Social Insights: Letters by DGSW

vol. 3

Written by

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Preface

Over the past few years, the shifts in social and economic trends in Singapore have caused the social needs of our clients to become more complex. We can foresee that socioeconomic trends and issues in the near future will look even more diverse, intricate and multi-dimensional in nature.

This book is a compilation of my reflections and observations on social work practice, social service delivery and my journey in social services. The concepts and principles covered in my letters would be relevant to the work of practitioners, policymakers and social service leaders, in your journey with clients and your own journey in the social service sector. With a focus on leadership and planning in social services, this book also touches on strengthening capabilities of social service professionals and leaders. It is only by developing human capacities that we can improve the social service ecosystem and deliver sustained impact to our clients.

With these skills and knowledge in place, I am confident that social service professionals will be able to keep pace with the complexities of our ever-evolving environment and be well-equipped to bring change to the lives of clients, families and the community.

Ang Bee Lian
Director-General of Social Welfare
Ministry of Social and Family Development
March 2021
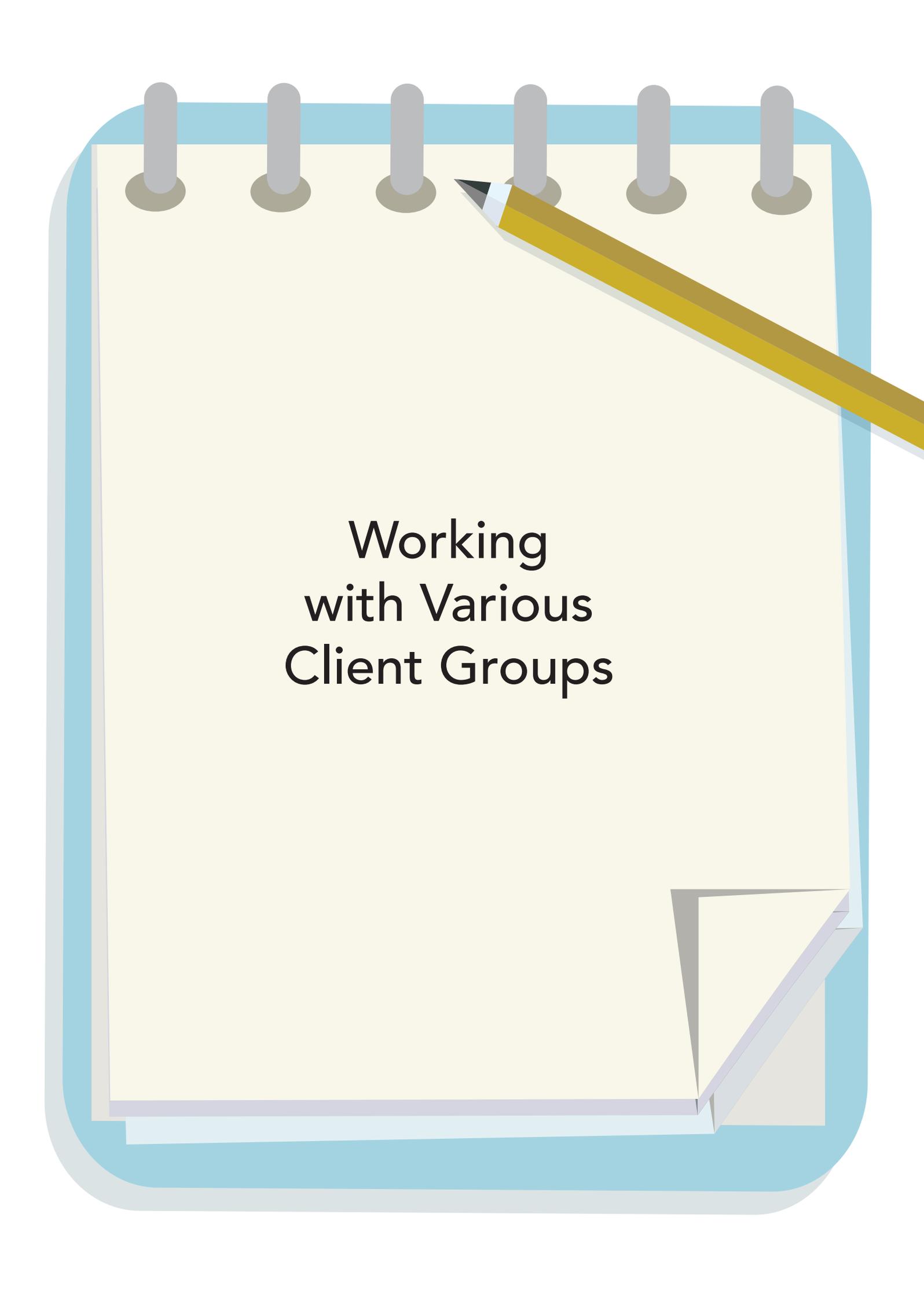
Working with Various Client Groups

Medical-Social Integration

Increasingly, we are recognising that health and social integration must gain more prominence to ensure that discharged patients continue to receive care and support in the community. These individuals need a range of services that go beyond social integration to prevent a relapse or a premature return to the hospital; and to help them regain as much independence as possible.

Shaping Care for the Future

So how can we shape care for the future? We can and have started through the 3 'I's: Integration, Innovation and Investment.

1. Integration

Integration is the process of combining two or more things to create a seamless "one" experience. It is about putting on the lens of the patient, and being intentionally flexible, personalised and seamless when extending help and treatment to the patient. This may sound simple but the barrier is the expert lens of issuing instructions and a lack of consideration for co-existing factors that time does not permit one to pay attention to.

Greater collaboration across the social and healthcare sector is needed to provide integrated care. Holistic and coordinated care will ensure that patients do not fall through the cracks[1].

Principles to Guide the Application of Integrated Care

These are principles that can guide the application of integrated care.

i. Clear and Committed Leadership

We need leaders to come together to discuss, establish a common purpose and focus on desired outcomes. We also need a common set of values and vision across the sector to provide clear direction for the team's service provision and for supporting and supervising team members.

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[1] Lloyd, J., & Wait, D. S. (2006). *Integrated Care – A Guide for Policymakers.* Retrieved from International Longevity Centre UK's website.

ii. Training and Education

Integration begins with the patient's perspective as the organising principle of service delivery. As such, leaders may need to adjust systems and routines or even come up with new regulations to facilitate integration. Cross-training of professionals is necessary to bring about a shared perspective to facilitate coordination and encourage mutual respect across systems.

iii. Good Understanding of Roles

Social care services can provide insight regarding how patients live, and this can contribute to the success of healthcare intervention. Information-exchanges amongst professionals (with patient's and family's consent) and with family members are important. Information technology can facilitate standardised communication protocols, shared patient information, single assessment procedures and defined care pathways. Exchanges of information help form a strong network of trust and relationship surrounding the patient, where appropriate support can be activated for the patient whenever necessary.

Challenges to Integrated Care

Who owns the patient and his/her problems? There is no easy answer to this question as there is often no clear ownership. This leads to a lack of role clarity and time is spent waiting for responses from various parties involved in the patient's care.

The lack of home care and informal support for discharged patients is another challenge. The lag between both types of care leads to a 'cliff effect' once the patient is discharged. For better integration of care, we need to cultivate the informal care support system, expand and integrate its network into the care management process.

2. Innovation

Innovation requires us to look inward and outward. When looking inward, we should reflect on how our services, interventions and work processes are affecting patients and how we can improve[2].

Looking outward means firstly, keeping in touch with emerging trends and social issues. Secondly, building upon ideas within and beyond the sector; and tailoring them to the relevant context. Thirdly, collaborating with other disciplines (e.g. the technology industry, the marketing industry and increasingly the digital industry) to co-create solutions.

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[2] MSF Cares. (2017, March 21). *Fostering Innovation in Social Work Practice*. Retrieved from MSF Cares' website.

Examples of Innovation in Healthcare

i. Support of Patients with High Medical and Social Needs

Ms Zahara Mahmood, Winner of the 2017 Outstanding Social Worker Award, was recognised for her innovative spirit in leading the "Neighbours for Active Living programme" under the Eastern Health Alliance. The programme bridges the medical-social divide through a combination of practical social assistance with targeted healthcare assistance. It reduces relapses, complications and re-admissions of seniors in east Singapore who have high medical and social needs and frequent hospital admissions.

ii. Interventions via Video

The Ministry of Health piloted tele-rehabilitation though video to reach out to home bound patients to make rehabilitation exercises more accessible in 2017[3]. Patients do exercises with wearable sensors, with their therapist thereafter reviewing their exercises through video links and the results from the sensors. Such forms of interventions are becoming more widespread and have been found to be both effective and efficient.

Challenges to Innovation

The lack of time, awareness and appreciation of the multi-layered knowledge required to understand the environment better, are common challenges to innovation. There is also a preference for things to remain the same even though the benefits of change are rationally larger.

3. Investment

Investment is the act of putting resources into a particular product or instrument, with the hope that it will bear returns in the long run. Particularly in human services, investment is about putting resources (often including time), in ourselves and others.

Investment in Self, Others and Health-Social Integration

Investing in the self means continuously improving ourselves through training, education, and seeking mentorship and supervision. It also includes self-care so that we can last the long journey of integration, innovation and investment.

Leaders lead people into the future. When we invest in people, we need to think long term. An important role of leaders is to prepare those under them to be ready for the challenges of the future. Leaders need to challenge themselves and ask, "how can social workers and social service practitioners step up and step out to work with partners from other disciplines and agencies?".

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[3] Siau, M. E. (2017). *Tele-rehab option for physiotherapy to be rolled out at 14 institutions.* Retrieved from Today Online's website.

With better medical care, more older persons and persons with disabilities are living longer. More will need to be done to integrate help, services and programmes to achieve client satisfaction. Structures, systems and processes led by human service practitioners who mindfully and purposefully integrate services and innovate will better prepare us for the current reality and the future. Finally, we must continue to invest in people and encourage experimentation, innovation and collaboration to deliver good outcomes for those we serve.

18 July 2019

Behavioural Economics and Change in Social Behaviour

We often hear of several frequently mentioned topics within the social service sector. These include topics such as volunteerism, how to better help individuals and families change their behaviour to improve their circumstances, raising public awareness on social issues and having communities take responsibility to improve their environment. As mentioned in an earlier letter (Behavioural Economics and Social Work)[1], behavioural economics is an area of work that studies how psychology broadens the scope of traditional economic theory. It offers insights in addressing some common issues mentioned above, such as how we can nudge communities to participate and take responsibility using low-cost and simple interventions. Behavioural economics is after all often about how incentives, communication and education, belief management and other measures can be applied to bring about behavioural changes. In this letter, we explore how insights from behavioural economics can add on to our current intervention methods to nudge improvements in those we seek to help.

