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Transforming Social Service Agencies in Covid-19 Times

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The demands on social service agencies will grow as societal needs evolve, exacerbated by the economic uncertainty and psychological anxieties brought about by Covid-19. Yet, as resources become scarcer, there is urgency for these organisations to transform to better serve their users. At the same time, private and public sector stakeholders, as well as citizens, can play a critical role to collectively care for and empower the most vulnerable in our society, while forging stronger bonds in the community.

The social service sector serves to enhance the well-being of our community in Singapore. The sector has more than 450 social service agencies or SSAs, nonprofit organisations that provide services to benefit the community. They employ 17,000 social service professionals dedicated to the collective vision of empowering the vulnerable – those who are in family circumstances, live with mental health concerns, disabilities and special needs, encounter the effects of ageing or the challenges of growing up – to live with dignity. (For examples, see box, “Services for Vulnerable Groups in Singapore”).

Evolving demands and pressures

Even before Covid-19, there had been increasing demand for community services. This was driven by an ageing population, alongside shrinking family size and greater strain on caregivers.

Some families continue to be challenged by the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages. At the same time, the social inclusion of persons with disabilities and persons with mental health conditions remains inadequate.

The pandemic has exacerbated societal needs. With disruption to care services, increased economic uncertainty, and greater incidence of psychological and physical stress, the pool of existing service users has expanded alongside the emergence of new user groups.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development set up the National CARE Hotline in April 2020 and received over 27,900 calls within the first five months. While the number of calls has decreased since, the trend of increased mental health issues is expected to persist into the longer term.

Services for Vulnerable Groups in Singapore

	 Persons with Disabilities	 Vulnerable Families	 Seniors	 At-risk Children and Youth	 Persons with Mental Health Conditions
Social issues of vulnerable groups	Social inclusion of PWDs is lacking. Caregivers experience strain. PWDs have a lower quality of life in all domains.	Criminality and social disadvantages are transmitted from one generation to the next.	Persons aged 50 and above have a lower quality of life, even lower if they have complex needs, e.g. disability or mental health issue.	Children who are abused or have contact with youth justice system will be less educated, earn less, more likely to divorce as adults.	Stigma towards mental health conditions remains. Social inclusion of PWMH conditions is lacking.
Examples of Services	Special Education, Sheltered Workshops, Home-Based Care Services	Family Service Centres, Counselling, Transitional Shelters	Senior Activity Centres, Befriending, Sheltered Homes	Child Protection Specialist Centres, Mentoring, Cyber Wellness	Peer Support Specialist Programme, Psychiatric Day Care, Suicide Intervention

According to a study conducted by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) in 2020, the quality of life for vulnerable populations (comprising seniors, HDB 1-2 roomers and persons with disabilities) generally deteriorated during the lockdown period. They experienced increased symptoms of psychological or psychosomatic stress and lowered independence. This contrasts against the general population showing signs of recovery with their quality of life scores closer to pre-Covid levels.

On the other hand, persons with mental health conditions who remained connected to social services showed improvements in their quality of life, demonstrating the importance of seeking help. NCSS will continue to monitor trends in the impact of Covid-19 on the vulnerable segments of the population.

The lockdown and safe management measures posed unprecedented challenges. Across the board, SSAs reported the top three challenges faced: digitalisation, finances and workload. When Covid-19 struck, many SSAs were still early in their digital adoption journey, without laptops for every staff and poor Wifi connectivity. Some could not connect with staff, much less service users, many of whom were not digitally savvy.

The majority of SSAs polled reported reduced cash donations due to cancelled fundraising events and lack of online fundraising capability. Twenty-seven per cent reported that their donations had decreased by more than half. At the same time, SSAs saw a plunge in their number of volunteers overnight. Some 67 per cent of SSAs polled reported a decrease in volunteers arising from Covid-19 regulations and restrictions. As volunteers have always been

an important resource in the sector, SSAs had to quickly adapt and come up with new ways to operate with less manpower.

Responding to the crisis

The people, public and private sectors (3Ps) were quick to support the social service sector in responding to these immediate challenges. An outpouring of generosity from the public enabled the Community Chest to raise just over S\$10 million from the community for The Invictus Fund to support 89 SSAs to continue to deliver critical services during the pandemic. Close to S\$6 million was disbursed from the first tranche of the Fund.

The sector came together to harness its collective strengths and wisdom to tackle the evolving needs. The Beyond Covid-19 Taskforce, convened by NCSS in May 2020, brought together representatives from the sector, as well as other stakeholders, to develop plans for the sector to emerge stronger. SSAs also galvanised their peers and other stakeholders through new collaborations.

One such example was Project Makan, where YMCA partnered The Social Kitchen and together worked with logistics companies and commercial restaurants to deliver more than 100,000 meals to vulnerable families during the lockdown.

SSAs benefited from the various support measures introduced by the government, including manpower initiatives like Jobs Support Scheme and SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package. Importantly, private sector companies brought valuable capabilities to the social service sector.

