

Number of new charities down to 10-year low

Rise of informal help groups and sector reaching saturation point cited as likely reasons by experts

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The number of new charities here hit a 10-year low last year, a decline experts say could be due to the rise of informal groups performing charity work and the sector reaching a saturation point.

The Commissioner of Charities' latest annual report, released last month, showed only 39 groups registered as charities last year.

This is down from 49 a year before and 57 in 2008, the commissioner's spokesman told The Sunday Times.

Charity Council chairman Gerard Ee said the smaller number could indicate that the charity sector has reached a saturation point.

"There are so many charities out there fighting for the same donation dollar and it is very difficult for new charities to raise funds," he added. "So people may think it's easier to volunteer at existing charities, doing the work they were thinking of doing, instead of starting a new charity."

The annual report showed that there were a total of 2,263 registered charities last year. Religious groups accounted for about half of them.

The rest include organisations in the arts, education, health and social service sectors.

Although fewer charities were registered last year, Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Justin Lee noted that there are many informal groups coming together to support a variety of causes on an ad-hoc basis.

He added they may not want a more permanent set-up as a charity and all its attendant costs. Take, for example, Project Goodwill Aid, which was founded by Ms Siti Nurani Mohd Salim, 36, an executive dealing in club memberships.

She and her group of over 20 volunteers go knocking on doors of rental flats to seek out the poor and offer help, for example, by giving food rations and other aid.

"All of us have full-time jobs and registering our group as a charity requires a lot more commitment as there are all the rules and regulations to follow. It is not feasible for us to do so now," she said.

Some of the new charities that were registered last year include Awful Grace, Octava Foundation and Wheelchair Rugby (Singapore).

Wheelchair Rugby (Singapore) was set up to promote the sport here, said its director Rodney Holt, an able-bodied rugby enthusiast.

The sport combines elements of rugby, basketball and handball.

So far, there are about 10 active players here - all men with spinal cord injuries caused by accidents or illnesses.

Mr Holt, 56, said: "The sport helps them to get out of their homes and gets them active. And they have a community who can empathise with what they have been through."

The Octava Foundation gives out grants, funds bursaries and supports programmes that help troubled youth, among others initiatives. The foundation was started by the family office of Octava Private Limited, which has interests across diverse industries, from real estate to financial technology.

A family office manages the wealth of ultra-wealthy families.

Ms Christine Tan, 54, set up Awful Grace in 2016, and it was registered as a charity last year. The charity works with prisoners and their families, and at-risk youth here, and also runs community development projects in Nepal.

For example, its signature programme involves participants making clay pottery to learn about themselves and pick up life lessons, such as resilience and the importance of planning, said Ms Tan, who is a clinical counsellor.

"Every person has a pain journey that they go through. Some in our community will need others to journey with them and that is our role," she said.

Meanwhile, 23 groups were de-registered as charities last year, up from 19 in 2016, and 18 in 2008.

Among other reasons, charities may have de-registered because they ceased operations or had their operations subsumed under another charity, the commissioner's spokesman said.

Care Corner Singapore de-registered its family service centres in Admiralty, Queenstown, Toa Payoh and Woodlands, the Care Corner Counselling Centre and Care Corner Teck Ghee Youth Centre last year.

All six charities were de-registered as individual entities to consolidate them under Care Corner Singapore.

Among other aims, it allows the charity to achieve operational efficiency and better support for staff development, said its spokesman.

Care Corner Singapore runs a suite of services, from senior activity centres and student care centres to youth centres.