Drivers of Behavioural Change

In their article "The Behavioural Change Matrix: A Tool for Evidence-Based Policy Making"[2], Fehr, Kamm, Jäger and FehrAdvice & Partners AG propose that there are two deciding drivers of behavioural change: awareness and willingness to contribute (to societal or organisational goals).

1. Awareness is the knowledge or understanding of a subject or situation. In situations where awareness is lacking, education and knowledge sharing become useful interventions to increase the likelihood of people taking steps to change. Certain behaviours can be controlled through messages that are communicated to them. For example, smokers can be educated on how smoking has a negative impact on others, and in particular, their children.

2. Willingness to contribute to societal or organisational goals refers to the readiness and desire of the individual or community to take certain actions to contribute to change. Awareness alone is not enough to motivate people to act. For example,

[1] Ang, B. L. (2016, September 15). Behavioural Economics and Social Work. *Social Insights: Letters by DSW*, 102-108.
[2] Fehr, G., Kamm, A., & Jäger, M. (2017). The Behavioural Change Matrix: A Tool for Evidence-Based Policy Making/Behavioural Science in Practice. *The Behavioral Economics Guide 2017*, 47-53. Retrieved from The Behavioral Economics' website.

an awareness of the dangers of a sedentary lifestyle may not necessarily lead one to make lifestyle changes. In such cases, we must seek to understand the barriers to change and to draw on what we know about human behaviour to craft effective interventions and policies.

Bringing About Behavioural Changes

Several measures can be used to bring about behavioural changes by increasing awareness and willingness. FehrAdvice & Partners AG developed a Behavioural Change Matrix[3] that identifies interventions that are most effective in effecting behavioural changes. How applicable they are to individual cases is dependent on the issue at hand.

i. When Both Awareness and Willingness are High

When willingness is high, a lack of norm-compliant behaviour is most likely due to a lack of awareness in certain circumstances. As such, what would be most helpful in such circumstances is to *shift people's attention* towards a certain direction when they are in the decision-making moment. An example of this is the Healthier Choice Symbols seen in some food courts that make it easier for consumers to choose healthier food when deciding what to eat. What happens here is that we want to guide people towards a certain direction when they are in the decision-making moment by providing good information. Information provided in a timely manner moves people to display the correct behaviours, e.g. the willingness to act responsibly.

ii. When Willingness is High but Awareness is Low

Oftentimes, behavioural change is lacking not because of an unwillingness to change but because of a low awareness of the negative consequences. A typical example of this is in the area of second-hand smoking. In such instances, we can *improve communication and education* to increase awareness. However, the results or change in behaviour may take some time to take effect.

iii. When Awareness is High and Willingness is Low

In such situations, examples of interventions include *using incentives to encourage positive behaviour or imposing sanctions to bring about compliance*. Notable campaigns in Singapore include the rewards given for Steps Challenge that incentivise people to be more active in their daily lives.

iv. When Both Awareness and Willingness are Low

As interventions in such situations require increasing both awareness and willingness, the desired behavioural changes are only achievable in the longer term. It involves intervening to educate and then creating incentive to change or increasing the

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[3] Ibid., 14.

sanctions to deter further non-compliance.

Many measures can be used to change people's behaviour: monetary incentives, fines, legal punishment and educational measures. While all these measures can be effective, their relative effectiveness depends on specific contexts, social norms, and the individual characteristics of the targeted population.

Factors Influencing Human Behaviour

As mentioned in my previous letter, behavioural economics informs us of several cognitive biases that influence human behaviour, namely:

a. **M**essenger: We are heavily influenced by who communicates information to us.
b. **I**ncentives: Our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts.
c. **N**orms: We are strongly influenced by what others do.
d. **D**efaults: We "go with the flow" of pre-set options.
e. **S**alience: Our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us.
f. **P**riming: Our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues such as sights and smells.
g. **A**ffect: Our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions.
h. **C**ommitments: We seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts.
i. **E**go: We act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves.

Source: The Institute for Government and the Cabinet Office (UK)[4]

These cognitive biases influence people's awareness of a situation or problem and their willingness to change. With these biases in mind, the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT)[5] has crafted an EAST (Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely) framework that lists four principles to take note of when crafting policies.

1. Easy

People tend to do something if it is easy to do. Some possibilities to make policies "easy" are to make something the "default option" (e.g. use an opt-out instead of opt-in system for a newsletter subscription), get rid of unnecessary clutter or steps that bring inconvenience to the service user (e.g. make a link directly to an application form instead of a website that links to the application form) and to give clear and specific messaging (e.g. give clients specific step-by-step actions to take or not take when working out of debt instead of general principles).

[4] Dolan, P., Hallsworth, M., Halpern, D., King, D., & Vlaev, I. (2009). *Institute for Government.* Retrieved from Institute for Government's website.
[5] The Behavioural Insights Team. (2014). *EAST: Four simple ways to apply behavioural insights.* Retrieved from The Behavioural Insights Team's website.

2. Attractive

People are usually drawn to things that grab their attention or that appeal to them. It is important to understand the target audience and what they are attracted to in designing services and policies to maximise results. Examples of making options attractive include using specific colours to indicate nutritional value of foods, sending personalised messages and using a popular messenger to communicate information. It is also useful to make salient or obvious the costs and benefits of a particular action.

3. Social

Human beings are social beings and our decisions are strongly affected by social norms, what others do and how they think of us. We are more likely to do something if we know that others are doing it. Therefore, it helps to magnify positive social norms as opposed to negative social norms. An instance of this in Singapore's context can be seen in road tax renewal reminders that seek to incentivise timely renewals by stating that the majority of Singaporeans renew their road tax on time. Using commitment devices are also helpful to encourage people to follow through their desired actions.

4. Timely

People respond differently to similar prompts depending on the timing of its delivery. For example, placing reminders to save the environment on the paper towel dispenser in the toilet is more effective in encouraging people to use less paper as opposed to similar reminders placed elsewhere. Furthermore, human beings also place higher weight on costs and benefits that are experienced immediately as opposed to those experienced at a later date. It is important for service providers and policymakers to understand how the responses of their target audience differs according to the timing of delivery and to select the right timing for intervention in order to maximise impact.

Improving Delivery in Social Services By Drawing From Behavioural Science

By recognising that human decisions are strongly influenced by context, including the way in which choices are presented to us, we can design interfaces in service delivery to shape responses. It is worth reflecting on whether we can tweak and re-organise or re-draw the design of a particular service, programme or workflow to nudge, extract or shape behaviour. Sometimes, the re-visiting of a service and programme design may also require us to challenge our own belief system, biases and assumptions.

I would challenge ourselves to consider how much we are prepared to relearn, revisit and redesign to accommodate new behaviours. After all, as we learn from behavioural science, behaviour is subject to cognitive biases, emotions, and social influences. Those of us who are social workers and social service practitioners can appreciate that decisions, be it by clients, organisations or communities, result from a less deliberative, linear, and controlled process than we would like to believe.

16 October 2017

Early Intervention and Stability

There has been a lot of interest in preventive work, and especially so in the area of early intervention. One of the challenges of early intervention work is to effectively direct resources towards areas where it makes a difference. To understand this challenge better, it is necessary to know what these efforts and interventions are trying to prevent in the causal relationship. Although there are always intermediary factors that will complicate the link, thinking critically about causality is important to ensure proper resource allocation and interventions. So what are some useful concepts that will help when we are thinking about early intervention? Let's take a look at this in the context of child welfare.

Thinking Across Children and Family Social Services

In the case of families with young children, we should begin with thinking about the struggles faced by families who are known to the social service system. For these families, we want to offer better and early support so that they will not need child welfare services in the future. For families who require welfare services, we want to ensure that they do not need increasingly serious interventions down the line. Thinking this way helps to link the work between the children and family social services. It also helps in visualising the outcomes that we want to see when we work with these families.

From Data to Outcome. We often want to keep track of the children in vulnerable families who are embedded in case files, living in group homes, lingering in various forms of care outside of their families and who are part of the social service data system. The challenge then is to ensure that such information and data become statistics that can help us to reduce the number of children in care or the number of children experiencing neglect, abuse and harm. In essence, how can we develop the ability to use these data to drive decision-making? How can we build discipline in good assessment, good case planning and good follow-up to derive good outcomes for children?

A Stable Child Welfare System. Core to systems thinking is the systematic deployment of the correct interventions. The choice of intervention is based on a proper understanding of evidence and not just an assumption that all early intervention is good and preventive. Intervention should be based on a causative relationship no matter how difficult it may be to determine the link. Thereafter, having oversight and demanding adherence to good practice is crucial to ensuring good outcomes.

The difficulty with compliance in such systems is the ongoing calls to deviate and experiment with something "untestedly" different. It is important to ensure that the system itself is stable to work with these families and to better protect children.

Intervening Early for Vulnerable Families. Most families, with support from friends, neighbours and colleagues, are able to cope with crises and respond in a way that avoids disaster. However, families plunge into instability when they are not able to respond this way. Instability potentially brings with it many undesirable outcomes such as evictions, addiction, domestic violence, abuse, and neglect[1]. This is especially so in the case of vulnerable families who usually already present themselves with some of these problems.

What these families really need is intervention *when they were beginning to struggle*, when they still had a job or when the children were not yet at risk of being abused or irregular at school. While these families are often below the radar for detection, they are not outside our radar and can be detected early *if we tune up the sensitivity in the system*. Early intervention can possibly stave off more serious or drastic interventions.

Efforts in early intervention usually show good outcomes. These efforts usually work on a high trust basis as they involve sharing of information between partners such as schools and community agencies about families that are showing early signs of distress. The challenge then is the responsiveness of those who are able to work with such families as they often require the person helping to pull together access to resources through creative strategies and justifying the access. These early intervention efforts require a certain amount of regular "coaching, connections to community resources, access to treatment, and a steady presence in sometimes chaotic households"[2]. There is no one specific way or standard of intervention for such circumstances because they may not fit neatly into the standard criteria. They require the person who is helping to have tenacity to stay with the uncertainties and ambiguity inherent in such circumstances.

The good part of such work or early intervention is that the help arrives at the earliest signs of trouble, the support is injected long before things get so dire that statutory intervention has to be activated[3]. Using this approach, there are opportunities for partnerships to step forward to support family stability and to avoid state intervention.

An Example of Early Intervention: Childcare

Through the expansion of childcare centres in Singapore, access to childcare is less of a problem for children from disadvantaged circumstances. Childcare is important as it provides a critical source of support for the parents and children. Let's imagine a family in crisis with a parent who has lost his or her job. The whole family is under stress. The parent, perhaps a single mother, is desperately trying to find another job,

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[1] Tierney, M. M. (2016). *From Family Data to Neighborhood Outcomes.* Retrieved from Stanford Social Innovation Review's website.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

while figuring out how to pay rent and feed the children, doing everything possible to make sure the crisis doesn't escalate. The children are under stress, scared and needing reassurance and stability.

