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SPEECH BY MR CHAN CHEE SENG, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY,
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS, AT THE SINGAPORE ACTION GROUP OF
ELDERS CONVENTION HELD ON SATURDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 1977
AT 2.00 PM AT THE VICTORIA THEATRE, EMPRESS PLACE

Increasing proportion of the aged

We are fortunate in Singapore to have good health facilities, which taken together with the advances made in medicine and the rise in standard of living, will certainly increase the life-span of the average Singaporean. The expectation of life for males has increased from 60.3 in 1957 to 67 in 1975, and for females, this has increased from 65.2 in 1957 to 72 in 1975. The aged constitute about 9% of our population. Population projections based on the 1970 population census indicate that by the year 1995, 347,400 persons in Singapore would be within the age group of 55 years and above. This is almost double the figure as at 1970. The increase in the proportion of aged in the population demands that special attention should be given to this problem.

The problem is complex

The problem is a complex one. It has many facets and inter-linked with a multitude of social, cultural and economic factors. The elders in our community have varying needs and there must be programmes to meet these needs.

Factors which alienate the aged

There is evidence to show that many elders are becoming more and more alienated from their families and the community in which they live.

This situation has arisen out of the following four factors:-

- (i) Urban re-development;
- (ii) Breakdown of the extended family system;
- (iii) The cost of living; and
- (iv) Changing attitudes of the young.

Breakdown of the extended family

Rapid urban re-development has accelerated the breakdown of the extended family system in Singapore partly because low income families are unable to bring their aged members along with them could be because of the physical limitations of HDB flats and partly because of their difficulty to take care and support the aged with the increasing expenditure which their new way of life entails.

Homes set up by the Government and voluntary organisations

In recognition of the need to care for the aged, both the Government and voluntary organisations have taken steps to provide facilities for the care of the aged. Apart from the welfare homes for the aged operated by the

(Social Welfare Department...)

Social Welfare Department, there are now twelve voluntary homes. Three

community homes for the aged have been established using HDB premises.

They are the Henderson Old Peoples' Community Home, the Ang Mo Kio Old

Peoples' Community Home and the Rochore Kongsu for the Aged. Mutual

benefit organisations in Singapore have also responded to this challenge.

Five community homes for the aged will be set up by 15 mutual benefit

organisations over the next two years in response to the Ministry of Social

Affairs' encouragement to MBOs to diversify their services. To encourage the

setting up of such homes and to enable philanthropists and well-wishers to

contribute to such projects, the Government has agreed that Homes for the

Aged including Homes for the Aged Sick be considered as institutions of a

public character to enjoy tax exemption. The benefits, however, would only

be applicable to those homes which satisfy the minimum conditions laid down

by the Social Welfare Department and supervised by the Department.

To live in the community

Homes for the Aged are really meant for those who need to be looked

after within an institutional setting. They are people who are sick or have

no families or relatives and friends to care for them. As far as possible,

the elders should live in the community rather than be admitted into an

(institution.)

institution. People with elderly relatives should make every effort to ensure that their old folks are properly looked after. It is a social responsibility that must be discharged. Our traditional values of filial piety must be preserved and given greater emphasis. We must build a community that cares. It is an uncaring community if it gives the excuse that the pressures of modern life make it impossible for children and families to share the same roof with their elders. People must realise that apart from the need to respect and care for the aged, there are mutual benefits to be derived in having the old folks close to their young. The old would have their children to look after them and they in turn could help in looking after the grandchildren. To get people to live and care for their elders who had in their time contributed to the growth of Singapore, is a goal that we must achieve. It requires a long process of education and emulation to achieve this.

Participating in community life

The elders themselves must come forward to participate in community life if they are to integrate with the community. They must mingle with young people, and contribute their knowledge and skills to help young people develop. The elders have an important part to play in the social and cultural

(activities of the community.)

activities of the community. Rather than taking a passive stand and accept their diminishing socio-economic roles in the community, the elders can in fact come forward and involve themselves in meaningful socio-economic and community services. We should continue to encourage the elders to go on working. Those who cannot work full-time should at least do work on a part-time basis. It is in the interest of society, no less than in the interest of national economy, that as many people as possible should go on working for as long as possible.

The message of the Singapore Action Group of Elders

It is in this context that we must view the Singapore Action Group of Elders Convention whose message to the elders in the community is an inspirational one - that old age like any other phase of life is a new world of adventure. It is not necessarily the winter of life with its loneliness, poverty and pain. For winter it is for some who become isolated from the community and from their friends and resign themselves to a life of seclusion and inactivity.

The Singapore Action Group of Elders was formed with this philosophy in mind. It is not another organisation just to organise welfare

(programmes for the care of old people.)

programmes for the care of old people. It is intended to be an organisation with the active participation and support of the elders in the community to get them to be fully integrated with the community and to carry out community action programmes so that they will continue to contribute towards the society.

Conclusion

I congratulate the Singapore Action Group of Elders for organising this Convention. The various activities such as education classes, keep-fit classes and the elders' activities centres will no doubt go a long way towards the achievement of the objective of getting elders to play a more important role in the community.

I wish the Singapore Action Group of Elders every success.

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