those in need. This was not just about increasing the level and range of assistance available. It was also how our touch-points and officers deliver help more flexibly and effectively. We are also making greater efforts to link up different help services to better serve families with complex needs.

**Update on SSOs and SSNet**

2 Mr Amrin Amin asked about the effectiveness of the Social Service Offices (SSOs). Since we started developing the network 3 years ago, we have improved the accessibility and delivery of help. Today, some 9 in 10 SSO beneficiaries living in HDB towns can access an SSO within 2km of where they live or work.

3 With better accessibility, the SSOs have also helped more Singaporeans. The number of households who received ComCare short-to-medium term and long term financial assistance increased from 24,000 in financial year 2012 to more than 31,000 in 2014. A recent 2015 MSF survey showed that 9 in 10 SSO users were satisfied with the service, regardless of whether they eventually received financial assistance.

4 We will continue to improve the effectiveness and impact of the SSOs. They will take on a larger role in coordinating service delivery for families with more complex financial and social needs. At Taman Jurong and Kreta Ayer, we are experimenting with bringing together social assistance, family services and employment services under one roof at the SSOs. Elsewhere, SSOs will actively coordinate with government and community partners to integrate help, particularly in the areas of employment, family services, housing and healthcare.

5 Mr Amrin was concerned that the tight labour supply will affect our ability to deliver help services. This is a challenge faced by the social sector, and indeed all other sectors in Singapore. We will do more with our partners to uplift image, professional development and career prospects in the sector. My Minister will share some examples later.

6 Our officers also need support to do their job well. I therefore thank Mr Amrin for raising concerns about abuse of frontline SSO officers. While they have a good working relationship with most of those who seek help, they do encounter a few who may be verbally or physically abusive. We have installed CCTV and duress alarms at all SSO interview rooms. We are training SSO and selected frontline officers in de-escalation and self-defence. Some of our SSOs have security officers deployed. We will continue to take steps to protect our officers.

7 Let me emphasise here that MSF will not tolerate any form of abuse of our officers. We will not hesitate to bring the perpetrators to task under the law, as we have done on a few occasions.

8 One strategy to tackle the manpower challenge is to be more productive and coordinated in how we deliver services. Here, one important enabler is technology. This was why we decided to develop the Social Service Net (SSNet). With this electronic backbone, we can share information and streamline work processes, which will in turn reduce the administrative burden on both our beneficiaries and officers and improve the efficiency and quality of case management.

9 Mr Seah Kian Peng asked about the progress of the implementation. Since we launched the system early this year, it has been rolled out at all 24 SSOs and 46 Family Service Centres. We are now addressing the teething problems and making improvements. We have also started planning for the next phase, to extend the system to other social services.

### **ComCare Long Term Assistance**

10 Sir, in the Budget Speech, the Minister for Finance announced that MSF would be increasing the ComCare Long Term Assistance rates. The ComCare Long Term Assistance scheme, also commonly known as Public Assistance (PA), provides a package of assistance to persons who are unable to work, with no means of income and limited or no family support. Most of our beneficiaries are elderly persons.

11 The package of help includes:

- Firstly, cash assistance to meet basic living expenses;
- Second, additional assistance where necessary for other recurring expenses like medical consumables, and one-off purchases such as household appliances;
- Third, free medical treatment at polyclinics and public hospitals; and
- Lastly, befriending and social services in the community.

12 Many of the PA households are also allocated heavily subsidised HDB rental flats.

13 Starting this July, we will increase the cash assistance rate for one-person households from \$450 to \$500. The rates will also increase for larger households. This is to keep pace with the cost of living.

14 ComCare also provides short and medium term assistance to low-income families and children in need. Each household is different. Our approach is to provide appropriate assistance to meet each family's needs and work with them so that where possible, they can improve their lives and regain self-reliance.

15 To answer Ms Kuik Shiao-Yin's concerns, besides financial needs, we also look at their food, shelter, caregiving, employment, family support, and healthcare needs. Our SSOs would typically work with them to formulate action plans to guide them towards improving their circumstances in the different areas. Such assistance is also

available to foreign spouses in vulnerable transnational families, as raised by Mr Ang Hin Kee.

16 For example, SSOs work with the Singapore Workforce Development Agency to help train ComCare recipients and place them in employment. SSOs may also link them up with financial literacy classes for proper budgeting, or with other social services if they have family or socio-emotional issues. CPF and HDB do give advice when home owners buy or sell their flats. Mr Chen Show Mao and Mr Daniel Goh had asked about this. An example of a person or a family who have graduated is a case of a male Singaporean, aged 37, who approached the SSO in Choa Chua Kang Sep 2014. He was also the sole breadwinner for the family and was not on a full-time employment. He and his spouse have three young children, youngest being three years old. We provided the necessary assistance to the family. Together with our partners, we helped him secure a full-time job with a basic income of \$1800 per month, in Sep 2015. Our assistance ended in Sep 2015, as the family was able to cope with their lives. However, given the complexity of cases and variety of needs, there is no single definition of graduation.