The stories of such families could play out differently if they had access to support that could stabilise them and keep things from escalating into a major crisis. Often, childcare is least on the mind of the parent as cost is involved. In the case of a single mother, she would often have the children in tow as she scrams to find employment. However, childcare can be a critical source of support in times like this. The stabilising effect of childcare cannot be underestimated as the child can continue to go to a stable, loving place. The caregiver could help the child to work through his/her fears to prevent him/her from acting out so that the parent can focus on managing the crisis with the comfort of knowing that her child is safe.

The initial results from efforts such as the Circle of Care by the Lien Foundation and the KidSTART Programme are testaments to the value of childcare as a critical stabilising measure. A caseworker, be it in the form of a social worker, case manager or coordinator, plays a significant role in linking the parent to resources that can help them with their various problems. In such situations, childcare can mitigate the deterioration of instability in other parts of the child's and family's life.

However, childcare in isolated instances could also ironically contribute to destabilising a family situation. Take the situation where a family can no longer afford childcare, or a child is taken out of childcare because of a child's acting out or misconduct. The loss of care disrupts the equilibrium and increases tension and stress in the home. In such situations, quick access to a caseworker or social worker can help the family to access help and resources.

Focusing on ensuring that childcare is affordable and accessible to vulnerable families and enabling early intervention can play a crucial role in stabilising the lives of families, and especially single mothers. Such efforts can strengthen the web of support for families in trouble and help prevent them from becoming families in crisis.

27 June 2017

Dilemmas of Protective Work

Child abuse or neglect can have a long-standing impact across the whole spectrum of the child's development and life span. Similarly, the physical and psychological effects of abuse or neglect on elderly also have a substantial impact on their quality of life in their silver years. It is therefore important to ensure strong early intervention and support for families where neglect or abuse are identified, in order to safeguard the vulnerable from harm. This is where social service practitioners play a crucial role in identifying signs of neglect or abuse in their clients and to intervene in a timely manner.

Identifying Abuse or Neglect

Social service practitioners are trained in identifying signs of abuse or neglect such as delayed development, emotional and behavioural problems and poor socialisation in a child[1]. For older persons, the condition of the skin and the overall countenance of the individual are tell-tale signs of neglect and distress. However, even with these indicators, there are still times when the neglect of children, adults with special needs or older persons are overlooked and are not recognised.

What then are some obstacles to appropriate and timely intervention? For some practitioners, the lack of appreciation for the impact of abuse or neglect may lead them to be slow in intervening. Others may not be up to date on current research and safeguarding responsibilities. Yet for some others, resource constraints such as time and energy, influence their professional behaviour and what they perceive can be achieved when they have concerns about neglect or abuse.

Dilemmas and Difficulties

While it may seem obvious to intervene in cases of neglect or abuse, working with such cases are often fraught with dilemmas and difficulties. Professional training should help practitioners reconcile some inherent conflicts in a professional role which requires them to empower the most vulnerable parents and yet take decisive and ultimately disempowering action when child or adult protection concerns become extensive. This must be the most difficult dilemma that the child protection service has to handle. Likewise, practitioners working in the adult protection sphere are confronted with the dilemma of respecting the right of the older person to refuse services and

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[1] Mohammad, N. C. (2016). *The identification of child neglect in social work practice.* Retrieved from University of Salford's website.

the right for the state to intervene where there is a law to protect the individual from abuse and neglect. Training and supervision should aim to help practitioners reconcile theoretical knowledge and practice, with a recognition of the emotional demands that practitioners experience.

Another difficulty that arises is when practitioners have a fixed view of the case type which can cloud thinking and openness to take in new information. When this happens, first impressions can lead to a fixed view of the case that is difficult to change. For example, when social workers determine a case type for their client, there could be a tendency to focus on the child (or adult) in need. This focus on a particular child (or adult) rather than the other family members can arise because of his high level of need or vulnerability. It reflects a tension in priorities between protective services and family services. It can also shape the approach and extent to which the child or vulnerable adult will be observed and monitored.

Another area of tension is determining who has the area of expertise or responsibility for the assessment of neglect on the development or well-being of the child or older person, with the caseworker believing that someone else is better placed to make a decision. There is tension posed when the evidence is not yet clear or when there is not yet concrete manifestation of neglect. The dilemma is whether one should seize an opportunity and take a risk in intervening or not to intervene at all. Making judgment while maintaining a working relationship with clients is both emotionally and professionally demanding. Supervision and case consultation are therefore essential. These should help to clarify the differences between risk factors for neglect and indicators of actual neglect in day to day practice. However, there will be issues of interpretation to be aware of and it is important that there is regular discussion about the observations that lead to identification.

Evaluation

What is helpful in assessing cases of potential neglect or abuse is to have an evaluation of the nature of the condition[2] and to determine the options for the next steps. There are three aspects to such an evaluation.

1. Identifying indicators of current neglect or current indicators of neglect;

2. Determining if there is persisting indication of neglect such as frequency or neglect that was never noticed before; assessing the risk to the individual especially when indications are not clear or observed;

3. Evaluating the extent of cooperation from caregivers which can be derived from studying the family history.

[2] Petersen, A. C., Joseph, J., & Feit, M. (2014). *Describing the problem – New directions in child abuse and neglect research. National Academies Press.* Retrieved from National Center for Biotechnology Information's website.

Some consistency in standards and practice such as shared models of assessment with clear theoretical foundations would be helpful for practitioners. An example of this is the Structured Decision Making tool for child protective services. These tools help practitioners to analyse different aspects of neglect and produce better assessments and more informed support and protection plans.

Stay Focused and Vigilant

Many cases have situations which are dynamic with relationships that are in disequilibrium. Practitioners need to remain focused on what they need to monitor and remain vigilant to seize opportunities to intervene. Such opportunities may take the form of clear indicators of neglect, openness to receiving help and crisis when interventions are welcome, mandated or appropriate. Staying focused after the evaluation and having a plan that is closely adhered to, monitored and driven towards an outcome will always be helpful. It takes away the less systematic engagement with the individuals being helped while remaining open to the changing circumstances and revelation of new information.

3 September 2018

Identifying Cases of Neglect

We are often asked: is it important to document what transpires in social service interventions? How much information should we retain in our records when time is a limiting factor? On-the-job training as well as education and courses have given practitioners good guidance on documentation. However, it does not resolve the ever-present tension of how much we should document our cases with clients and families.

Having after-action reviews and reflection on our social work practice are integral in raising competency and are not necessarily always linked to negative incidents. Deep and insightful learning points have been gained from after-action reviews of "near misses". At times, these reviews make us wonder why glaring indicators of neglect of clients were overlooked. This could be due to the visibility of neglect or abuse indicators. Physical indicators such as a child or vulnerable adult being perpetually hungry, depressed or living in unsafe conditions are easy indicators for practitioners to flag out. However, indicators such as delayed development, emotional/ behavioural problems, and poor socialisation are more subtle indicators that may be overlooked by practitioners[1].

The Hidden Client?

Neglect is often linked to unstable or poor physical living conditions of clients, but these are not the only determinants of neglect. In well-ordered households with physically and emotionally unresponsive parents, neglect can also occur. Less visible signs that suggest distress or an onset of neglect can be linked to the elusive nature of clients or clients being deliberately unresponsive to offers for help. Consequently, practitioners tend not to follow up with such cases as they do not seem to require immediate intervention. Even if practitioners wish to step in, there are concerns on whether the principle of self-determination will be upheld, where individuals can decide for themselves whether they want help. For adult protective services, the common dilemma lies between respecting the right of an older person to refuse services or taking legislative intervention to protect the individual from abuse and neglect. The dilemma also arises when practitioners do not have enough evidence to determine neglect and wonder whether they should seize an opportunity and risk intervention in possible neglect cases. As professionals, we cannot underestimate the anxieties present in our decision-making process. We should instead strive to reflect on what prevents our clients from accepting help; their constraints and anxieties, and what we

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[1] Calderdale Safeguarding Children Board. (2018). *Calderdale Neglect Strategy.* Retrieved from Calderdale Safeguarding Children Board's website.

can do to alleviate them.

We should always be mindful of situations where there might be more than meets the eye and constantly look out for indicators of neglect that are not typically seen as risk factors. Frequent reflection and collaboration with relevant partners on the case can help us recognise new signs that we might not have identified before.

Who is the Client?

When working with situations of abuse and neglect, it is not ideal to immediately categorise the case type, as this may affect our analysis and openness to new information. This "fixed view" may be perpetuated by first impressions. For example, when determining the risk level of cases, practitioners tend to focus on the child or adult in need. Neglect could, however, be identified through other factors such as frequent housing moves or rough sleeping. These factors could be attributed to social isolation and a limited support network, where parents do not receive assistance with the daily care of their children[2]. Thus, we must consider all circumstances surrounding neglect – the focus should not be only on the child or vulnerable adult, but also the support system and environmental stressors[3].

Documenting Intervention

How should neglect cases be documented? Documentation should be concise, objective, and legible. This is because it is used to communicate between those involved in the care and supervision of the client. Establishing key facts and circumstances of a case assists in the recall of details of a specific situation. In the documentation process, we should work with a mindset of accountability to show that appropriate care standards and safety plans were put in place for the client. Here, "appropriate" means *safe, ethical and effective care*.

Next, how should we document that appropriate care standards and safety plans were provided for the client? Our documentation could make reference to (i) documented standard operating procedures (SOPs) and training materials; (ii) a sample of the actual documentation; (iii) a guideline of how an assessment is made and the follow-up actions. Lastly, the documentation should show that proper assessments were done, plans were followed through and interventions and outcomes were evaluated. Moreover, the assessment and evaluation must be made by persons with the relevant knowledge, skills and judgment.

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[2] Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership. (2018). *Neglect Strategy*. Retrieved from Kingston and Richmond Safeguarding Children Partnership's website.
[3] Bowyer, S. (2016). *Laying the Foundations: Messages from the Triennial Analysis 2016*. Retrieved from Slideplayer's website.

Equipping Practitioners

Practitioners must be kept up to date with knowledge and findings on signs of neglect and abuse. This includes information such as the effects of neglect and abuse on a child or adult's development such as a child's inability to develop certain motor skills. Training, supervision and case consultation should aim to help practitioners follow guidelines of identifying neglect, common indicators that tend to be overlooked as well as the differences between *risk factors* for neglect and *indicators of actual neglect* in everyday practice[4]. We should also be aware of the emotional demands that such cases have on practitioners and learn to process our emotions regarding these cases.

Remain Vigilant

Admittedly, many of us work with limited resources and feel that this might lead to a higher chance of slip-ups, though this is not always the case. However, if missed steps happen to align with other circumstantial factors, seemingly small mistakes can be grievous. Consistency, discipline and mindfulness are thus extremely important traits for good case management. After-action reviews should thus be studied carefully by current and to-be practitioners as they offer invaluable insights to how critical SOPs are followed as the case develops. Practitioners should also remain vigilant in practising good documentation and monitoring potential neglect cases.

