

# Call to rethink active ageing centres to engage more seniors

Health minister wants to make it easier for them to socialise more, be physically active

Cheryl Tan  
and Gena Soh

Active ageing centres need to be transformed from their current state and become a “magnet” for seniors, to get them out of their homes and help them stay healthy and socially connected, said Health Minister Ong Ye Keng on Monday.

These centres serve seniors in the community by providing them with recreational activities, social support and basic information, as well as referral to care services.

Speaking at the Ministry of Health’s headquarters, Mr Ong noted that most seniors prefer living in the community, either independently or with some help, rather than in a nursing home.

He added that their “biggest enemy” is social isolation, so the Government is reviewing its strategy to help them socialise more and engage in more physical activities that can help delay – or even prevent – frailty and deterioration.

One main method to accomplish this would be to expand the network of active ageing centres around Singapore, so that senior support is “more ubiquitous”, said Mr Ong.

There are 29 such centres in the Republic, with plans to increase this number to 220 islandwide by 2025.

To be better aligned with the Healthier SG initiative – which will see the healthcare system focusing more on preventive care – the centres will expand their services from April 2023, according to the Agency for Integrated Care.

For one thing, they will provide assistance to seniors and help them to stick with the social and lifestyle interventions included in their individual health plans as devised by their family doctors.

The Straits Times understands service providers for active ageing centres can tap a fund to help them expand their range of services. This will come from the \$1 billion set aside for Healthier SG.

Mr Ong said that one of the best ways to entice seniors to visit these centres would be to provide them with nutritious meals.

“Once seniors visit the centre, you can then do a lot of things – you can work with the health care cluster, you can do health checks... you can conduct physical exercises, activities and so forth,” said Mr Ong.

He was giving an overview of the “Care” pillar for the Forward Singapore exercise – which is a series of conversations centred on enhancing the nation’s social compact.

The Healthier SG programme will be launched in six months, he added.

For seniors with more complex care needs, home-based care will need to be enhanced and tailored according to individual needs.

This can be delivered at an active ageing centre close to the senior’s home, and this would help to reduce the burden on caregivers, said Mr Ong.

To help low-income households, governments must invest in universally accessible, high-quality public services such as healthcare, education and public housing, he added.

Therefore, by building up Healthier SG – the preventive care model as a universal public service – it is most likely to be the middle- to lower-income groups that will benefit the most, Mr Ong noted.

He added that the Government was looking at better integrating services for low-income families.

One example would be through the Community Link programme, where vulnerable families can access a suite of interventions, depending on their needs, through a single beholder.

“Beyond packaging different interventions and services, we can combine society’s duty to assist the vulnerable family with the family’s exercise of personal responsibility,” said Mr Ong.

Ms Aw Lay Hoon, deputy director of Pui Yue Community Services, said that with active ageing centres now acting as touch points for seniors from all socio-economic strata, she looks forward to the additional support from the Government.

“There are many challenges associated with the mixing of people across different social classes... For instance, groups across classes might have very different interests and might not even speak the same language,” she said.

“As a result, there is a need for resources to upskill our volunteers and staff in order to learn how to socialise across groups and bring these groups together.”

While Pui Yue Community Services offers engaging recreational programmes that aim to “neutralise this distance through shared activities”, Ms Aw said that these classes are already oversubscribed.

Even with the additional support from the Government, Dr Christina Tsiang, chief executive of Home Nursing Foundation, said that more collaboration with the community and other service providers will be needed to transform active ageing centres into reliable providers of senior care.

However, stable volunteerism remains an issue.

Dr Tsiang said: “The problem of talent acquisition plagues even commercial fields... Volunteers want to be part of a programme where it feels meaningful to give back, and we need to ensure that our programmes are structured in a way that gives them just that.”

tan.cheryl@sph.com.sg  
soh.gena@sph.com.sg