17 Ms Tin Pei Ling asked if agencies can adopt a consistent definition of income in the criteria for different schemes. The Government has been making efforts to streamline income criteria and simplify processes where appropriate, and we will continue to do so across schemes that target the similar groups. For example, MOH's subsidy schemes for outpatient and long-term care and MSF's residential subsidy schemes for adults with disabilities make use of a common set of income information.

18 However, there are also schemes that focus on fairly unique beneficiary groups or needs. It is more appropriate for these to adopt different income basis. We will continue to partner other Government agencies to review this, so as to make our assistance schemes more citizen-centric.

### **Helping Other Groups of Vulnerable Seniors**

19 Some vulnerable adults may not be able to care for themselves and may lack family support. This could result in them having to fend for themselves or being abused by their caregivers. So later this year, my Ministry will enact a new Vulnerable Adults Act. This will allow us to intervene earlier to protect them from harm. Our social workers, especially those from the family violence specialist centres, have given us useful feedback for the Bill.

20 There are also caregivers who are themselves elderly and face the real concern of loss of mental capacity. We appreciate the public feedback and suggestions raised by Members such as Ms Tin Pei Ling and Mr Seah Kian Peng that has helped us streamline the application process for the Lasting Power of Attorney, and the appointment of deputies.

21 As Ms Rahayu Mahzam has pointed out, we have also come across some seniors who are unable to provide for themselves, but are unable to receive financial support from their children.

22 The Maintenance of Parents Act provides a legal recourse for these elderly to claim maintenance from their children. The Act was amended in 2011 to strengthen its conciliatory aspects. Since then, more than 80% of cases have been resolved through conciliation. Of the remainder, 4 in 10 were successfully settled out of court after further mediation. If mediation is unsuccessful, the Tribunal may as a last resort make a maintenance order if it considers it just and equitable for the children to maintain their elderly parents.

23 Where the children themselves may be struggling financially, the elderly parents are referred to the SSOs. The elderly can also turn to the SSOs on their own. Our officers will assess the case, and work closely with partners such as Family Service Centres, to reconcile the family and provide assistance to the elderly.

### **Upstream Intervention for Youth-at-Risk**

24 From the elderly, let me now turn to youth-at-risk. MSF already funds youth-at-risk programmes to ensure that youths have opportunities to be meaningfully engaged and not go off onto the wrong path. Later this year, MSF will work with two appointed social service agencies to pilot a suite of youth programmes. Through this, we aim to improve the quality and consistency of service delivery for our programmes.

25 We plan to provide booster grants to help appointed agencies develop their organisational capability, and train Youth Workers to become more competent in managing youths with varying levels of risk. These enhancements will provide, or support our programmes to deliver better outcomes for the youth-at-risk.

### **Empowering Persons with Disabilities**

26 Let me now turn to persons with disabilities, who are among the most vulnerable in our society. Sir, the Enabling Masterplan is a 5-year roadmap to support and empower persons with disabilities to realise their full potential and lead independent lives as contributing members of society. We are now in our final year of the second Enabling Masterplan.

#### *Continued Progress & New Initiatives Under Enabling Masterplan 2*

27 Mr Seah had asked for an update. MSF, together with various Ministries and Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs), have brought about substantial progress under this second Masterplan. We have prepared a booklet that summarises how the support for persons with disabilities across their life stages and how their quality of life has improved. With your permission Sir, may I ask the Clerks to distribute it to Members of the House? This booklet will also be made available on MSF's website.

28 As the booklet is fairly comprehensive, I will just highlight a few areas of progress and share some new initiatives and improvements.

## Training and Employment

29 First, in the area is in training and employment, key enablers to help persons with disabilities lead independent lives and realise their potential. Between 2012 and 2015, \$44 million of Special Employment Credits was given to employers who hired 9,200 eligible persons with disabilities. Over the same period, the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme supplemented the income of more than 7,400 low-wage persons with disabilities. From 1 January 2017, persons with disabilities aged below 35 years old will also be able to tap on the Workfare Training Support Scheme to improve their skills.

30 Ms Chia Yong Yong asked about the efficacy of the Open Door Job Portal. The job portal is part of the Open Door Programme launched in April 2014 to support employers in hiring and integrating persons with disabilities. In 2015, over 500 job vacancies were posted and more than 200 persons with disabilities registered in the portal. SG Enable, an agency set up by the Ministry to enhance employability and employment options for persons with disabilities, is working closely with employers to further raise awareness.

31 Overall, SG Enable and its partners – Autism Resource Centre, Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore and SPD - have collectively placed more than 750 persons with disabilities into employment over the past 2 years. Recently, I met some employers at the Enabling Village and was impressed by Uniqlo's commitment. They aim to hire at least one person with disability in each of their Singapore stores. In fact, they hired over 40 persons with disabilities in 2015. I believe we can help even more persons with disabilities. We will expand efforts to support the hiring of persons with disabilities in the public sector. We will identify job opportunities, especially where their skills sets and disposition give them an advantage, and where needed, redesign work processes and improve workplace accessibility.