25 February 2021

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[4] Department for Education. (2014). *Indicators of neglect: missed opportunities.* Retrieved from GOV.UK's website.

Our Responsibility in Child Abuse Cases

"If a child trusts you enough to open up about their anxiety, please don't dismiss them."

In the course of your work, you may sometimes come across children with injuries (which do not look accidental in nature) or behavioural and emotional concerns. Some children may share what is happening at home which makes you concerned about their well-being and safety. If you have reason to believe that a child is being severely disciplined or abused, you need to do something or tell someone about it.

While clear cases of child abuse require immediate reporting, less obvious cases may remain hidden behind walls, with terrified children suffering in silence. There can also be occasions where a practitioner may decide not to alert anyone or seek consultation on the case so as to protect and avoid risking the therapeutic relationship developed with the child or family. Without timely intervention, a "hidden" case of child abuse may deteriorate and lead to a child sustaining repeated injuries that can be potentially serious and might result in death. It is a reminder that practitioners have an obligation to the children whom we serve to intervene early to save a child from further harm and hurt.

In this letter, I will be sharing the definition of child abuse, the system of child protection in Singapore and resources that you must access to identify and follow-up on cases of suspected child abuse.

Defining Child Abuse

Child abuse is a term that professionals use to describe any act by parents, caregivers or any other persons entrusted with the care of the child or young person (CYP) that causes harm to a CYP's physical, emotional and/or psychological well-being, and is judged by community values and professionals as abusive. Child abuse is generally classified in the following categories:

Physical Abuse: Any act that causes physical injury to a CYP, that is not accidental in nature. This includes deliberately causing bruises, burns, cuts and broken bones through a range of actions such as beating, shaking or excessive discipline.

Emotional and Psychological Abuse: Any act that harms a CYP emotionally or psychologically. The acts can be repeated or can be an isolated extreme incident.

Neglect: Neglect occurs when a CYP is harmed because a parent or caregiver fails to provide adequate supervision, physical shelter, food, medical care, mental health care and/or clothing appropriate to the CYP's age and level of development. It may include situations where the parent or caregiver exposes the CYP to unsafe and/or unhygienic living conditions.

Sexual Abuse: Any act where a CYP is used for sexual pleasure or is taken advantage of sexually. It also includes exposing a CYP to sexual acts or pornography.

Understanding the Management of Child Protection Cases in Singapore

Child protection concerns operate on a continuum, with intervention from either the community, more specialised partners or the State (Child Protective Service (CPS), Ministry of Social and Family Development). Generally, a more serious concern requires higher levels and more intrusive interventions, with CPS stepping in when warranted.

CPS will intervene in situations where there are serious child protection concerns posed to the CYP e.g. sexual abuse, severe neglect and cases with serious injuries inflicted by the parent/caregiver. Such cases must be reported immediately to CPS.

For situations that do not require statutory intervention, CPS may refer the families to community-based Child Protection Specialist Centres (CPSCs), for ongoing counsel and support. Examples include cases that have inappropriate or excessive discipline, but caregivers were willing to receive help and improve on their parenting methods.

For families facing high levels of emotional and economic stress, which may adversely impact CYPs in the future, CPS may refer the families to Family Service Centres (FSCs) and other social service agencies. Examples of such cases will include families who need caregiving support, financial assistance or counselling to better cope with stressors and provide adequate care for CYPs.

How Can I Better Manage Child Abuse Cases?

- **Get trained in identifying suspected child abuse**
  MSF provides training to professionals in the community (e.g. social service agency staff, teachers) to use the Sector Specific Screening Guide (SSSG) and Child Abuse Reporting Guide (CARG). The SSSG and CARG guide professionals on managing reports of suspected child abuse, and the follow-up thereafter to ensure the safety and well-being of the children.

- **Get advice from a specialist agency when you come across a suspected child abuse case. These agencies are:**
  - Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre
  - HEART@Fei Yue Child Protection Specialist Centre

- PAVE Integrated Services for Individual and Family Protection Specialist Centre

- **Reporting suspected cases of child abuse**
  - If the child's life is in danger, please call the police at 999 immediately.
  - Child Protective Service Helpline at 1800-777 0000 (Operating hours: Monday - Sunday, 7.00am - 12 midnight) or email MSF_CPSintake@msf.gov.sg

When reporting, it would be helpful to provide as much information as possible, if the information is available:

- Description of injuries, abuse, neglect
- Location of abuse
- When and how did you find out about the abuse
- Child(ren)'s name, age, address, school
- Name of the alleged person causing harm, age and relationship to the child(ren)
- Your name and contact details

Child protection is a collective responsibility. We need everyone in the community to be on board and report suspected cases of abuse so that networks can be strengthened to prevent child abuse and keep our children safe.

9 October 2020

Ageing and Family

With advancements in science and health, people now live longer. This means that there will be more older persons in society and a greater number of older persons with disabilities. Longer life expectancies and reduced fertility rates can mean the lives of generations are more prolonged, but it also results in a reduction in the availability of familial care and support for the oldest-old. As a result, various segments of society such as families, care agencies in the community and the private sector will increasingly have to play a part in caring for the elderly.

Trend of Ageing in Singapore

The size of the elderly Singapore resident population has increased substantially over the last decade with the proportion of residents aged 65 years and over increasing from 9.0% in 2010 to 13.0% in 2017[1]. It is estimated that the elderly population will grow by about 450,000, to 900,000 between 2018 and 2030[2]. In 2030, the senior support ratio will also likely be halved from 5.7 to 2.1 adults supporting one elderly person.

Changing Context of Eldercare

Trends in the past decades have resulted in structural transformations in family composition, community support networks and labour force participation. These pose stress and strain on the availability of family members and other informal support to provide the assistance needed by the growing numbers of elderly. Changes in household patterns have also resulted in caregivers and care recipients being less likely to live with or near one another. Assistance will therefore likely be more focused on instrumental tasks such as meal delivery, transportation and household chores, with grassroots volunteers and neighbours playing an increasingly significant role. For some family members, they serve as intermediaries between disabled elderly family members and formal care providers. In a sense, they are increasingly assuming the role as care managers, providing care management tasks such as service coordination, linkage, brokerage and information transmission including health conditions.

As a principle, most countries aim to reduce the use of nursing homes and other expensive residential settings by promoting home and community-based care. As much as possible, an older person with a disabling accident or illness will be rehabilitated and

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[1] Department of Statistics. (2017). *Population Trends.* Retrieved from Singapore Department of Statistics' website.
[2] Singapore Budget. (2018). *Budget Speech.* Retrieved from Singapore Budget's website.

enabled to return to live in the community with services from voluntary organisations and the community. Generally, older persons prefer to reside in their own homes and within the community rather than in a more restrictive institutional setting. As such, to some extent, the move towards home and community-based care upholds individual autonomy and personal control. This move must however be accompanied by ensuring that there are resources to develop concomitantly the range, availability and affordability of community-based support services. It is important for there to be sufficient community resources and support to ensure a seamless and uneventful transition back from the hospital to the community.

Tapping on Technological Innovation

In recent years, technological innovations have made it possible for various devices to be used at home to facilitate caregiving. For example, telemedicine has made it possible for ongoing evaluation of patients in their homes. Such efforts lessen the stress from transportation and the crunch on time in caregiving. Technology today is also capable of providing in-home and community monitoring as well as response systems to deliver both pre-emptive and responsive healthcare interventions. For example, multi-modal sensors and devices can track the whereabouts of older persons, creating alerts to trigger a medical response when needed. Wearable technology such as RFID[3]-tagged slippers can prevent falls or avert dementia patients from getting lost. Gloves fitted with gyroscope and sensors can even combat hand tremors in those with conditions such as Parkinson's disease. Robotics and sensing technology can help detect feelings such as joy, sadness and anger. They can be used to conduct exercises, to enable basic cognitive tasks, and as a form of therapy for depressed older persons. Technology has expanded the care options available for older persons. Where possible, we should start tapping on such technology to facilitate their care.

Paradigm for Responsibility for Care

Our policy approach reflects the view that families should have the primary responsibility for caring for and coordinating the needs of dependent members. However, the challenge is in determining the reasonable level of support to expect from families and at what point of frailty and deterioration of health.

With our ageing population, the demand for caregivers will inadvertently increase in the years to come. They are an important source of care and help for the elderly and should not be overlooked. Practitioners should not only help caregivers who actively seek for help but should also keep watch on caregivers who choose to stay silent about their needs. Practitioners can intervene by providing information on programmes that provide respite care for caregivers, organising family meetings to discuss caregiving responsibilities and connect caregivers to support groups with other caregivers[4].

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[3] Radio Frequency Identification Devices
[4] Nguyen, A. (2012, October 31). *Working with Family Caregivers.* Retrieved from Social Work License Map's website.

In addition, practitioners can introduce the use of technology, especially the readily available mobile technology, into the support system. The aim can be to tailor solutions for individuals and deliver services with the help of digital technology including digital alerts.

What Matters for Older Persons

Here are a few useful considerations for practitioners or caregivers who work with older persons on matters concerning ageing:

Giving Choices

It is important to give older persons choices. Every individual is unique, with different tastes and backgrounds. Some may want to dance and dabble in adventurous activities such as trekking while others may want to sign up for courses to acquire new knowledge and skills. There are also more avenues made available in recent years for seniors to pursue their passions. For example, seniors can tap on their SkillsFuture credits to take up various courses such as those offered by the National Silver Academy. Ultimately, all of us should be empowered with the opportunity to live an active life. As the Englishman George Bernard Shaw once said: "We don't stop playing because we grow old; We grow old because we stop playing!"

A Positive Mindset

While many older persons look forward to their golden years, others face different challenges as they age. It is not uncommon to hear of older persons having depression or suicidal ideation. This is usually due to loneliness, poor health or financial anxiety. Besides facing mental stress, older persons are also often easy prey for criminals (e.g. scamming) and victims of ageist attitudes.

Overcoming these mindsets and challenges will require everyone – the government, the community, families and individuals – to play their part. As the government continues to reach out to caregivers and seniors with information and services, society also needs to correct the common misperception that ageing is a physically and mentally deteriorative process and to continue to promote ageing as an active and progressive stage of life. We need to work together to create a community where the elderly are treated with dignity, embraced and included as society progresses. This will take time and there is much that we, as individuals, can do to make a difference in the lives of the elderly.

The Importance of Social Networks

Besides exercising and health screenings, a less spoken yet important contribution to well-being is having a network of relationships with family and friends. This network is a good insurance for lifting older persons up when they are down or in need of support. The Council for Third Age was set up to promote the importance of growing old with purpose and meaning. Its activities provide avenues for people to meet and

keep in touch.

It is All About Balance

The local community plays a large role in enabling ageing in place by helping to ensure continuity of care. We need to strive towards finding the appropriate balance in providing services by sharing the responsibility of both delivering the services and the cost of care among the individual, the family, the community and the state. The partnership will evolve as we continue to calibrate the range and extent of services that will be provided. With various segments of society working together, we can create an inclusive environment for our seniors to thrive in their silver years.

