

Plan to let migrant workers into community still on hold

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LITTLE TO GAIN

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ALEX COOK, of NUS' Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, on how more infections are being found in the community than in the dorms.

LOW INCIDENCE

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JEREMY LIM, of NUS' Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, on the cases in dorms.

A pilot programme to allow migrant workers living in dormitories back into the community remains on hold, 16 months after movement restrictions were introduced to curb the spread of Covid-19.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) told *The Sunday Times* that this is to protect workers and mitigate the risk of further transmission as new Covid-19 clusters have emerged in dorms over the past month.

As at yesterday, there were six active clusters linked to dorms, like Westlite Juniper and North Coast Lodge, with a total of 249 cases.

Since Tuesday, MOM has also adopted vaccination-differentiated measures in dorms for the 300,000-plus residents.

While fully vaccinated residents are allowed to engage in activities at the dorms such as going to the gym, visiting beer gardens, and eating in groups of up to five, unvaccinated residents must adhere to stricter rules.

The Government gazetted two dorms as isolation areas on April 5 last year, but by April 21, all workers in dorms were not allowed to leave.

By December last year, migrant workers had accounted for 54,505 of the Covid-19 cases. To date, Singapore has recorded over 66,000 cases.

But with more than nine in 10 dorm residents now fully vaccinated against Covid-19, infectious disease experts say it is hard to justify the restrictions, especially given the impact on mental health.

Associate Professor Alex Cook,



vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the public health justification for the continued restrictions is to stop infections from the community entering dorms, and prevent dorm infections from getting back out.

But unlike last year, there are now more infections being detected in the community than in the dorms.

"Given that the public health benefits are marginal at best... we should seriously consider relaxing these restrictions as we relax measures in the community," he said.

Workers are now allowed to leave their dorms only for work, to visit designated recreation centres, and for essential errands such as medical appointments and banking.

Last December, a pilot scheme allowing migrant workers to access the community once a month was announced, but it has been pushed back repeatedly, most recently because of the move back to phase two (heightened alert) in June.

Visits to recreation centres were also suspended for a month.

MOM said it continues to enforce safe living measures, and maintains tight surveillance through routine rostered testing, wastewater testing and surveillance of acute respiratory infection symptoms.

"MOM is monitoring the situation closely and will further ease the measures progressively and safely," a spokesman said.

Prof Cook said Covid-19 outbreaks within dorms are inevitable given the transmissibility of the Delta variant.

"Even in a population with 90 per cent vaccination coverage and 60 per cent natural immunity, we can expect to see clusters when we do mass testing and contact tracing. But with such levels of immunity, the cases are mostly mild and quickly self-limiting."

North Coast Lodge, which has 139 cases, is evidence of this, said Associate Professor Jeremy Lim of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

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Prof Lim is also vice-chairman of migrant worker non-profit organisation Healthserve.

As Singapore moves towards a Covid-19 endemic state, Prof Cook said the authorities can impose the same restrictions on migrant workers as the general population while maintaining regular testing and contact tracing.

"For the vast majority of people living in Singapore, I suspect we're more likely to catch Covid-19 from a member of the public than from a dorm resident, even with relaxed movement controls," he noted.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, suggested using antigen rapid tests instead of polymerase chain reaction tests, for faster results. "This may turn out to be an important compromise to let the migrant workers return to moving about freely in the community."

Prof Lim and Professor Paul Tambyah said surveillance testing, like

what is being done for influenza, and wastewater testing could be sufficient to monitor the situation at the dorms.

Prof Tambyah, president of the Asia Pacific Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infection, added: "Once we have accepted that the virus is endemic, we will not need

to test fully vaccinated asymptomatic individuals."

Migrant worker advocacy groups Transient Workers Count Too and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) have also called for movement curbs on dorms to be lifted, citing, among other things, reputa-

Current dorm restrictions

Migrant workers living in dormitories, including temporary quarters on work sites, can go out only for work, to visit designated recreation centres, or run essential errands under current rules.

EXIT PASS

To go out for leisure or personal reasons, they must apply for an exit pass.

For now, they can visit only their designated recreation centre on their rest days at fixed time slots.

They can apply for an exit pass only once a week, but there are limited exit passes for each time slot.

For workers to go out for essential errands such as medical appointments, their employers or the dorm operators need to provide the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) with the relevant information on the workers' behalf.

Employers are accountable for their workers' whereabouts and are encouraged to provide private transport for them.

ADDED RESTRICTIONS

With new clusters detected in Westlite Juniper and North Coast Lodge over the past month, MOM has imposed further measures. When a positive case is detected, dorm operators are not allowed to admit new residents or check out existing residents from the affected block.

VACCINATION-DIFFERENTIATED MEASURES

Inside the dorms, MOM has also put in place vaccination-differ-

entiated measures for residents from last Tuesday.

But communal facilities such as laundry rooms, minimarts and barbers are open to both the vaccinated and unvaccinated.

Communal kitchens are also open to both groups but group sizes are limited to two people.

The other measures are:

Prayers and events in dorms organised by non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

- Up to 250 people if all are fully vaccinated; up to 50 people with pre-event testing if any are unvaccinated.
- NGO volunteers must be fully vaccinated and also undergo pre-event testing.

Communal dining and beer gardens

- Up to five persons per group if all are fully vaccinated.
- Dorm operators must be able to implement checks on vaccination status.

Outdoor courts

- Up to 50 allowed in groups of five if all are fully vaccinated.
- Only two per group if they are unvaccinated.
- Each group can use the court for up to 30 minutes with staggered timings.

Gyms and indoor sports facilities

- Up to 30 people are allowed at one time in groups of five if all are fully vaccinated.
- Those unvaccinated are not allowed to use these facilities.

Workers are now allowed to leave their dormitories only for work, to visit designated recreation centres, and for essential errands such as medical appointments and banking. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

tional damage to Singapore.

MOM said it has been working with non-governmental organisations to provide mental health support, and has trained close to 50 front-line medical professionals to identify and care for workers in distress. A task force, Project Dawn, was also set up last year to develop

a support ecosystem for workers.

However, Prof Lim said: "Letting workers go out into the community, interact with their friends, and restoring some modicum of their social networks will be far more effective."

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