

Volunteer Arm of SAF to be Set Up Next Year **Over 100 expected in first batch, with two tracks - operations or specialist**

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Since the age of 13, Teng Wen Li had waited for the day she could join the National Police Cadet Corps (Sea), a school uniformed group.

Her mother, a regular in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), had often regaled her only child with stories of her adventures in camp, sparking her interest in being in the military.

Now 17, Wen Li plans to sign up for the newly formed Singapore Armed Forces Volunteer Corps, which would give her an entree to that world while enabling her to do something for her country.

"Unlike the boys, we don't have national service, so I want to gain some experience and knowledge before committing to sign on," said the junior college student, who hopes to be a civil servant if she does not become a defence executive officer.

Every able-bodied man and woman between the ages of 18 and 45 who is exempt from national service will be eligible for the military volunteer corps when it is set up in the middle of next year.

Women, first-generation permanent residents and new citizens will be the target of the new corps, first mooted last year and envisioned as a unit that will serve alongside regulars and national servicemen.

Defence planners hope to see about 100 to 150 step forward to form the first batch of volunteers.

They can choose to serve in two tracks:

* Operations - guarding the Republic's key installations like Jurong Island and crowd control during SAF-related events;

* Specialist - applying their expertise in the legal, medical, psychological and maritime fields, among others.

After signing up, they will have to wear a uniform and undergo a four-week course to familiarise themselves with military culture and operations.

Like every operationally ready national serviceman, volunteers are liable to be called up to serve for up to two weeks every year, for at least three years.

They are likely to be given an allowance during their in-camp stints.

The topic of women and first-generation permanent residents volunteering attracted intense discussion in recent focus groups led by the Committee to Strengthen NS.

In a recent Institute of Policy Studies survey, seven out of 10 Singaporeans said women should be allowed to volunteer for the country's defence.

This could include helping out at National Day parades and military open houses.

But Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said yesterday that NS must be for a real and critical need, and "neither tokenistic nor symbolic".

The military volunteer corps is likely to be a variant of the Singapore Police Force's Volunteer Special Constabulary, which helps in patrols, and the Singapore Civil Defence Force's Civil Defence Auxiliary Unit, whose members teach or man the 995 hotline.

Both units have about 900 volunteers.

Dr Ng said setting up the SAF's volunteer corps would not be "an exercise in numbers" but to ensure people are meaningfully deployed.

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