31 July 2018

Caregiving for Elderly

Many of you would have handled cases with elderly clients who rely heavily on caregivers for assistance in their activities of daily living and for psycho-emotional support. Often times, these caregivers come from the sandwiched generation and also have their own families and children to care for. All these responsibilities often lead to caregiver stress and burnout. What can we as practitioners do to better support the caregivers in our midst?

Understanding the Factors That Lead to Burnout

As practitioners who work with caregivers, it is important to understand the factors that leads a caregiver to experience burnout and to provide timely referrals or assistance before the situation deteriorates. Caregivers who are new to the role may not go in expecting to face stress, depression, loneliness or hopelessness. This is where practitioners can intervene early when working with new caregivers to ensure that they are prepared and to direct them to the support and help they need.

So why is caregiving such a difficult role and what factors contribute to burnout and stress?

1. **Changes in roles:** the dynamics of the relationship between a child and parent or between a husband and wife would change significantly upon taking on the role of a caregiver. Such changes can cause strains and stresses to the relationship, especially when expectations are unmet and when new responsibilities are taken up. It takes time for caregivers to adjust to the new role and the new dynamics of their relationships.

2. **Failed expectations:** caregivers may expect their caregiving to effect positive change in the health and psycho-emotional well-being of their loved ones. However, this may not always be the case especially with the presence of progressive diseases such as dementia or Parkinson's.

3. **Little alone time:** the schedule of the caregiver now centers around the person being cared for rather than themselves. They often have a long list of caregiving duties and have little time for themselves to recuperate or rest.

4. **Fear and uncertainty:** taking on the role of caregiver often requires learning new knowledge and skills such as information about the illness, household chores and helping with daily activities of living. Caregivers can be overwhelmed with fear and uncertainty over their own capabilities for this new role, and are unsure what to expect for their loved ones in the future.

Source: Scott (2018), Cleveland Clinic (n.d.)[1]

Dilemmas and Difficulties That Caregivers Face

The main dilemma that most caregivers have is about trade-offs. The choice is often between safety, autonomy and independence. The elderly are often motivated by autonomy and are reluctant to accept help. They interpret accepting help as a loss of autonomy and independence when in fact by accepting the correct form of help, they can better keep their independence. Having the conversation and negotiation is an important start although it is fraught with difficulty because it is filled with emotions. Any conversation about supporting the senior can be emotional as the senior will naturally be anxious if there is a loss of independence and a sign to move into a nursing home, no matter how distant the idea may be. The goal of the negotiation should therefore be how to enable the senior to live safely with the appropriate help.

Signs and Symptoms to Look Out For

When working with caregivers, some red flags that practitioners can look out for in clients include:

- Overwhelming fatigue or sleep problems (sleeping too much or too little)
- Changes in eating habits, excessive weight gain or loss
- Feelings of hopelessness or depression
- Withdrawing from or losing enjoyment in activities they once enjoyed
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Being unusually impatient or argumentative with others or the person being cared for

Source: Vitas Health (n.d.)[2]

These symptoms are usually signs that the caregiver is facing stress or burnout and should not be ignored.

Practitioner's Role in Supporting Caregivers

Practitioners should not only help caregivers who actively seek for help, but they should also be on the lookout for those who stay silent about their needs. Practitioners can intervene by providing information on services and programmes that provide respite

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[1] Scott, E. (2018, March 9). *Common Causes of Caregiver Stress.* Retrieved from Verywell Mind's website.
Cleveland Clinic. (n.d.). *Caregiving: Recognizing Burnout.* Retrieved from Cleveland Clinic's website.
[2] Vitas Health. (n.d.). *Signs of Caregiver Burnout and How to Prevent It.* Retrieved from Vitas Health's website.

care for caregivers, organising family meetings to discuss caregiving responsibilities and stresses, connecting caregivers to support groups or other caregivers and providing resources for financial management and planning, as well as financial assistance[3]. These interventions should be done in a timely and sensitive manner so that caregivers do not feel even more overwhelmed.

When working with new caregivers, it is helpful for practitioners to inform them of the common struggles faced by caregivers as well as the resources or support that are available. This would help them to be mentally prepared before they plunge into the role and to be aware of the help resources available to support themselves and their families.

Starting a Critical Conversation

It may not cross a caregiver's mind to engage the elderly they are caring for on a conversation about ageing. However, this is crucial as it helps caregivers to understand the needs and wants of the loved ones they are caring for. While we may think that speaking with a senior about ageing is like any other conversation, it is perhaps not quite so. Practitioners can coach caregivers how to initiate these conversation starters. Examples of starters can include topics such as safety, freedom, peace of mind, social connection, and being able to make choices.

Practitioners can walk caregivers through the process. Encourage them to write an outline to organise their thoughts so that they won't forget important points. Emphasise that there are no right or wrong options or ideas and to keep an open mind. Encourage them to be respectful and considerate and to be a good listener. It sounds odd but it is useful to do a practice run so that one will be less nervous about the conversation.

It is usually natural to start with casual conversations to plant ideas. The caregiver can then build on these to lead to the more decision-focused conversations later. Some possible ice-breaker questions are as follows: "I've noticed some things take more energy these days. What are the important things you really want to do? or "What are your priorities? Is there a way we can make it easier for you to do these things?" Caregivers can also use an event in the news or a story about an ageing family member or friend to link the conversation. For example: "We never talk about these things. I don't want to pry, but it would give me a peace of mind to know there's a plan if we need it."

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[3] Nguyen, *Working with Family Caregivers*, 31.

Ensuring Caregiver Support

With our ageing population, the number of caregivers will be on the rise in the years to come. They are an important source of care and help for the elderly and should not be overlooked. It is important that they are also supported by state and community resources. Practitioners need to be increasingly prepared for how to work with caregivers and to ensure that they get the support they need.

16 May 2018

Multi-Disciplinary Team for Older Persons

Why is a multidisciplinary team (MDT) especially important in complex cases? Through experience, we know that the range of perspectives and knowledge from professionals of different disciplines is required for holistic case management. This is especially so for cases involving the elderly. The elderly tend to face "fragmented health care and social services systems; complicated, sometimes distant or dwindling families who are uninformed, in-conflict or exhausted; fundamental questions about life, death, obligations, and choice; profound spiritual and ethical dilemmas (and) complex legal options"[1].

As such, the greater amount of expertise present in MDTs will allow for deeper understanding of individuals which can help in deciding how to better support them. The value of having MDTs is more than the sum of each professional's expertise and contributions. A standard practice for interventions in complex cases involving older persons should therefore include the establishment of MDTs.

What is Multidisciplinary Work?

What in essence is multidisciplinary work? MDTs comprise members from different disciplines. There are various models and ways to structure an MDT but some common themes comprise members seeing each other, listening to each other and recognising the value of each other's contributions in a deliberate way in order to address the problem at hand.

It is important for team members to be respectful of other professionals, to be willing to receive constructive criticism, to be patient in listening to others, to be able to communicate in non-technical language and to have the client's well-being in mind.

MDT Coordinator

A good team leader and coordinator is essential to ensure the value add of a MDT. Coordination is often an underestimated skill, but it is crucial to facilitating team meetings, gatekeeping and deciding which cases merit review by an MDT. Good coordination monitors the progress of decisions made by the MDT and ensures

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[1] Grooh, H. (2014). Providing Care Management with a Multidisciplinary Team: Managing Quality. *Journal of Aging Life Care.*

appropriate follow-up by the relevant team members. It also ensures that the right professionals and people are present when a case is being discussed[2].

Bringing the right people together is not always easy as individuals of agencies tend to hold on to their respective perspectives. Getting consensus therefore requires the coordinator to have strong administrative skills and the ability to communicate well and facilitate discussions with professionals from various disciplines.

Elder Abuse or Neglect: Assessing Cognitive Capacity and Its Dilemmas

When working with the elderly, it is common to come across vulnerable adults. A vulnerable adult is someone who is by reason of mental or physical infirmity, disability or incapacity, incapable of protecting himself or herself from abuse, neglect or self-neglect[3]. In such cases, the first and primary challenge for professionals is often in determining the cognitive capacity of the victim – to know if he or she understands the consequences of a particular decision, activity or event and is able to make decisions in his or her own best interests. However, directing assessment of cognitive capacity is easier said than done. Orchestrating it requires creativity and ingenuity by stipulated professionals and in a timely and accurate manner. When it is done, the assessment guides the MDT on the follow-up actions to take.

Embedded within this is the challenge of having someone who has "full capacity in one area of life yet lack capacity in another". For instance, an individual who can manage daily tasks well without assistance may have a poor grasp of finances and does not understand the consequences of 'giving' that money to someone else.

Furthermore, while a few professionals may be mandated to make cognitive assessments, and all professionals may understand the relevance of cognitive capacity, not all practitioners always evaluate it in the same way or reach the same conclusions. Whatever the differences in views, having practitioners from different disciplines work together is necessary to widen the options for follow up. To address this challenge, most MDTs would want to have some control over the process of obtaining a cognitive capacity assessment so that there is access to important information to make timely and good decisions in a case[4]. This is also where the coordinator can play a role. When one professional's views and recommendations conflicts with someone else's assessment, they can discuss it with other team members with facilitation by the coordinator.

When working with vulnerable elderly, it is necessary for professionals to give them as much dignity and autonomy as possible. Professionals should ask, even if it is a hard question, or even if they think they already know the answer, and then listen to the answer as openly and completely as they can.

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[2] Breckman, R., Callahan, J., & Solomon, J. (2015). *Elder Abuse Multidisciplinary Teams: Planning for the Future*. Retrieved from NYC Elder Abuse Center's website.

[3] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2017). *Stop Family Violence - Abuse of Vulnerable Adults*. Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.

[4] Breckman, Callahan, & Solomon, *Elder Abuse Multidisciplinary Teams*, 39.

Under the Vulnerable Adults Bill, which has recently been introduced in Parliament[5], it is proposed for the State to be given power to intervene to protect and ensure the safety of vulnerable adults where necessary. This is crucial in cases where cognitive capacity is significantly diminished, or where access to a suspected victim is denied.

Unsolvable Dilemma

Perhaps the unsolvable dilemma for MDT with elder abuse and neglect is that of older persons who continue to live with an adult child with mental illness or substance abuse issues. Despite their advanced age, frail condition and the abuse they have endured, they feel an obligation to care for their child at home. In such a situation, both persons are in need of help. Removing either one or both of the persons especially when they do not have cognitive capacity is often not a good option. At best, practitioners can counsel these older persons and support them in the care of the adult child even though it often compromises their health and well-being.

This is where motivational interviewing can help to prepare them to receive help and even placement out of home at some point. Elder abuse and neglect work is filled with ethical dilemmas. One recurring dilemma is how to help an older person while minimising the negative repercussions on an abuser who may at times, also has needs. The dilemma is compounded by the difficulty of balancing the older person's safety with his/her own right to make choices in life.

