

One-Stop Social Service: 30,000 Needy Families Already Better Off In nearly two years, the new service offices have helped many lower-income households, though Insight finds there are still wrinkles to be ironed out

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In November 2013, Madam Choo Lay Ting and her husband Richard Ang stepped with trepidation into the recently-opened Social Service Office (SSO) in Boon Lay, in what was once part of a Housing Board void deck.

The couple needed financial help, and badly - Mr Ang, now 50, used to be a chef but had been out of work for over a year after breaking both ankles in a fall. Madam Choo, now 41, took care of their two young children at their rented one-room HDB flat.

They had asked their MP, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong, for help and he suggested they visit the new SSO, only a 10-minute walk from their home. The SSOs were being set up in HDB towns to bring social assistance closer to needy Singaporeans. The Boon Lay office was one of 10 opened by then.

Previously, they would have had to trek to one of just five Community Development Councils (CDCs) - often crowded and not at the most convenient of locations - for ComCare assistance.

The Angs found the brightly-lit Boon Lay SSO to be welcoming - for one thing, it allows walk-ins, unlike some organisations that require a referral. Receptionists advised them that it would be about half an hour before an officer could see them.

The couple went on to spend an hour with a social services officer, who asked intensely personal questions about their finances and family history, but in what they felt was a respectful, polite way.

Six weeks or so later, in January, the family received the first of monthly \$200 cash grants.

Welcome to the new and accessible face of Singapore social assistance. The Angs became one of 30,300 households last year to receive financial help from SSOs, which were launched during the Budget of March 2013 and come under the Ministry of Social and Family Development.

And the SSOs' reach is likely to be much greater, if the offices tracked non-financial aid they helped to provide, such as in counselling and anger management.

The first SSOs were made up of converted offices in CDCs - previously responsible for administering ComCare, the national aid fund whose assistance includes monthly cash grants and rental fees. The first dedicated SSO opened at Kreta Ayer in August 2013.

The scheme has blossomed from the initial aim of 20, to an expanded 24 offices by this year, in HDB towns islandwide. The aim is for at least 95 per cent of those in need to be able to access social services within 2km of where they live or work.

CONTROVERSIAL START

Yet in parliamentary debates following that 2013 Budget, Workers' Party MP Muhamad Faisal Abdul Manap questioned if the new heartland social service offices would duplicate services by other agencies and add another layer of bureaucracy for needy families to contend with.

Mr Faisal (Aljunied GRC) said he was "puzzled" that while the Government frowned on a welfare state, it was introducing additional bureaucratic levels with the 20 new SSOs.

But times were indeed changing. That year marked the start of an increased emphasis on social spending in Budgets. In the 2013/2014 financial year, about \$56 million was distributed in the form of short- and medium-term payouts, more than double that five years ago.

In announcing the SSOs in Budget 2013, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam had declared: "We want citizen-centred social services that are more integrated, so that anyone who needs help can get it conveniently and need not go to different agencies."

That year, Mr Tharman also injected another \$200 million into ComCare, "as the fund is well-utilised".

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser notes that by making it easier for those who need help to get it, the Government has shown an inclination to deviate from its preferred "self-reliance" premise, post-2011 General Election.

This approach, SSOs included, shows that the Government "recognises that there are limits to the 'self-reliance' approach, and that there are problems for which individuals can't reasonably be expected to shoulder on their own", Associate Professor Tan tells Insight.

Previously, the needy would have gone to a CDC, while perhaps also turning to voluntary welfare organisations for other forms of aid, such as free school textbooks for their children or meals for their elderly parents.

Now, SSOs are one-stop help centres located near them. The offices don't just administer ComCare. They coordinate the work of the various helping hands on the ground, such as voluntary welfare organisations and grassroots groups.

For Madam Choo, for example, the SSO has provided a suite of help, not just financial in nature. Besides the monthly cash grant, which has helped to put food on the table and pay bills, and was doubled to \$400 recently, she and her husband received help with job-seeking.

The ability of the SSO to provide or enable such holistic care is one of its strengths, says NUS associate professor of social work Corinne Ghoh.

"Very often, families come forward to seek help on financial matters, but this may just be a problem at the surface level," she says, adding that deeper issues like mental health problems, unemployment and family problems could arise.

Another way SSOs have changed the social assistance landscape is by placing people on the ground to provide more localised, individualised care.

Ms Ida Iryanee, who manages SSOs in Chua Chu Kang and Bukit Panjang, notes that more families with young children, as well as single parents, are seeking help with family planning and employment.