## Adult Care

32 Second, let me talk about adult care. I know many caregivers are concerned about the accessibility of adult care services.

33 In the last 5 years, we have increased the capacity of Day Activity Centres by 40% to 1,200 places in 2015. By 2018, we will add another 600 places. Half of these new places will cater to the rising number of adults with autism. From April 2016, we will vary our funding support in these centres based on level of needs. This means that those with more severe needs will be given more Government support. We will also equip service providers with skills to better manage clients with challenging behaviours.

34 Ms Chia asked about end-of-life issues, and if the Government can help parents and caregivers with permanency planning. This is indeed a concern amongst the many parents we speak to. It is also why my Ministry had set up the Special Needs Trust Company. SNTC works with caregivers to develop care plans and set up Trust accounts to ensure that the long-term financial and care support of persons with disabilities are met. 390 families have benefitted thus far. Parents can also nominate their children to receive monthly disbursements from their CPF savings after their demise, through the Special Needs Saving Scheme. More than 330 parents have done

so. We will also continue to extend outreach. We will also look into building up the capability of social workers and other professional staff working with persons with disabilities, to better support long-term care planning.

### *Awareness, Recognition and Celebration*

35 Third, I should cite our efforts to raise public awareness and celebrate the achievements of persons with disabilities. The ASEAN Para Games was a milestone event that showcased the abilities of our para athletes. Team Singapore fielded 156 athletes in 15 sports. 60% were debutants. Many of us who watched the events were inspired by their spirit. I am proud of how well our para-athletes did, winning medals in 10 sports.

36 The games' impact goes way beyond the week of competition. The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and SPORT Singapore are now working with MSF to increase accessibility to sports for persons with disabilities.

37 Sir, what I have covered are just some examples. There are many more areas – in healthcare insurance coverage, in education, in transport and built environment, in support for the use of technology, and improving sector capability – where we have made progress over the past 5 years.

38 Mr Seah asked about the Assistive Technology Fund take-up since it was enhanced in August last year. In the past seven months, more than 500 persons with disabilities have benefitted from the enhanced funding. This is 5 times more than in the past.

39 I thank all the ministries and VWOs, social service professionals and volunteers, employers and funders, and most of all persons with disabilities and their caregivers, who have worked with us to bring this about.

### *Looking Ahead to Enabling Masterplan 3*

40 With the Enabling Masterplan 2 in its final year, we have started work to develop the next Enabling Masterplan. This will guide the development of policies, programmes, services and other support for persons with disabilities from 2017 onwards.

41 We have formed a steering committee that will develop this plan. It has 22 members from the people, private and public sectors. Mr Seah has asked what the Masterplan will focus on. The Committee will be studying a wide range of areas including:

- First, enabling persons with disabilities to reach their potential, through further efforts in early intervention, education, employment, lifelong learning, and health;
- Second, improving service delivery and quality by harnessing data, and organising services;
- Third, supporting their families and caregivers;
- Fourth, smoothening transitions across different services at different life stages, and

- Fifth, fostering an accessible and inclusive community through public education, technology, disabled friendly spaces as well as sports and community integration.

42 The Committee will examine where and how we can “mainstream” the support given to persons with disabilities. Just like what we have done with the public transport system, we should see how key national infrastructure and initiatives, including SkillsFuture and SmartNation, can be just as relevant to persons with disabilities.

43 I thank Ms Denise Phua for her many thoughtful and useful suggestions. Indeed, we will encourage the Committee to dream big, dive deep, and dare to deal with the difficult. I therefore assure Mr Seah, Ms Phua and Ms Chia that the Steering Committee will look into the issues that they have raised today. My Ministry and partners are holding a series of focus group discussions as part of the SG Future series. I hope that everyone of us will take part in this.

### **Closing**

44 Sir, while we have made significant progress, I believe we can do more as a society to create a safer, supportive and more inclusive environment for persons with disabilities.

45 The important role that Singaporeans play in this cannot be overstated. Caregivers have shared with me that they are sometimes over-protective of their loved ones with disabilities because the larger public is unable to empathise with the challenges they face. Occasionally, we hear of indiscriminate use of wheelchair accessible parking lots at the expense of persons who need them. We hear about onlookers’ lack of understanding when a person with autism is having a meltdown in public.

46 As Ms Chia had so eloquently put it last week, there are disabilities that are real even if they are not visible. We need every part of our society to understand, be considerate and help support the integration of persons with disabilities in everyday life.

47 Likewise, to effectively help the low income, vulnerable elderly, at risk youth and other groups with less, we will need the support of everyone in our community. To identify who may need help. To reach out and understand what they are going through and what they need. To render support - big or small. Building a caring and inclusive society requires all Singaporeans to play a part.

Thank you.