What is a Reasonable Outcome for Each Case

The complexities and uniqueness of each elder abuse or neglect case makes what is considered a reasonable case outcome more varied. While the desire to preserve the dignity and safety of every elderly person is present across professionals, different professionals have varying opinions of what is considered a reasonable or good outcome. According to Geriatrician Mark Lachs, some may want the abuser removed from the home; others may want the abuser to get help and others may want the abuser to get treatment for a mental health condition even when it is most difficult to get it[6].

The ability to *pull and pool* together resources to build a sustainable safety net for the older person continues to be the biggest challenge with each case and sometimes with evolving circumstances. If we make an effort to collaborate and consolidate our resources across disciplines, it is a step forward in making this possible.

5 April 2018

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[5] The Vulnerable Adults Bill was introduced in Parliament on 20 March 2018.
[6] Breckman, Callahan, & Solomon, *Elder Abuse Multidisciplinary Teams*, 39.

Vulnerable Adults Act

The Vulnerable Adults Bill has recently been passed. It aims to protect vulnerable adults[1] from abuse, neglect or self-neglect, and to provide timely and effective interventions to prevent further abuse or neglect. The recurring theme that was present throughout the various consultations with helping professionals and stakeholders was the timeliness of this legislation, given the needs of our rapidly ageing population[2].

Support for the Family in the Community to Provide Care

In Singapore, we uphold the principle of family as the first line of support. However, some families struggle to provide care for vulnerable members, let alone adequate care that ensures safety and keeps members confident at home. There are also elderly with physical or mental infirmities who live alone, and who may be at risk of social isolation.

This is where support from the community is especially important. A strong support for the family lies in the community. More services will continue to be provided in the community to support assisted living and ageing in place. As mentioned in this year's Budget, the goal of integrating seniors within supportive communities will take the form of the Community Networks for Seniors programme. The programme will be expanded island wide by 2020[3]. The Silver Generation Office placed within the Agency for Integrated Care will also have Silver Generation Ambassadors proactively reach out to new cohorts of Singaporeans aged 65 years and above, bringing them to health services and educating them on relevant support schemes[4]. Where help is needed, various government agencies and partners will come together to deliver coordinated care to seniors.

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[1] A vulnerable adult is an individual, aged 18 years or older, who because of mental or physical infirmity, disability or incapacity, is incapable of protecting himself or herself from abuse, neglect or self-neglect.
Taken from "Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2017). *Stop Family Violence - Abuse of Vulnerable Adults*. Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website."
[2] By 2030, the number of seniors aged 65 years and above will almost double to over 900,000. The largest increase will occur between 2020 and 2025, with about 179,000 baby boomers entering 65 years and above.
Taken from "Ministry of Health. (2018, March 7). *Speech by Dr Amy Khor, Senior Minister of State for Health, at the MOH Committee of Supply Debate 2018*. Retrieved from Ministry of Health's website."
[3] Ministry of Health. (2018, February 19). *Integration of Health and Social Services to Support Seniors*. Retrieved from Ministry of Health's website.
[4] Ibid.

Adult Protection Framework

Singapore's adult protection framework relies on strong support from both the family and community. However, there will be occasions where family and community interventions are not adequate, and state interventions are therefore necessary as a last resort. These state interventions call for a legislative framework and safeguards to balance individual autonomy, familial support or obligation and intrusive help.

The Vulnerable Adults Act complements other existing laws that protect vulnerable individuals. These include the Women's Charter and the Mental Capacity Act. The new Act will not supplant these laws but will instead work alongside them to fill the narrow gap where family and community interventions have been exhausted. An example of this would be when one faces severe neglect but persistently refuses help despite good counsel and protracted engagement.

Families will continue to be supported and enabled by community interventions to be the first line of care and support for those unable to care for themselves. Personal care arrangements are often better put together through a collective decision by the family. The Act will only come in as the last resort.

Key Principles of the Act

The Act is guided by five key principles. These principles acknowledge the importance of balancing the need to protect a vulnerable adult and the person's right to autonomy. The intent of the Act will be shaped by the following calibrations:

- Any exercise of power or duty sanctioned by the Act must be for the protection of the adult from abuse, neglect and self-neglect;
- The adult who has mental capacity is generally best placed to decide how he/ she wishes to live and whether or not to accept assistance;
- The views, wishes, feelings, values and beliefs of a vulnerable adult who lacks mental capacity must be considered;
- The duty sanctioned by the Act must be carried out in a manner that is the least restrictive of the person's right and freedom of action; and
- The welfare and best interest of the person must be the first and paramount consideration.

Statutory Powers for Effective Protection

Where community intervention fails, the Act will provide powers that will enable swift protection of the vulnerable adult. An example of such protection includes the enabling of the Director-General or Protector[5] to enter private premises to assess a suspected vulnerable adult if there is reason to believe that a vulnerable adult is at risk

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[5] Director-General of Social Welfare (Director-General): The state powers and functions will be held by the Director-General, who is responsible for the administration of the Act.
Protector: The Director-General can appoint senior officers from MSF's Adult Protective Service as "Protectors" to enter and assess, obtain information and remove and relocate.

of, or has been subjected to abuse, neglect or self-neglect.

Having established that the adult requires to be in a safe environment, the Director-General or Protector may then commit the person to a place of temporary care and protection or to the care of a fit person. The Director-General or Protector must then apply for a Court order for further committal of the person within 14 working days.

Good follow through of social interventions is also important. This includes the ability to safeguard the well-being of the vulnerable adult through court orders for medical and dental treatment if necessary for the care of the person. Other court orders include orders to make the adult's residence a safe living environment and orders requiring the adult or any other person to attend counselling or programmes as directed by the Court. The latter aims to repair relationships and ensure adequate support for both the vulnerable adult and his/her caregiver who may be the perpetrator. To preserve the role of the family, family members can apply for protection orders as victims may not be able to apply for orders on their own.

Protecting Case Workers and the Community Who Do Due Diligence

To give case workers the peace of mind as they diligently and dutifully carry out their practice, the Act protects anyone performing a function or who exercises powers under the Act from legal liability when they act in good faith and with reasonable care e.g. they act professionally and responsibly.

The Act is premised on the adult's autonomy to make his or her own decisions providing for the government to intervene only in exceptional situations. Such situations include the persistent refusal of assistance when there is imminent danger even when the vulnerable adult has mental capacity or when help is refused due to duress or undue influence.

However, the Act will only be effective if the community continues to play its part in various ways. As a community, we must ensure the safety of vulnerable victims and support families in their care responsibility. Abuse of anyone is not a private matter and must not be tolerated. Everyone - including family members, neighbours, grassroots leaders, employers and healthcare professionals - has a responsibility to prevent, interrupt and protect vulnerable victims from abuse. We must all step up to break the silence by reporting suspected cases of abuse, neglect and self-neglect.

23 May 2018
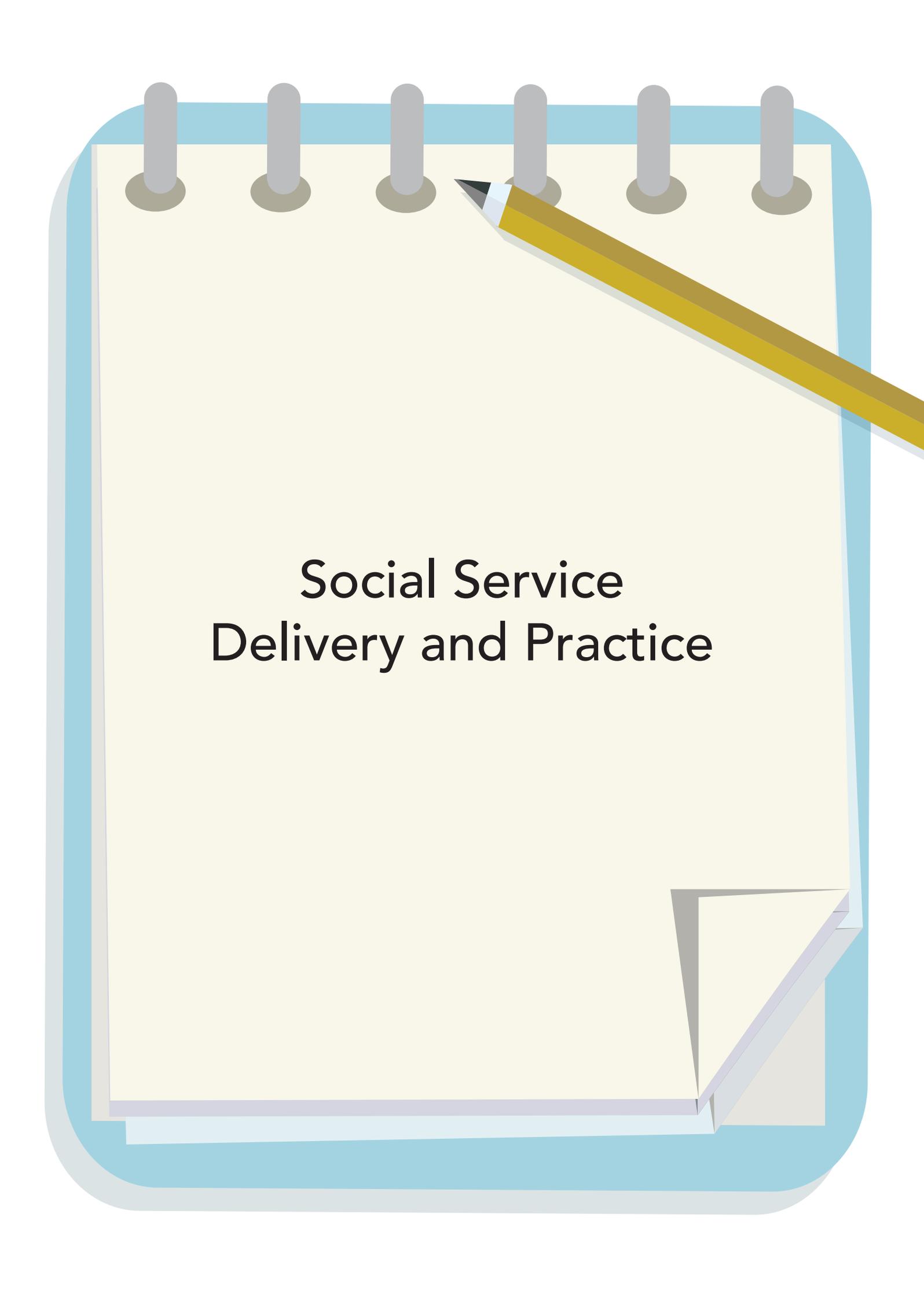
Social Service
Delivery and Practice

Collaboration

Collaboration is often a common response to the constraint in resources for services and programs. Agencies are commonly exhorted to collaborate in order to optimise assets and resources. So what is collaboration? And will it deliver on optimising resources?

