

Fewer residents at Meet-the-People sessions

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Fewer people to see at weekly Meet-the-People sessions (MPS), and more time to deal with complex cases: MPs say Social Service Offices (SSOs) have freed them up to work on things that benefit more residents.

The MPs' sessions can be gruelling, often stretching beyond midnight, as they deal with residents' problems, ranging from something as simple as a leaking tap, to complex issues like exemption from national service, and taking care of families.

But with more time freed up now, thanks to the SSOs, MPs can tackle more complicated cases, meet agencies to push for amenities like sheltered walkways, and organise more constituency events.

Since the first SSOs were rolled out nearly two years ago, several MPs note that attendance at their weekly Meet-the-People sessions has dropped, by about 10 per cent to up to a third for some.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Ang Hin Kee observes that the number of "repeat visitors" at his sessions - residents who see him frequently for a variety of problems - has gone down.

He tells Insight: "Out of every 10 cases, three to four have found that the SSO is a better place to receive complete care."

Meanwhile, Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Chia Shi-Lu finds that while the number of financial assistance cases he deals with has been reduced thanks to SSOs, those left are more complicated.

"The simple cases, like trying to get an HDB flat for first-time buyers, you hardly see those anymore," he says.

"It's the stuff like getting a flat right next to their parents' in a mature estate like Queenstown - that's more difficult."

While SSOs have had some impact, Marine Parade GRC MP Fatimah Lateef takes pride in the fact that she makes a concerted effort to ensure the down-and-out don't even need to attend her MPS.

"My ward now includes about 100 rental blocks, after the 2011 General Election. During house visits, I make voucher recommendations, see what's happening in their lives," she says.

She and her volunteers can leave the MPS earlier now, but that doesn't mean a restful week ahead: Dr Fatimah organises more community events, to reach out to more residents.

"Take the Mid-Autumn Festival. I don't just have one, I have seven to eight, spread over two weekends in September," she says. With SSOs becoming a permanent part of the landscape, will they diminish the role of an MP?

Aljunied GRC MP Pritam Singh, who belongs to the opposition Workers' Party, says the sessions remain relevant as there are residents who need help but aren't aware they qualify for various schemes.

"Our job is to listen to their stories and sift the problems," he says.

He does acknowledge, however, that fewer residents at an MP's sessions will result in less face-time with potential voters.

"An opposition politician appreciates whatever contact he makes with residents through a session, because he's not part of the Residents' Committee nomenclature," he says, referring to the network of grassroots organisations in the constituencies, whose advisers are appointed by the Government.

But he emphasises that this should not matter in the grand scheme of things: "We're supposed to be reaching out to residents anyway."

Similarly, Dr Chia says fewer faces at MPs' sessions does not translate to less relevance. In fact, residents have increasingly turned to social media and e-mail to get their point across - to which he also responds.

In another vein, Singapore Management University law don and former Nominated MP Eugene Tan says most MPs have never been directly involved in the actual delivery of social assistance.

This being so, the presence of SSOs is unlikely to reduce the need for MPs overnight.

But, "if MPs worked very closely with SSOs in their localities, it would aid his standing, as he could be seen as someone who is caring and doing what he can to help a resident in need", he says.

This is what Dr Chia tries to do with select residents who, for whatever reason, choose not to go to SSOs.

"I've a focused programme where we try to redirect our efforts to dire cases, and help them break out of the poverty trap," he says. "Because it's so focused, I can only do a few at a time."

Agreeing with the view that being an MP is a long-term commitment, Ang Mo Kio GRC's Mr Ang says: "You can't be establishing relationships only when people have crises."

While there are some cases in which an MP is only a middleman in providing help, taken as a whole, the MPS "provide clues about what is happening on the ground".

But there is also a political cost if SSOs do not perform up to people's varying expectations.

Says National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser: "Some people may consider government assistance to be an entitlement. If so, it may not have much impact on voting behaviour."

"However, if no help is given, we can be quite sure that they will vote against the incumbents, especially if other parties promise something more attractive, sustainability aside."

In dealing with SSOs, MPs agree that their benefits far outweigh any political costs.

Says Associate Professor Eugene Tan: "They are part of the same ecosystem looking after the welfare of residents, rather than competitors."