

SOCIAL CHANGES CAN INTERACT TO PRODUCE POTENTIALLY DISRUPTIVE OUTCOMES: ESM GOH

New centre 'to prepare for avalanche of social issues'

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SINGAPORE—As social service agencies and policymakers deal with pressing problems on the ground, a research centre has been launched to help fill the gap in areas such as innovation and transform social services in Singapore.

The Social Service Research Centre (SSR) will provide a platform for strategic research in the area, serve as a test-bed for pilot programmes, and facilitate research partnerships between government agencies, sector organisations or professionals and academia, among others.

It was set up by the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Speaking at the official launch of the SSR yesterday, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong identified three key drivers of social changes here: Changes in demography, technology and social expectations.

These changes can interact to pro-

duce "complex, and potentially disruptive outcomes", he said.

"I can see an avalanche of social issues coming ... The social challenges of Singaporeans in the next 50 years will be drastically different from those in the past 50. We need to think ahead of the curve and evolve a new social service infrastructure."

Mr Goh added: "Social service agencies are busy fighting fires on the ground. National policy is, by design, slow. Policymakers and practitioners often have other more pressing problems to deal with and may not accord rigorous research on long-term social problems priority."

An institution such as the SSR fills the gap to provide innovation, reflection and experimentation to think ahead to transform social services, said Mr Goh in his address to about 250 policymakers, international and local academics, students and social service practitioners at the NUSS Kent Ridge Guild House.

What will SSR do?

● The Social Service Research Centre (SSR) will provide a platform for strategic research in the area, serve as a test-bed for pilot programmes, and facilitate research partnerships between government agencies, sector organisations or professionals and academia, among others.

The SSR will receive about S\$3.3 million in funding over five years, NUS said yesterday. Among other things, the centre will focus on the issue of low-wage workers and their families. One of its major projects will be a longitudinal study of 1,500 low-income families who are in debt. Starting next month, the study will be carried out in collaboration with the Methodist Welfare Services, Care Corner Singapore and Thyee Hua Kwan Moral Charities.

NUS Associate Professor Irene Ng, the centre's director, said the SSR has also been in contact with voluntary welfare organisations to identify trends and needs, as well as conduct research with them.

"When we think about social service, we can't only think about social, we also need to interact with other domains in people's lives, such as employment (and) health. The SSR helps to do the research, gives them the findings ... so other people can have the access to the information and

findings and use them," she said.

Also held yesterday was an inaugural conference, Transforming Social Services: Innovation, Evaluation, Impact, where international experts pointed out the importance of using research to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes.

Dr James Riccio, director of the Low-Wage Workers and Communities policy area at MDRC, is currently the principal investigator for the evaluation of a pilot project that tries to reduce two-generation poverty in New York with monetary rewards. The MDRC is a non-profit social research organisation in the United States.

There were mixed results from the evaluation, which Dr Riccio said underscored the importance to test rigorously what seemed like good ideas for the social service sector. "There are many innovations that often don't live up to their promise and the goal is to learn from them and try to build on those lessons," he added.

VWO adopts evidence-based practice for debt programme

SINGAPORE—At the end of a year-long pilot programme to help low-income families clear their debts, both clients and staff from family service centres run by the Methodist Welfare Services (MWS) felt good.

Total arrears of the families that were helped went down and their average net worth went up by nearly S\$2,500.

This was in contrast to a control group of families that did not receive debt co-payments, whose arrears went up and whose average net worth increased by just over S\$500.

But after running a test, the verdict was that there was not enough evidence to suggest that the programme had worked. This meant the results could have been by chance.

Mrs Cindy Ng-Tay, assistant director of MWS' Covenant Family Service Centre, shared these findings yesterday at a conference to launch the Social Service Research Centre at the National University of Singapore.

It was the voluntary welfare organisation's effort to move towards evidence-based practice, which the new centre hopes to foster.

The pilot programme ended last month and Mrs Ng-Tay said her team will be looking at some revisions before the programme's second round, slated for after September.

In the first round, there were 34 families each who received debt co-payment and who did not. The first group had total arrears of about S\$256,000 before the programme, and about S\$175,000 after it ended.

The control group had total arrears of about S\$276,000 before the programme, and about S\$294,000 after it ended. The figures exclude that of two "outliers" which had over S\$100,000 in arrears.

About half the families seen by MWS' three family service centres face financial difficulties and current strategies of budgeting workshops, employment support and cash transfers have had limited impact on some, said Mrs Ng-Tay.

MWS decided to try alternative poverty-alleviation strategies and opted for matched payment of debt — the VWO would match every dollar of debt (incurred for at least four months) that the families chose to repay, up to a sum of S\$100 per month.

The bulk of debts were for utilities, service and conservancy, rent, telco bills and furniture hire-purchase, she said.

MWS said 19 of the 34 families said the programme encouraged them to clear a portion of their debts and review their debt situation.

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