Local IT firm ThunderQuote partnered with NCSS to help SSAs develop their digital

capabilities pro bono. Besides developing comprehensive IT resource guides that enabled SSAs to continue with their services during the lockdown, ThunderQuote continues to organise and run free webinars for SSAs on key digitalisation topics. One silver lining behind the cloud of Covid-19 was how it nudged many SSAs to adopt digital technologies to improve the way they work and serve users.

Transforming to emerge stronger

Motivated by the sector's response to reimagine the delivery of social services, SSAs have been inspired to transform "from SSA 1.0 to SSA 3.0" to enable the sector to better cope with future demands. SSA 3.0 envisions SSAs that are driven by committed social service professionals, augmented by volunteers, and enabled by technology, while keeping service users at the centre of what they do.

While SSAs have embraced many of these elements to strengthen their organisations, much more can

be done to achieve this vision. Often, the lack of resources and capabilities stand in the way (see box, "Initiatives and Resources to Transform to SSA 3.0").

This is demonstrated by Care Corner Singapore, which cultivated change-readiness and high staff engagement, to streamline its processes and better serve clients. During the pandemic, it continued re-constructing its service delivery model and implemented a customer relationship management system to provide integrated support to its service users across more than 30 service points.

In addition, 80 per cent of SSAs which participated in NCSS's People Practice Consultancy initiative saw improvement in people practice maturity (in areas ranging from recruitment and selection to career planning). Participating organisations also had lower turnover rate of 13 per cent compared to 17 per cent of non-participating SSAs.

Initiatives and Resources to Transform to SSA 3.0

Driven by Committed Social Service Professionals

- Strengthen boards of SSAs
 - Partner collaborations
- Address sector leadership gaps
 - Sun Ray scheme
 - Social Service Scholarships and Awards
 - NCSS 40-Under-40
- Develop skilled sector professionals
 - New e-learning and blended learning courses aligned to the Skills Framework for Social Service
 - Mobile learning
 - Learning & Development opportunities
- Improve SSAs' organisation practices
 - People Practice Consultancy
 - Organisation Development Journey
 - Transformation Support Scheme

Augmented by Volunteers

- Enlarge volunteer management capacity
 - VM Capacity Development consultancy
 - Enhanced Volunteer Manager Funding Scheme
- Enhance volunteer management capabilities
 - Volunteer Management Learning & Development Roadmap
 - VM Champions
- Build and foster a stronger volunteer management community
 - Volunteer Management Network
 - #Heartwork

Enabled by Technology

- Strengthen SSAs' organisation resilience
 - Transformation Support Scheme
- Enable SSAs through digital technologies
 - Tech-and-GO! Hub
- Build SSAs' competencies in data protection
 - Data Protection Grant

More manpower with suitable skillsets is needed to accelerate sector transformation. For this purpose, NCSS's Transformation Support Scheme provides funding support for SSAs to recruit manpower for capability-building projects leading to organisational transformation. Projects like fundraising, financial sustainability and stakeholder engagement require transferrable skillsets and experience of individuals from other industries.

Mid-career professionals from other industries have made significant contributions. Take, for instance, Mervyn Lim who joined The Helping Hand (THH) under the Sun Ray scheme, a talent development scheme by NCSS to identify and nurture leaders for the sector. Having previously helmed a large postal and logistics company, he initiated new social enterprise activities and strengthened collaborations at THH.

This facilitated more effective reintegration of ex-offenders back into society and increased the employability of its beneficiaries from 72 per cent to 93 per cent and increasing the number of placements from the Singapore Prisons Services by 50 per cent in the past year. Overall, THH improved its financial performance in FY2020 despite the pandemic.

The above examples speak to the importance of investing in strong organisational capabilities. Boards play an important leadership role in championing the development of such capabilities, and connecting their SSAs to best practices and resources to do so.

The Community Capability Trust will be launched in 2022 and provide up to S\$480 million towards the sector's efforts in capacity and capability building. The government has provided an initial

injection of S\$150 million, and is committed alongside Tote Board to match donations from the public to the Community Chest over 10 years.

Activating partners and community

The important role that private and public sector partners and volunteers play in the success of the social service sector cannot be understated. With the unique strengths and experience that corporate partners bring, they can create meaningful volunteer roles for longer-term engagement that will greatly benefit SSAs and their service users.

Certis is an example of a company that has partnered with SPD to launch Breaking Barriers in August 2020 to empower and engage persons with disabilities through suitable employment opportunities and a series of engagement activities. Besides conducting disability awareness training for all its security personnel, Certis donated S\$20,000 to support SPD during the pandemic.

The *NVPC Individual Giving Study 2018* revealed working adults to be an untapped pool of potential volunteers with 58 per cent of all working adults keen to volunteer, while only 33 per cent said their employers had organised volunteering activities in the past 12 months.

The experience with Covid-19 has revealed the potential for stronger collaborations to play a bigger role in the sector's recovery. This is especially so with evolving and increasingly complex needs on the ground amid limited resources. To do more with less, the community must work together as an ecosystem in a coordinated manner and harness our collective strengths and insights. ■