

NS Recommendations May Cost Govt S\$4.5b Over Next Decade Proposed benefits strike right balance between responding to NSmen's needs and letting them contribute more, says Ng

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Singapore— Recommendations from the Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS) would cost the Government S\$4.5 billion over the next decade if they are approved, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said yesterday.

Acknowledging that the outlay would be a significant investment, he reiterated that proposed benefits for national servicemen (NSmen), such as a substantial Medisave grant, must reflect the right values of service and not dilute the spirit of serving the country.

Speaking in Parliament, Dr Ng said the committee — which he chairs — believes the set of recommendations announced last Thursday “strikes the right balance (between) responding to the needs of national servicemen and allowing them to contribute more as national servicemen and volunteers”.

The recommendations could be implemented as early as next year if approved by the Government.

The committee's 30 recommendations included disbursements of S\$2,000 to NSmen in three stages: When one completes full-time NS, is halfway through his operationally ready training cycle and when he completes the cycle.

Dr Ng said the committee recognises the increasing pressures of work and studies on operationally ready NSmen, which was why it recommended easing travel restrictions and giving them more time to prepare for the Individual Physical Proficiency Test.

Noting the overall positive response to the recommendations, Dr Ng said: “Many Singaporeans have expressed their concerns that too many benefits for NSmen would dilute what it means to serve the country. We agree that the benefits we give must reflect the right values of service to the country.”

Citing a study by the Institute of Policy Studies commissioned by the CSNS, Dr Ng noted that public support for NS remains strong. Among other findings, it found that 98 per cent of respondents agreed that NS is crucial for national defence and for securing Singapore's peace and prosperity, while 94 per cent acknowledged that NS provides opportunities to learn something useful.

“When they presented to me these figures, I said, ‘Too good to be true. Must be selection bias or the time you called, or the households you went to’,” Dr Ng said. “The researcher was fairly taken aback. He said, ‘No, this is very rigorous — we looked at it. No different from other studies we did. This will stand up to scrutiny and scientific rigour; objective survey across the population.’ These are remarkably high support levels for any national issues, let alone NS.”

The current strong support for NS made this the best time to conduct a review to ensure NS remains responsive and relevant to a new generation that did not experience Singapore's early struggles first hand, said Dr Ng. "Better to hear them now and adjust policies, rather than wait and assume previous policies will work even when circumstances have changed."

Dr Ng also spoke about the role of Malays in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), which was brought up by some Members of Parliament earlier this week. He reiterated that all soldiers are deployed and promoted based on merit, capability and aptitude, as well as their commitment to the SAF and Singapore, regardless of race and religion.

He added that Malays had made significant strides in skills and education and that they are in all services of the SAF as pilots, commandos, combat engineers, artillery men and naval personnel. While the role of Malays in the SAF has expanded over the years, Dr Ng said the SAF had done it quietly, progressively and "without fanfare".

"I have many senior Malay commanders within the SAF. I meet them from time to time, not because they are Malays but because I meet senior commanders. To take any action based on race, even if it is an affirmative action, puts us onto the path of tokenism," he added.