

AIC's new chief wants seniors to join community activities

Drive for senior volunteers, home care services set for a boost as population ages

Joyce Teo
Senior Health Correspondent

Mr Dinesh Vasu Dash, the new chief executive of a national agency that coordinates care services for seniors, met a 104-year-old woman during a visit to an active ageing centre (AAC) in Bedok in 2023.

"I asked if her children were helping her, and she said that her children also needed help because they were also elderly," said Mr Dinesh. "So increasingly, you're going to see not just a single layer but potentially, both parents and grandparents, and hence, the caregiving demands on adult children in the future would potentially be more complex."

Mr Dinesh, who made that visit as the CEO-designate of the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), took over as CEO on Feb 1, 2024. His new role comes at a time when the community is set to play a very important role in supporting seniors to age in place, as the country prepares for a super-aged population.

Nearly one in five Singaporeans now is aged 65 and above. By 2026, this proportion will be one in five citizens, bestowing the status of a super-aged society on Singapore.

By 2030, one in four citizens will

be 65 and above. More seniors will be living alone and facing rising care needs without daily family support. They risk becoming lonely, which has implications for their mental and physical health, and will face safety and security challenges.

To help seniors age well in the community, AIC will redouble its efforts to drive senior volunteering, increase the range of activities and services at AACs and draw seniors, particularly those at risk of social isolation, into the community, said Mr Dinesh.

Its work will complement Healthier SG, a preventive health programme launched in July 2023 to link Singapore residents with a general practitioner (GP) who will oversee their healthcare needs.

AACs are drop-in social recreational centres that extend support to Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 60 and above who live nearby. Their suite of services includes active ageing, befriending and care referrals. The centres are typically located in Housing Board estates, but seniors living in private housing can also sign up with an AAC nearby.

A key activity is communal dining, either cooking together or having a potluck, which all AACs will



RECOVERING AT HOME

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MR DINESH VASU DASH, the new chief executive of Agency for Integrated Care, a national agency that coordinates care services for seniors.

Mr Dinesh urges seniors to stay fit, consult their doctors from time to time – not just when they are unwell – and take part in activities within their communities. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

aim to do once a week from mid-2024, said Mr Dinesh.

The authorities have said that the network of AACs here will grow from 154 now to 220 by 2025. AACs come under Singapore's Age Well SG programme, which will have a budget of \$3.5 billion over the next decade, said Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong in his 2024 Budget speech on Feb 16.

The various initiatives in the programme will include assisted-living options for seniors with care needs, senior-friendly upgrades to residential estates and homes, and improvements to commuter infrastructure.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung has said that \$800 million will be set aside over five years to expand the network and outreach of AACs. In November 2023, he also said the number of senior volunteers

trained by AIC will be doubled to about 4,000 by 2025, up from about 1,900 Silver Generation ambassadors at the moment.

Senior volunteers can befriend other seniors to help them beat loneliness and prevent the early onset of frailty and mental illness, said Mr Dinesh. It is a win-win approach because volunteering is also a way for seniors to contribute to society, he said.

Today, Singapore has 16 dementia-friendly communities, in areas such as Yishun, Bedok and Kebun Bahru. In these communities, residents are aware of the condition, and those living with dementia, as well as their families, can feel included and supported.

AIC has also worked with multiple agencies to create dementia go-to points – places to which the public can take people who are lost and

appear to have dementia. There are now about 650 such points island-wide, at various locations such as MRT stations, bus interchanges and most FairPrice supermarkets.

"The idea would be to say, if you have a condition such as dementia, it is not something that requires you to be institutionalised. You can be cared for in society," said Mr Dinesh.

To help seniors monitor their health, AIC is working with public hospitals to set up community health posts progressively across all AACs where seniors can go to have basic health checks done, said Mr Dinesh.

Getting Singaporeans up to speed with caregiving resources is also an area of focus, as AIC aims to expand the provision of home personal care services to help with activities of daily living and other care tasks.

"In the future, when you have more seniors and fewer people taking care of them, you would need more home personal care services. Otherwise, there could be a tendency to want to go to an institution," said Mr Dinesh, 49, who is married with three children and whose parents are in their 70s.

He was previously the Ministry of Health's group director of crisis strategy and operations, and was instrumental in leading Singapore's national Covid-19 vaccination push.

Aside from helping to shift the paradigm of how seniors will be cared for, AIC is also tapping technology to enable seniors to access care.

Today, the first thought when seniors fall ill or have a small accident could be to go to a hospital's emergency department, but if it is not life-threatening, they should first go to their family doctor or Healthier SG GP, said Mr Dinesh.

"If you need to recover, you can recover at home, you can recover in the community, you don't need to be in the hospital or a community hospital or nursing home. At home, you're taken care of by enhanced services," he said.

"The whole idea is to... have as many people as we can, living, ageing well, and being taken care of in the community, by the community, rather than for them to gravitate towards the healthcare institutions that we have."

This also requires changing the notion of what a senior is, he said. For this, AIC has the Break the Silver Ceiling movement, which challenges the way ageing is viewed, even among seniors themselves.

On March 16, AIC will hold open house events at four AACs in Teck Ghee and Cheng San-Seletar to encourage seniors living nearby to sign up with the centres.

"Seniors should take care of their health by staying fit, and consult their doctor from time to time – not just when they are unwell. They should also participate in activities within their communities, to keep themselves socially connected and be happy," said Mr Dinesh.

"What we would hope not to (see) is seniors sitting at home, watching TV, not moving around anywhere, starting to get frail, starting to deteriorate cognitively and eventually passing away at home."

joyceteo@sph.com.sg