This contrasts with the older demographic at the SSO in Ang Mo Kio. General manager Ang Chee Meng is looking out for a higher incidence of degenerative diseases like Alzheimer's or osteoarthritis over the next two to three years, which "may bring about additional stress to families and caregivers".

BUT A LONG ROAD AHEAD

Observers say the SSO marks only the beginning of a long journey - more can always be done.

For one thing, while SSOs aim to clear all social assistance applications within six weeks - already a marked improvement from the days when less than half were done in this time - those in desperate need cannot wait that long.

"We try to give vouchers, rations and, for some, a one-off cash handout, to help them wait out the application process," says a People's Action Party branch secretary, who declined to be named. "But when you're desperate, those few weeks can be hell."

Then there are those who try "shopping around", going from one MP's Meet-the-People session to another, plus community events, in the hope of immediate handouts, without ever sitting down to resolve the root cause, adds the branch secretary.

Some worry that SSOs provide only remedial - not preventive - help.

Prof Ghoh points out that nearly half of lower-income households have family members financially dependent on them, according to a 2011 Ministry of Social and Family Development study of 2,000 respondents. (The study classed the lower-income segment as those on incomes below \$3,000, comprising non-university graduates in one- to four-room HDB flats). Families with children coped by cutting back on enrichment courses for their children, it showed.

"The implication is that the children may be deprived of learning opportunities, leading to a slower head start in life. Preventive and developmental assistance can be put in place to support these children (so that) they have a better chance to do well in the school system and not lag their peers," she says.

There are also those who find the SSOs' rigorous means-testing invasive.

Recounting that several residents had forsaken help from the SSOs, Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Ang Hin Kee says: "The SSOs conduct a thorough survey of the family household income, like who can provide what, even their extended siblings, and some residents don't like it because they think it'll create a dispute within their family."

Meanwhile, Lien Foundation chairman and former Nominated MP Laurence Lien has heard feedback that "needy residents still feel they are not understood and are judged", and that "aid is often piecemeal, short-term and conditional".

"The financial anxiety for many is not taken away, which makes it difficult for aid recipients to be more self-reliant, engage in long-term thinking, and break out of their poverty cycle."

He argues that the SSOs' intended holistic approach must come across more strongly, as needy residents require better social relationships and networks, as part of the long process to becoming self-reliant.

Thus, SSOs must improve their partnerships with voluntary welfare organisations, which are often better placed to mobilise community support, he says.

Despite concerns raised by MP Faisal in the Budget 2013 debates, none of those interviewed by Insight this week mentioned any issues of agency duplication and layers of bureaucracy. Indeed, following the announcement of the setting up of SSOs, South West District mayor Amy Khor gave the assurance that though CDCs will no longer disburse ComCare, they will continue to assist the needy by focusing on the elderly, encouraging volunteerism, and getting more corporate partners on board.

Mr Alfred Tan, executive director of Singapore Children's Society - which runs a family service centre (FSC) in Yishun - says SSOs and FSCs have "no choice but to work hand-in-hand" as FSCs' social workers are better equipped to take on counselling cases, while SSOs can handle more monetary cases.

Other SSO general managers share stories of collaboration - for example, voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) that distribute food to the elderly in rental blocks alerting the SSO when volunteers notice a resident still has a meal packet hanging on his door.

"Together, there's a fuller picture of what's happening on the ground," says Mr Tan. But he acknowledges that grey areas could emerge later, as SSOs, FSCs and VWOs figure out their roles.

Singapore Management University law don and former Nominated MP Eugene Tan notes that SSOs have taken over social service delivery, a role once predominantly performed by VWOs, which are still an integral part of the social assistance landscape.

The introduction of SSOs "signals an attempt to ensure that the Government's position on key issues of social assistance is coherently developed, articulated, and delivered effectively and efficiently on the ground," he says.

WHEN IT ALL WORKS OUT

Whatever the shortcomings of the SSOs, their introduction has certainly helped Madam Choo and her husband.

With their officer's encouragement, Mr Ang took part in a six-week, subsidised course and now operates a forklift. The job brings him \$1,600 a month.

And thanks to someone at a nearby family service centre - which works with SSOs to keep tabs on the community - Madam Choo starts work as a saleswoman next month. Their combined income is likely to make them ineligible for the cash grant - a problem she is more than happy to have. Their officer also helps them plan ahead financially. "(He) said we must start thinking of how we are going to pay for our children's school fees when they get to

university or poly," she says in Mandarin of her son, now 10, and daughter, seven. "So when I start work, I'm going to save \$100 a month and not touch it. It's going to be just for them."

With any luck, she says, they won't need to go to the SSO anymore.