

'Get the village involved' to help low-income single mums

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Social workers, teachers, volunteers and Govt all have a role: Tharman

LOW-INCOME single women with young children are among the most vulnerable in Singapore and they need a complete societal support network to help them, said Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

Or in his words, "get the whole village involved".

He outlined five areas to help poor single mothers, a group whose needs are emotional, he stressed, since they have to recover from the trauma of their divorces.

First, a good programme is critical. "Frankly, once you have a good programme... the donors are willing to come forward," he said at a Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda) event yesterday.

Second, social workers are important because they are the people with the skills and expertise, added Mr Tharman, who is also chairman of Sinda.

Third, it is useful to have volunteers who can share their own experiences. "We have found that single mothers who have been through the programme also make excellent volunteers and mentors," he said, referring to Project Athena, a Sinda support group for single mothers.

Fourth, school teachers and principals must play a role too, as they are the ones who can keep a "special eye" out for the children of single mothers.

Last, the Government. "We want to coordinate across agencies, to help the women so they don't need to go from pillar to post," said Mr Tharman, who is also the Finance Minister.

"They have one social worker dealing with them. And we will arrange the back end. We will coordinate as well as we can to help the women."

The key to all these efforts, he added, is to get them to back to the workforce.

"Because that's also part of the confidence building. Being part of the workforce, earning their keep and eventually managing another group of people is entirely possible as well," he said.

He was speaking at an event to launch a handbook on the experiences of Project Athena, written by Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Mathew Mathews.

The book addresses issues faced by low-income Indian single mothers to help social workers better understand their needs. It was put together using data from 441 low-income single mothers.

Mr Tharman said that the help which a low-income single mother needs are much more than that of a normal person, "involving jobs, training, housing, schooling, informal support for the children, financial assistance - multifaceted," he said.

"So we're all in this together and the Government will certainly do its part."