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Singapore Government

MEDIA RELEASE

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE & MINISTRY OF HEALTH), AT THE "COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION" CONFERENCE ON SATURDAY, 3 JUN 2000, AT 9.00 AM AT MARINA MANDARIN HOTEL, MAIN BALLROOM, 6 RAFFLES BOULEVARD, MARINA SQUARE

Friends and colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen

National Archives of Singapore

I am very happy to join you this morning for the "Community Partnership in Action" Conference. I am particularly happy to see so many CDC and VWO representatives at this Conference. I hope today's good start is a first step towards good success in the future.

2 The idea that CDCs be delegated more social service delivery functions by the Ministry of Community and Sports (MCDS) has been discussed since late last year. The Marine Parade and Tanjong Pagar CDCs will be taking over some schemes from MCDS in July 2000. The other CDCs will do likewise in 2001. Most VWOs agree that it would be beneficial if they work closer with the CDCs. However, they are also concerned about the change, especially over their working

relationship with the CDCs.

3 It is important that we discuss openly these concerns, and address them. CDCs aim to promote community bonding and enhance social cohesion. To do so, CDCs must work towards a more active citizenry, where the more successful Singaporeans come forward to help the less successful. Since VWOs comprise many active citizens in Singapore, CDCs must work well with VWOs. Otherwise the effectiveness of the CDCs' work and programmes will be severely discounted.

4 We address to VWOs' concerns by building mutual trust and through open communication. With the help of MCDS and National Council of Social Service (NCSS), the People's Association (PA) invited 100 VWOs for a series of five round-chair discussions with staff members working with the CDCs. I joined them for all the five discussions. We discussed very openly and frankly all issues of the heart. These range from clarification in roles and functions, to assurance of continued government funding, to who is the boss, to political dimension of the new working arrangements.

5 I believe this is the first time the CDCs and the VWOs discuss these issues so openly. The informal small group round-chair setting makes all feel comfortable. I feel there is also mutual trust and sincerity. I believe that everyone present, whether they are from the VWOs, CDCs, MCDS, NCSS or PA, benefited from the discussions. Certainly I benefited a lot from all the ideas raised.

6 As you will be having more discussions later, I do not intend to give a point-by-point answer to the concerns raised. However, I would like to say, after the round-chair discussions, I feel a strong consensus that the VWOs and CDCs all want to serve the community better. This is fundamental. We should always have this fundamental objective in mind, and not be too duly distracted by the political dimension. We should establish an atmosphere whereby VWOs and CDCs feel they are part of a team which can and must work together to achieve synergy, so that together more clients will be served better.

7 However, I also feel some tangible assurances will be in order. I would like to assure our VWO colleagues that delegation of service functions to the CDCs does not mean the government reduces existing funding to VWOs. It only means government funding, originally channeled through MCDS, will now be channeled through the CDCs. The delegation will not affect NCSS funding, since NCSS' funds are not government fund. To many VWOs, government and NCSS fundings are their main source of funding, or their "bread and main course". These will

not be affected after the delegation of functions.

8 However, the delegation of functions will mean VWOs networking closer with the CDCs. This would give the VWOs additional flexibility to request, and probably obtain, CDC funding for specific projects which are particularly relevant to the CDCs' objectives. Hence, in addition to the "bread and main course" from government and NCSS, VWOs can obtain "wine and dessert" through CDC project-funding. This would make a fuller meal. Thus VWOs can get more support through working closely with the CDCs.

9 I do not expect the "bread and main course" to be affected by political changes in the constituencies after a General Election. However, since it will be more difficult for the CDCs to raise funds and recruit volunteers in opposition constituencies, the "wine and dessert" portion may be affected. However, there should be no starvation as VWOs can continue to survive with the "bread and main course", with a reduced or even diminished "wine and dessert".

10 I would also like to assure the VWOs that there is no intention from the CDCs to "boss" over them. CDCs would like to facilitate VWOs' projects, since these projects are of service to residents. VWOs and CDCs may also work as team-members in some joint projects. The issue is how to achieve win-win and synergy, not who's the boss.

11 However, I do acknowledge that initially, some CDC staff may not relate very well when interacting with the VWOs. This is due to lack of skills, not lack of will. Most CDC staff members come from PA. They are more familiar working with grassroots organisations, which are quite different in style from the VWOs. The People's Association (PA) has therefore organised a "Understanding VWOs" Workshop for CDCs' councillors and staff last month. The Workshop received strong support from MCDS, NCSS and VWOs who sent speakers and lecturers. CDC staff members who attended the Workshop found it useful and revealing. PA plans to organise more workshops. Its National Community Leadership Institute will be launching a series of "Community Partnership in Action" training programmes for both VWO and CDC staff to promote better understanding and partnership. I hope VWOs will support the project by sending speakers and participants. PA is also considering a proposal by some VWOs to have an "Understanding CDCs" Workshop.

12 With the CDCs and VWOs both wanting to understand each other, I am very optimistic about the prospect of success. This interest in understanding each other is the biggest achievement of the series of round-chair discussions.

13 I have offered a proposition to my CDC colleagues: One year after taking over the additional services, CDC staff will be at least as good as MCDS and NCSS staff in working with the VWOs. This must be so, if we truly believe that the CDCs and VWOs can achieve synergy to serve more residents better. This must be so to justify the larger number of staff needed to manage a decentralised system after delegation from MCDS. Perhaps we should have another round of "Community Partnership in Action" Conference like what we are having today one year from now, to review progress of the new working relationship.

14 The keys, as I mentioned a few times, are mutual trust, mutual understanding, open communication, as well as partnership, sincerity and commitment. I have shared the experience of the round-chair discussions with the Mayors and Chairmen of CDCs. I have also proposed that they consider having their own open discussion sessions with the VWOs operating in their districts.

15 Finally, I would like to thank MCDS, NCSS, VWOs as well as CDCs for the strong support in attending this Conference, and the earlier round-chair and training sessions. I look forward to the same degree of support when we implement the new working arrangements.

16 Together we shall serve more in our community better.

Thank you.

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