

THE STRAITS TIMES

New task force to tackle mental health issues among migrant workers



Areas of focus will include looking out for signs of mental and emotional distress among migrant workers. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



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SINGAPORE - A new task force has been set up to boost mental health care and support for migrant workers in Singapore.

Called Project Dawn, it will comprise representatives from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC) and HealthServe, as well as government psychologists.

Second Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng, who provided details of the initiative at an event on Friday (Nov 6), said the task force was named Dawn, which is an acronym for depression - a common mental health issue - awareness, wellness and normalisation.

The task force will focus on several key areas, including raising awareness of mental health issues and screening migrant workers who may have mental health problems.

It will also step up efforts to equip front-line officers, dormitory operators, employers and non-governmental organisations (NGO) with the skills and information needed to identify at-risk workers early and channel them towards getting the right care.

Other areas of focus will include looking out for signs of mental and emotional distress among migrant workers, and training para-counsellors as part of efforts to make available counselling services to migrant workers who need it.

The initiatives will be rolled out over two years.



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Dr Tan said migrant workers living in dormitories have faced significant anxiety and stress during the Covid-19 pandemic, and that it was important to care for other aspects of their well-being, beyond their physical needs.

HealthServe executive director Michael Cheah said its counselling hotline received about 250 calls a week during the circuit breaker period. The calls to HealthServe - an NGO that helps provide medical care and other services to migrant workers - have fallen to about 20 calls a week now, he added. However, migrant workers are still adjusting despite the situation slowly returning to normal, he said.

Migrant workers tend to have poorer mental health than the populations they join, said Dr Jared Ng, a consultant for emergency and crisis services at IMH and MOM's Assurance, Care and Engagement (Ace) Group.

This could be due to a variety of stress factors, such as being worried about their loved ones, or the stigmatisation they face as migrants, he added.



(From left) HealthServe executive director Michael Cheah, IMH consultant for Crisis and Emergency Services Dr Jared Ng, Second Minister for Manpower Dr Tan See Leng, Director (Medical) of ACE Group at Ministry of Manpower Dr Lam Meng Chon, and Migrant Workers' Centre executive director Bernard Menon at a briefing, at Ministry of Manpower on Nov 6, 2020.

"Migrant workers also need to adjust to a new culture, new norms and a new way of life in Singapore and these are stressors as well," said Dr Ng.

Mr Veluchamy Muniapparaj, 35, a migrant worker from India who is also an MWC ambassador, said he welcomed the move to address mental health issues among migrant workers as it would give them greater peace of mind knowing their emotional needs were being looked out for.

He said: "Many of us were anxious when Covid-19 first happened. We didn't know how long it would last, and some of us had issues back home we could not attend to because of the quarantine.

"Now things are better. Our basic needs are taken care of but knowing the authorities are there to hear our problems and offer more support is a step further."

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Dr Tan said supporting workers' mental health is a work in progress. He added that MOM will continue to look for ways to collaborate with NGOs, whose work the ministry was "deeply grateful and very appreciative of".

More will be done in the coming months to make mental health resources more culturally relevant for migrant workers.

For instance, Mr Cheah said HealthServe is hoping to bring onboard counsellors from the home countries of the migrant workers to help with counselling sessions. Having someone who understands their culture and environment is likely to bring more comfort and relief to distressed workers, he added.

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