

## Census to help target disability services

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For years, no one has known with certainty just how many people with disabilities there are in Singapore. But this will change with the upcoming population census which will be conducted in 2020.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) told The Straits Times that it is working with the Department of Statistics to find out the number of persons with disabilities and the type of disabilities they have, for the first time in the next census.

These disability-related questions aim to gather data on: The estimated number of people with disabilities, the type of disability they suffer from and their age and household structure.

The MSF spokesman said that such information will enable government agencies in planning sufficient services for the different groups of people with disabilities, such as in meeting their health and social needs as they age.

This data would also enable MSF to gauge the demand for its services and programmes for people with disabilities, its spokesman added.

Ms Anita Fam, chairman of the third Enabling Masterplan, a national blueprint for disability services, said: "Right now, I can't tell you how many people with disabilities there are here. We don't have precise data. All we have are estimates."

With the census data, she said, policymakers can better plan where resources should go, and the type of services needed to serve the different groups of disabilities.

Mr J.R. Karthikeyan, director of disability support at Awwa, a charity that serves persons with disabilities, said such information is crucial for programme planning for specific groups, given that the profile of those with disabilities has changed over the decades.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were more children diagnosed with physical and intellectual disabilities. Now, a lot more children are diagnosed with autism, he noted.

Currently, the best available estimate of the number of people with disabilities is the 2015 survey by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), based on a random sampling of 2,000 citizens and permanent residents aged 18 and older.

It found that the prevalence rate of disability was 3.4 per cent of the resident population aged 18 to 49. This rose to 13.3 per cent for those aged 50 and older. These figures include those who became disabled due to accidents, illness or old age.

Half of the people in this group had sensory disabilities, referring to blindness and deafness, and physical disabilities. The remaining were intellectually disabled or had autism.

The MSF spokesman said that compared with the NCSS survey, the census data will provide a more accurate estimate of the number and proportion of people with disabilities as the sample size is bigger.

Dr Justin Lee, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, pointed out that the last census in 2010 surveyed about 200,000 households, so the census data would be much more definitive than the NCSS study, which polled only 2,000 people.

Other countries such as the United States and Britain already collect disability data through their census, he added.

"The disability sector has always bemoaned the lack of credible statistics, so this census data is excellent news," he said.

"The data would also benefit voluntary welfare organisations to help them make strategic plans on whether they are meeting the demand and whether they should scale up or down (their services for persons with disabilities)."