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**SPEECH BY MR TEO CHONG TEE, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS), AT THE OPENING OF THE
WORKSHOP ON 'NATIONAL DEFINITION OF DISABILITY' ON
THURSDAY, 30 JUNE 1983 AT 9.00 AM IN TRAINING ROOM 1,
MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS**

I am glad to be here this morning to open the Workshop on 'National Definition of Disability'. The theme of the Workshop, I am told, is 'Towards a better profile of the disabled people in Singapore'. I am impressed by its aims. I hope there will be more of such workshops and seminars which can lead to greater and more intimate involvement of voluntary organisations in helping to better understand the problems and needs of the disabled persons in our fast changing society.

We have a vast network of community and social services which have been established by a happy marriage of the efforts of our people with those of the Government. Community development is a basic element of Government policy. A large number of volunteers, imbued and motivated with a sense of social concern and purpose and supported by private organisations and individual philanthropists, are engaged in a variety of community development projects.

There is, of course, the temptation to delegate the responsibility for community and social services to the Government. The danger of this is that it could ultimately undermine the very basic tenets of community development which are self-help and mutual help. We must

steer away from the expectation that the benefits of a comfortable life can be obtained without co-operative and unified effort.

The hallmark of a mature and caring society is the extent of volunteer participation in community and social service projects of the country. In order that we might forge ahead and with speed, we need to galvanise further support and mobilise the latent skills and abilities of our people for the welfare and well-being of all sections of our society, including of course, those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

There is a great deal of public spiritedness for social service in our community but, unfortunately, much of the enthusiasm is not in areas which require sustained personal effort and intense relationship on a face-to-face basis over prolonged periods. Many volunteers do a fine job with activity programmes like organising play sessions, children's parties, picnics and outings. While these, undoubtedly, are important, there is an urgent and continuing need for more of our citizens to undertake direct services like befriending the non-ambulant aged and the acute disabled.

Our Ministry recently undertook a review of the services it offers to disabled persons. Arising from this review, it was decided that the Disabled Persons Section of the Ministry should gradually veer away from its traditional direct service functions and take on a more dynamic and developmental role. The direct services, such as providing advice, assistance and counselling to disabled persons, have now been subsumed by other specialised sections within the Ministry, thus releasing the Disabled Persons Section to spend more time and effort in assuming a leadership role in formulating policies, identifying gaps in services and in stimulating new programmes for the disabled.

The Government, however, is aware that it can only succeed in achieving these aims with the co-operation of the Singapore Council of Social Service and the numerous voluntary organisations engaged in the services of the disabled. This workshop on the 'National Definition of Disability' is but a beginning that may foster a closer working relationship among all of us for the benefit of the disabled. If some lasting understanding and goodwill are forged through this workshop, the cause of the disabled would have been well served.

One of the recommendations that arose from the review of the Disabled Persons Section, and, which needed immediate attention, is a re-consideration of the definition of disability. The current definition appears to be narrow and restrictive as compared to that adopted by the International Labour Organisation or the World Health Organisation. It is not my intention to offer you an appropriate definition of disability as I must confess that I know so much less than the participants in this workshop.

It is, however, extremely important that everyone taking part in it should be in general agreement as to what 'disability' in the context of the disabled and society means; and, I suppose, whatever your final interpretation would be, must of necessity be functional. You must arrive at a practical working definition of 'disability'. But, however you define 'disability', the one indispensable element is the individual as a human being. Therefore, those of you who are concerned with the problems of disability must necessarily be imbued with a feeling for and an understanding of the disabled person as a human being.

This workshop, I am confident, will be beneficial to each and everyone of you who participate in it and, more importantly, your recommendations will play a significant part when my Ministry establishes a more comprehensive and computerised Central Registry of Disabled Persons. It is our hope that when the Central Registry is fully developed, it will:-

- (a) function as a focal point of reference for organisations providing services to disabled persons; and
- (b) be able to provide disability profile so that it will facilitate planning and provision of services for the disabled persons.

In conclusion, may I say that each of us has a two-fold obligation. We have an obligation to the disabled person as a fellow human being and citizen. We have also an obligation to the community of which we are an integral part. We must therefore try to strike the right balance between the needs of the disabled person and the needs of society. With this wish, I have great pleasure in declaring this workshop on the 'National Definition of Disability' open.

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