According to Harvard Business Review, collaboration is "a way of working that attracts and involves people outside one's formal control, organisation, and expertise to accomplish common goals"[1]. The key advantage of working collaboratively is the synergy produced by the joining together of efforts and resources[2]. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) points out that collaboration helps in building trusting relationships which are committed to the common goal, creating a holistic view of a problem through the involvement of various individuals, pooling together of resources and harnessing collective synergies through working together. Such collaboration is built on the assumption that the parties share and learn from each other and fill the gaps in knowledge, capacity or skills.

So What Must We Consider in Any Collaboration?

1. Be Clear About the Purpose or Goal of the Collaboration

We often hear people extolling collaboration before being clear about the goal or outcome of sharing resources. Calling a relationship a 'collaboration' does not make it one. What then differentiates a contract to deliver a service from collaboration?

Within a collaboration, there should be mutual agreement on a common purpose or goal. For example, having a common vision, sharing both risks and benefits, having a sense of 'co-creation' and having contributions from all parties. It is worth reiterating that the reason for collaboration should be clear from the start.

2. Be Clear About How Progress is Measured

How will we know that the collaboration is working towards success? Since collaboration is very much about a relationship, progress in working as a team and the quality of the partnership becomes very important. It is important to ensure that one's perception of

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[1] Gardner, H. K., & Ibarra, H. (2017, May). *How to Capture Value from Collaboration, Especially if You're Skeptical About it.* Retrieved from Harvard Business Review's website.
[2] Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth. (2013). *Why collaborate, and why now? Advancing Collaboration Practice - Fact* Sheet 2. Retrieved from Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth's website.

the success of the collaborative relationship coheres with objective indicators.

An example of one way to measure the progress is to consider whether all partners are well represented in major decision-making and whether the decisions made are reflective of the views of all the partners or just one. Since collaboration is about working together with partners, the measure of its progress should focus less on output but more on the quality of the partnership.

What Pre-Requisite Perspective Can Help in Collaboration?

1. Accept that collaboration is not about changing everyone so that they adopt a single point of view. We should start by asking how we should change the way we do things instead of expecting others to change. We should rethink the very act of problem-solving or how we deliver a service. Collaboration can help to eliminate the "echo chamber" effect created when like-minded groups interact only with each other.

2. Believe that collaboration can be an opportunity to create lasting solutions that are better than any one individual, perspective or ideology can imagine. Diverse points of view (although not excessive) can bring different but complementary strengths. This happens when one person's idea feeds into the development of another person's idea which thus produces creative and new perspectives to approaching a problem. There is a possibility of better analysis and the application of that analysis to the needs of clients. It can, with hard work, joint action and skilful engagement, find transformative common ground on intractable issues of resources and productivity and even breakthrough solutions.

3. Appreciate that collaboration may mean moving at a slower pace than working individually. The trade-off for a better service or program may however be worth the time once we understand and accept that reality.

How Can We Make Collaboration Successful?

Firstly, collaboration is better off when it starts with parties jointly framing the problem and not leaving one party to formulate the solution before mobilising the others to implement it. The latter is closer to an advocacy-based approach.

Secondly, good communication is essential and this includes a shared language. Along the process, communication often gets a bit rough and going back to the shared language and values as well as unpacking assumptions can often put the relationship back on track.

Thirdly, as collaboration is not a linear process but an uncertain one, each party must have the patience and commitment to stay the course and to make the collaborative relationship work out. It is also important to remind each other that collaboration is about sharing resources (finances, knowledge and people) to achieve a mutual goal which can help to deepen the trusting relationship. All parties must mutually benefit

from working together.

In some collaborations, the partnership is between people from different fields that may supplement one another's expertise (e.g. a partnership between healthcare and social services or between doctors, nurses, social workers and allied health therapists). These collaborations often do a lot more good to the users who receive a more holistic experience through a more seamless delivery of services. Sustaining such collaborations requires commitment of time, energy and reliable leadership.

Fourthly, collaborations often involve parties and even stakeholders attending a series of expertly facilitated activities or meetings. These require skilful facilitation to listen and respect differing views and perspectives and to arbitrate differences with the shared goal in mind.

Fifthly, ensure that roles, responsibilities and tasks are delineated clearly during collaboration. If tasks are not clearly assigned, productivity slows down, making it difficult to assess the performance of individuals and the parties.

Let the Vision Bond the Collaboration

All parties must understand the purpose behind the collaboration and the vision that is ahead. Collaboration without a clear purpose and vision will inevitably spin in circles and be saddled by unhealthy tensions. Establishing and communicating regularly the principles for collaboration will enable parties to stay on track and be guided by a healthy culture of give and take that is built on trust and consistency. This trust must enable any party to surface and address fears.

So is collaboration worth the time and is it necessary? The answer is usually a yes, especially for complex issues that require multidisciplinary interventions. Collaboration will, on most occasions, significantly enable more holistic solutions to be formed for more vexing problems. It is also a clear option in today's climate of constrained resources especially in manpower and time.

4 September 2017

Collective Learning and Co-Creation

Many of us would have heard about the need to prepare for a future that seems to have more complex problems and challenging dynamics. The complexity and fast pace of change is a result of a host of reasons and dimensions, from the impact of climate change on livestock, livelihood and businesses, to more transactional types of relationships, to the stress and strain of compliance framework in services. These projections about the future mean that organisations and practitioners have to depend more on cross-disciplinary collaborations, flattened hierarchies and working with communities in order to evolve and co-create solutions.

Learning Together

As a society, we need to be lifelong learners in order to stay relevant, competent and participative. Better still, we need to master new skills and envision new possibilities. This is what Workforce Singapore hopes to achieve through their programmes and initiatives. The big vision is for people to absorb knowledge and skills and to create new knowledge while learning.

Groups or micro communities are often the primary vehicle for learning. Creating new knowledge and developing new products often happen when people work together or are in a collective learning context. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is an example of such collective learning. The purpose of working together is to expand knowledge and expertise and to possibly create what is useful so that organisations, communities, customers and citizens can benefit or be better served.

What Makes This Work

What makes such teams or groups work are the relationships and bonds that are formed around a shared mission. Having a common goal fosters mutual support for each other even as people gather. Collective learning often requires adapting to a more freestyle and less controlling style of doing things and requires teams to work together to carry out interdependent tasks in order to problem solve and create new solutions. The group dynamics include listening to other points of views, coordinating actions and making shared decisions. It requires every person in the group to remain mindfully aware of other's needs, roles and perspectives, and to actively use feeling and thinking skills in engaging each other.

For such group learning to happen, there are some activities and conditions that must exist. These include leaders facilitating and enabling each group member through a supportive environment that places priority on partnerships. Leaders also play a big part in framing in order to promote effective collaboration and learning. What undergirds the environment is a safe interpersonal environment and psychological safety that promotes the attitudes, skills and behaviours necessary for meaningful learning. Framed as learning, what seems like failure and disappointments become lessons in inquiry and potential for development.

Be it multi-disciplinary teams or community groups, the lifespan of the group will depend on the camaraderie of the relationship to be fostered and the nature of the problem or solution at hand. Furthermore, the decision on whether to take an issue or solution further belongs to the group.

Contributions from Social Work Training

For social workers, our training in community and group work equips us with the knowledge and skills required for making learning together work. Social work training equips social workers with the ability to work in multi-disciplinary teams, across disciplines and with diverse communities. Good social workers have the skills and the flexibility to act in moments of potential collaboration when and where they present themselves. The basics of group work apply, such as recognising and clarifying interdependence, establishing trust and figuring out how to coordinate well. Offering to share crucial knowledge in a timely way and learning to ask open ended questions clearly and frequently make for good teamwork.

Co-Creating Solutions with Communities

Organising people to learn together is particularly helpful when working with communities to solve problems or to further improve conditions. This is because each person, group of people or community learns through the discussions and derives their own understanding of the situation or problem in order to organise or create a solution. For example, with the number of old persons in society on the rise, there will be an increasing number of needs that can be met by local communities more speedily and creatively as compared to government agencies. Neighbourhoods, towns and informal groups should come together to discuss these needs and what they can do to have a town that caters to a group of people with diverse ages, lifestyles and needs.

When people gather, those affected have a voice in coming up with a solution, and they have greater courage to move ahead even without great certainty. This is a process of action and reflection. When working with communities to improve conditions or solve problems, the following can help to generate an enabling and supportive environment:

- Asking questions
- Sharing information
- Experimenting with jointly created actions or possibility

- Talking about mistakes and learning together
- Seeking feedback

We should nurture an atmosphere where questions are asked in a curious sort of way and not perceived as interrogative. Good questions can deepen understanding, open up possibilities and clarify interpretation and perception.

Goal of Learning Together

Moving forward, it is likely that we will be engaged in more collaborations and work with other disciplines or communities. We must be ready as social service professionals to be able to facilitate such group work in order to achieve more contextualised solutions, greater knowledge sharing and client-centric services.

7 January 2020

Factors That Affect Change

As social service practitioners, many of you would have been introduced to various techniques and models of interventions that help you in your work with clients. These may include social casework, cognitive behavioural therapy, narrative therapy or solutions focused therapy. While each model has its theoretical underpinning and can be useful in helping to bring about change in clients when it is applied selectively, it is important to keep in the mind the bigger context within which change takes place.

Model of Change

Change often happens as a result of the interaction between various factors of the system and cannot be attributed solely to one factor alone. Scholars have come up with a four-factor model of change[1] in a therapeutic relationship. Change, or the lack of change, happens as these four factors interact. The four factors include: client and extra-therapeutic factors; relationship factors; models or techniques; and expectancy factors. I will explore in greater detail these four factors.

1. Client and Extra-Therapeutic Factors

Client factors, such as personal motivations, abilities, hopes, goals and expectations, play an important part in determining whether change happens and whether the goals of the helping relationship are achieved. While the techniques or skills employed by the practitioner are crucial, we need to be reminded that change can only happen hand in hand with clients. As practitioners, it is important then to know clients well enough in order to pace appropriately with them through the stages of change[2]. Seek to understand how their life experiences and worldviews shape their motivations, goals and hopes; and what their fears and barriers to change are. Motivational interviewing for example is useful in directing clients towards change by exploring the causes of their ambivalence.

It will also be useful for practitioners to help clients develop a "growth mindset"[3]. A growth mindset is the belief that one is on a continuous journey of learning and improving as opposed to a belief that one is unchangeable. Having this mindset will result in a greater ability to change. A practitioner can prime clients for a growth

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[1] Miller, S. D., Duncan, B. L., & Hubble, M. A. (1997). *Escape from Babel: Toward a unifying language for psychotherapy practice.* W. W. Norton & Company.

[2] Prochaska, J., & Diclemente, C. (1983). Stages and processes of self-change in smoking: toward and integrative model of change. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 5,* 390-395.

