

Call for collective support of seniors in Singapore's ageing society

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More volunteers are needed in the face of Singapore's rapidly ageing population, and they will mostly come from institutes of higher learning, corporations and the community, including younger seniors who are willing and able to engage their peers.

The volunteers are needed for home visits and to befriend the elderly, and support the organising and facilitating of activities at active ageing centres (AACs).

Dr Sng Hock Lin, chief of the Silver Generation Office (SGO), gave these insights, and said the number of his volunteers, or Silver Generation Ambassadors (SGAs), has grown to more than 5,000 today.

"Since the set-up of the Pioneer Generation Office 10 years ago, we have collectively completed 2.7 million engagements with seniors in the community," he told The Straits Times in an exclusive interview at his office in the MND Complex on Sept 18, ahead of SGO's 10th anniversary celebrations on Oct 12.

SGO was formerly the Pioneer Generation Office, established 10 years ago to reach out to pioneers on the Pioneer Generation Package. It became SGO in 2018, the outreach arm of the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC), and expanded its scope to support all seniors aged 60 and above on their ageing needs.

The volunteer pool has to keep growing, as one in four citizens here will be aged 65 and above by

2030, and many will be living alone.

In 2023, SGO partnered the Singapore University of Social Sciences and the National University of Singapore, as well as the polytechnics, to equip their students to be SGAs.

A year later, it engaged over 1,200 students across the institutions as SGAs, the latest being about 200 students from the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine in August.

Since 2018, SGO has worked with more than 90 organisations to recruit about 1,600 SGAs. It has also placed 1,500 corporate volunteers to support AACs under the Silver Guardians programme, where volunteers befriend seniors, or organise and facilitate activities at AACs.

"We encourage corporates to consider serving in a more sustained manner, beyond festive visits and gifting. In the process, they may learn more about how to support their own colleagues in their ageing or caregiving journey," Dr Sng said.

He urged grassroots and religious bodies, schools and even retirees to be proactive in helping to build an inclusive society for the elderly.

"A school can invite seniors from the active ageing centre in the neighbourhood to join in its anniversary event," he said. "A church, temple or mosque can also connect with seniors through activities like functional screening to identify age-related decline in vision and hearing."

Besides recruiting more volunteers, SGO will be exploring more



Silver Generation Office (SGO) chief Sng Hock Lin said the number of his volunteers has grown to over 5,000. Besides recruiting more volunteers, SGO will be exploring more modes of engagement with the elderly. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIANG

modes of engagement with the elderly beyond knocking on their doors. This is especially so as young seniors aged 60 to 70 will form about half of the elderly population by 2030.

"While many of our Pioneer Generation seniors prefer face-to-face meetings, we have seen a trend in an increasing number of our seniors who are more digitally savvy and prefer different engagement modes," said Dr Sng.

Since 2023, SGO has undertaken

phone conversations with seniors to better understand their needs, link them to appropriate services and share information on government schemes. It intends to develop more forms of engagement, especially on digital platforms.

At the same time, SGO is using data analytics to better understand and project the anticipated needs of seniors it has engaged with.

While staff previously had to manually go over feedback received from home visits to get an

understanding of seniors' sentiments, SGO now has a system that categorises the feedback into topics.

This helps staff to quickly narrow down the issues faced by seniors, and can help inform policies to support them better.

Even as it broadens its SGA network and engagement, there will never be enough volunteers to support a million seniors, said Dr Sng.

He is calling for a "collective ownership of seniors" in Singapore,

where caring for the elderly starts with one's family.

"If more people engage their seniors at home, even if it is just by eating or exercising with them, we can focus on those who are isolated," he said. "A family can even volunteer to help other seniors together."

A more important aim would be to foster seniors who are not just passive recipients of support, but active contributors, find meaning and purpose in their ageing journey, Dr Sng added.

Agreeing, Mr Dinesh Vasu Dash, chief executive of AIC, said: "We are going beyond the traditional approach towards volunteerism, where seniors are on the receiving end and viewed as only beneficiaries."

More opportunities will be given to seniors to volunteer as SGAs and as Silver Guardians in AACs, he added. There are annual recruitment campaigns for SGAs, while Silver Guardians are recruited for the AACs by SGO.

"One way that seniors can continue to live enriching lives is through volunteering," he said. "In doing so, they can continue to find meaning and keep themselves socially engaged."

The key to success is for seniors to take the first step, get to know what is available to them, and be encouraged to tap into what is provided, he said.

"Once they take that tiny step forward to take charge of their well-being, it can open doors to make a huge difference."

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