

SINGAPORE

Call to bridge gaps in mental health care for youth

Community support vital amid stigma of hospital treatment, says President

Syarafana Shafeeq

There is still a lot of stigma associated with going to hospitals to seek mental health treatment. Hence, strong support within the community is needed, to ensure that young people with mental health concerns can get help.

President Halimah Yacob made these points on Wednesday during a visit to the Singapore Children's Society, an organisation serving the needs of children and the youth. She said that treating mental health challenges is not a question of just medication or talking to doctors, but also support on the ground.

Even after one takes medication or receives treatment, there are moments in one's life when one needs to seek help and wonders where to go, she added.

"We realise there is a gap in services in the community, so we wish to provide a continuum of care, from hospitals or clinics to the community, which is very much needed."

Madam Halimah visited the society on Wednesday to get an up-



FAMILY INVOLVEMENT KEY

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PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB, who received an update on the President's Challenge-Institute of Mental Health programme, which was launched last year to help those between the ages of 13 and 19.

date on a programme that aims to bridge the gap between care from hospitals and care within the community for youth with mental health concerns.

The President's Challenge-Institute of Mental Health (PC-IMH) programme was launched in March last year to serve those between the ages of 13 and 19 with mild to moderate mental health symptoms.

Children's Society was among four social service agencies (SSAs) helping the youth under the programme, alongside Club Heal, Singapore Association for Mental Health and Touch Community Services. The youth are referred to the SSAs by IMH. The four SSAs have received 40 referral cases since January.

Children's Society shared on Wednesday that all 15 of its beneficiaries from the pilot programme displayed anxiety symptoms, and

four in 10 have been exposed to potentially traumatic experiences. Four in 10 also are at risk of suicide or self-harm.

The organisation said that after three months of the programme, most beneficiaries showed improvement and had a better level of functioning in their daily lives. As part of the programme, the youth go to the centre weekly or biweekly to meet social workers, sometimes with their parents.

Madam Halimah stressed the importance of enhancing awareness and knowledge of mental health issues among parents.

She said: "If you tell someone they've got cancer or heart problems, it is a lot easier to understand than something that is going on in the mind."

She said the problem is not that parents are not making any effort or being neglectful, but rather that they are unaware or do not know

how to help. "Services like this are really important as they involve the parents and family in order to, together, help the young person recover and have better mental health and be better able to take care of themselves."

Children's Society's Oasis for Minds Services deputy director Vivyan Chee said that additional training for the staff has helped them better help the youth.

Previously, the focus was on risk management of those with mental health concerns, such as ensuring the safety of those that show suicidal symptoms.

With the new training by IMH, staff can better assess the different aspects of mental health.

"It's not just about preventing mental illness from progressing to be more severe, but it's also about promoting mental well-being."

President Halimah Yacob and deputy director of Oasis for Minds Services Vivyan Chee observing an activity for youth beneficiaries during her visit to the Singapore Children's Society on Wednesday. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO