

## **New name for voluntary welfare organisations – social service agencies**

***Rahimah Rashith and Theresa Tan***  
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The social service sector in Singapore is looking to embrace a new moniker to replace the age-old term voluntary welfare organisations, or VWOs, after years of debate.

On Thursday, Ms Anita Fam, president of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), informed its members in an e-mail that it will be using the term "social service agency" (SSA) instead as a label that better reflects the sector's evolving work.

Ms Fam said that while VWO showcases the "sector's rich heritage", member organisations and stakeholders "have acknowledged that these terms may not fully reflect what our sector is today, the work that we do and what we can be in the future".

"It is therefore timely for us to review these terms."

Speaking to The Straits Times, the NCSS said the name change comes after previous discussions on another term did not pan out as expected.

In 2017, the NCSS started using the term "social service organisations", after conducting polls among participants at its Social Service Summit and its annual general meeting.

"However, we received feedback that the abbreviation of the term is similar to that of the Ministry of Social and Family Development's (MSF) Social Service Offices.

"The NCSS and MSF have considered various options and decided to move towards using the term 'social service agencies' instead," the spokesman said.

"The use of the new term is not just a change in terminology; it is a signal of our sector's professionalism, transformation and our aspiration to continue as agents of change, to build a caring and inclusive Singapore.

"We hope that, over time, the majority of the sector will come to identify with it."

Though not mandated, the NCSS encourages its more than 450 member agencies to adopt the new SSA term.

Charities welcomed the new terminology, with some saying that the VWO term is outdated, given the sector's push towards professionalism.

The term VWO, to describe organisations in the social service sector, was first used here more than 60 years ago in a 1947 report by the Social Welfare Department, the precursor of today's MSF.

"The term VWO was derived from the organisation being set up as a voluntary or interest group for those who have the passion and interest to uplift the disadvantaged in our community," said Handicaps Welfare Association president Edmund Wan.

"Along the way, with increasing needs, these VWOs needed professional manpower and a professional approach in handling the needs and aspirations of their beneficiaries."

Today, SSAs are staffed by professionals who are trained in areas such as social work and psychology.

Volunteers are still part of the sector, tapped for ad hoc or regular help. However, the bread-and-butter work is performed by full-time, paid professional staff, said those interviewed.

The chief executive of Sree Narayana Mission (Singapore), Mr S. Devendran, said that the sector has moved from simply providing "welfare" to empowering the beneficiaries they serve.

"We, as a country, have moved from providing simply 'welfare' - which breeds a crutch mentality and connotes a certain condescending veneer - to helping the disadvantaged find solutions to their problems and get back on their feet," he said.

Still, others questioned the necessity of changing a term that has become common parlance.

Senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies Justin Lee cautioned that changing labels "will do very little to alter the prestige of these organisations or the work that they do".

He added that the term voluntary also refers to the idea that these organisations are non-governmental and provide welfare services, in contrast to state-run welfare services.

"Therefore, to drop 'voluntary' from the term is to obscure what I think is a useful distinction that they are neither government nor private (for-profit companies)," he said.