[3] Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.* Ballantine Books.

mindset by using words such as "improve, develop, learn and grow". Listening for a growth mindset means focusing our attention on people's strengths, goals and possibilities. In essence, we are listening for potential - for what a person can develop or grow to be with improvement.

In addition to client factors, there are also what scholars have termed "extra-therapeutic" factors such as the level of social support or life events, that affect the change process of the client. This reminds us that the client is a "person-in-environment", where his or her behavior is largely influenced by environmental factors. Understanding that client and extra-therapeutic factors have a role to play in affecting change will push social service practitioners to look beyond the models employed in therapy towards a more holistic assessment of and intervention for clients.

2. Relationship Factors

According to Michelle Thomas[4], relationship factors refer to the "strength of the therapeutic alliance between the therapist and client(s)". Some would estimate that this accounts for about 30% of change[5] in clients. According to David G. Martin[6], "a good relationship is almost certainly healing in and of itself, but it is also powerful because it contributes to keeping the client actively involved in the treatment process".

This should not be new to those who have been working in direct practice for some time. Relationships of trust and respect are foundations from which positive change can happen. Clients must be able to know that their worker does not judge them, is listening to them, and is seeking to understand them. It is from a foundation of a strong relationship that practitioners are also able to encourage and even challenge clients in their journey.

As such, social service practitioners should invest time in developing strong relationships of trust with clients. One way in which practitioners can do this is by taking part in continuous reflective and reflexive practice in order to be more self-aware.

3. Models or Techniques

Another factor that affects change is the model or techniques employed by the worker. This consists of the theoretical orientation of the worker, as well as the therapeutic methods or strategies used by the worker in the helping relationship[7]. While models or techniques used by the practitioner may be secondary to the helping relationship, they are nonetheless important in facilitating change in the client. Practitioners should be aware of what works with different groups of clients (e.g. adolescence, clients with depression, etc.), and use these models when working with them. At the same time, practitioners should also be flexible in adapting these models and techniques to fit

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[4] Thomas, M. (2006). The Contributing Factors of Change in a Therapeutic Process. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 28*, 201-210.
[5] Hubble, M. A., Duncan, B. L., & Miller, S. D. (1999). *The heart and soul of change: What works in therapy?* American Psychological Association.
[6] Martin, D. G. (2003). *Clinical Practice with Adolescents.* Cengage Learning.
[7] Thomas, *Contemporary Family Therapy,* 52.

the specific needs and characteristics of the client. In upholding ethical practice, social workers should also use the therapeutic models that are grounded in research and that they are competent in.

4. Expectancy Factors

The last factor affecting change is what is known as expectancy factors. This refers to how hopeful and trusting clients are in the credibility of the treatment and the helping relationship[8]. The ability of the worker to present the helping relationship in a way that is in alignment with client's expectations will contribute to successful change[9].

Practitioners should celebrate little successes with clients along the helping journey in order to engender hope in them.

Change – A Result of an Amalgam of Factors

It is easy to get lost when presented with many theories, perspectives and models in the course of your work. But it is important to remember that change in our clients do not happen in silo, but as an intertwining of various factors. May these four factors serve as a helpful framework for all of us as we continue with the helping journey with our clients.

12 November 2018

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[8] Sprenkle, D., & Blow, A. (2004). Common factors and our sacred models. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *30*, 113-129.
[9] Johnson, S. M., & Talitman, E. (1997). Predictors of Success in Emotionally Focused Marital Therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 23*(2), 135-152.

Framing Social Issues and Perspectives

We are often asked to consider how we can teach youths in a relevant and engaging manner as part of our responsibility to educate the younger generation on social issues. This is especially important in today's digital era where we are competing with other channels that generate information at a rapid pace and scale. Senior practitioners who are eager to invest in the younger generation will need to pause and review ways to engage them, and in the process consider different perspectives of doing so. The same considerations can be applied to social issues that may draw contentious views - how can we better prepare people for conversations about difficult and divergent social issues? For such challenging topics, pushing down information and facts in a conversation or debate will not be feasible. One way is to focus on framing the issue that needs to be discussed.

Framing and Reframing

Framing is what we choose to say, how we choose to say it and what we leave unsaid. The frames we use affect people's attitudes, understanding and actions and contain cues that can trigger certain patterns of thinking[1]. Our perceptions, values and principles also play a part in how we frame issues. It affects our choice of words, tone, visuals and interpretation of statistics in the way we present issues. Together, these elements create an overarching frame that powerfully shapes what we think, feel and do. That is why it is so important to get our frames right.

The challenge today is that there can be several different ways to frame a single issue. Having a consensus on the type of frame to use will thus be helpful in guiding public discourse and collective thinking. Likewise, **"reframing"** an issue, or changing the way we communicate about an issue, can alter how others understand and respond to these matters.

Framing also changes the way we hold conversations with our peers, the younger and older generations. When we reframe an issue, conversations can begin on a neutral or positive note and spark fresh insights and discussions on the subject matter, which may not happen under the original frame. We can think about topics such as ageing and education in a different manner when we use an alternative lens and language in

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[1] Markowitz, E., & Sweetland, J. (2018, July 10). *Entering Climate Change Communications Through the Side Door.* Retrieved from Stanford Social Innovation Review's website.

our discussions. For example, if we perceive the elderly as active and independent, it can change the way we describe the elderly and our outlook on the ageing process.

Knowing How to Frame Issues and Perspectives

The most pressing issues of our time often attract the most polarising views. This is certainly true of issues like climate change, inequality and cultural diversity. What is becoming clearer is that the contestation of views using facts and statistics might not be the best method to generate public interest and participation in the topic. We can instead make better progress by looking for "side doors" to engage people to see different perspectives, rather than knocking down the "front door" with a barrage of facts.

Using "side doors" to frame issues allows more room for flexibility in the way people perceive issues. It avoids the need to define which way "left" or "right" is - opening up the possibility of true dialogue with diverse, even conflicting views. This prevents conversations and debates from turning into a polarised "yes" or "no" argument, which may cause a "fight or flight" reaction where speakers become defensive or feel the need to end the discussion. The "crisis" door, so often used by social change advocates, might even lead the discussion to a dead end. The use of images such as melting icebergs, deforestation and decreasing animal populations could trigger the moral concerns of some, but it could also cause others to experience "apocalypse fatigue"[2]. Such emotionally overwhelming frames can cause people to turn away from the issue instead of spurring action and change.

Increasingly, we are seeing the importance of inviting the younger generation to participate in discussions and to contribute their views. Their fresh perspectives could challenge us to review the current frames we use and propel us to find alternative ways to reframe subjects and discussions. To capture the interest of the younger generation to participate in these discussions, we must first pay more attention to the way we frame issues. This is particularly pertinent today where the youth are heavily exposed to attention-grabbing social media experiences that are specially curated for them.

Communicating Messages

The chosen messenger behind the message plays an important role in influencing the public's receptiveness towards the news. When messengers tend to be the "usual suspects", it may cause the public to doubt their authenticity. Having credible messengers that can gain the trust of the public helps to prevent this problem. More importantly, the way we communicate messages should be relatable to the layperson. The use of images of regular citizens engaging in climate change action has shown to increase the salience of the message as it connects with the viewers' day-to-day experiences[3]. Similarly, getting people to participate in local community activities will help them to link local, immediate concerns with bigger, global issues. This strategy

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[2] Ibid., 54.
[3] Ibid., 54.

can be used in the way we frame global issues by drawing connections and relevance to local concerns and daily life.

Inviting Discourse and Participation

Inviting public discourse and engagement allows people to explore various "side doors" or alternative views on issues that matter. For example, Youth Conversations, helmed by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), is a platform for youths to discuss issues of concern and co-create ideas with one another as well as with the government[4]. These conversations are important for youths and adults to discover different perspectives and to have a conducive platform to discuss these issues. Having a solution-oriented frame does not mean that we sweep difficult topics under the rug. Instead, a solution-oriented frame means that we are ready to roll up our sleeves and put in the work to address challenging issues. This also means being open to listening to and accepting diverse views and learning how to engage with these differing views fruitfully. With this solution-oriented frame in mind, people may be more inclined to accept alternative perspectives and adopt a more holistic and balanced stance in the issues that they deal with.

Opening Up Space to Elevate Public Discourse

Overall, we see that opening up the space for public discourse and having the flexibility to accept a range of perspectives would be more helpful in facilitating public dialogue than compelling individuals to reach an agreement by projecting facts and value-laden messages. More youths will be interested in participating and generating solutions once they see that their opinions are valued and welcomed. After all, they are the next generation's leaders. The way we frame issues should thus enable a healthy and open exchange of ideas, which would hopefully create more opportunities for Singaporeans to shape the future together.

7 January 2020

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[4] Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. (2019, September 30). *Youth Conversations.* Retrieved from Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth's website.

Good Listening

Those of us who have been trained as social workers or counsellors would know the importance of listening when working with clients. We are trained to listen emphatically and actively in a way which assures our clients that we are present with them. Listening is also important when working with co-workers and colleagues in order to get work done and to move projects forward. However, while many will acknowledge the importance of listening, we still struggle with being good and effective listeners. This could be due to a variety of reasons such as compassion fatigue, thinking we know better, or being pre-occupied with our own ideas and thinking. In this letter, I will explore ways in which we can become better listeners to both our clients and colleagues.

Back to Basics

Before we delve into what good listening entails, let us first go back to the basics. As many of us would know, listening goes beyond mere hearing. Julian Treasure, in a TED talk, defined listening as "making meaning from sound"[1]. It involves synthesizing information, making sense of what we hear and responding appropriately to the information that has been shared. Listening also involves making meaning from non-verbal cues such as body language, tone of voice and feelings expressed.

With the above understanding of listening, we can see how listening requires effort and concentration. It requires a person to focus one's mind and heart on what is being said verbally or non-verbally, with the intent of understanding and responding appropriately. It is not surprising then that good listening is essential for good communication, which is the basic building block of any relationship – be it client-worker or colleague-colleague.

Why is Listening So Difficult?

If listening is so fundamental in all relationships, why then do we not do it more often or do it better? There could be many reasons why listening is so difficult. An article on Inc. Magazine lists some bad habits that impede our ability to listen effectively such as, "planning your response while the other person is talking; assuming you know what the other person is about to say; offering advice before being asked; letting your mind wander to something that seems more important"[2].

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[1] Treasure, J. (2011, July). *5 Ways to Listen Better.* Retrieved from Ted's website.
[2] Zetlin, M. (2015, March 5). *8 Reasons You're a Worse Listener Than You Think (and How to Get Better).* Retrieved from Inc. Magazine's website.

I am sure that many of us have been guilty of at least one of the listed bad habits in our lifetime. If you read through these habits again, you will notice that a common theme across all of them is a pre-occupation with the self – fulfilling one's desire to be heard or to respond, being distracted by other things or using self as the reference point to interpret what another is saying. Often times, it is our self that prevents us from being good listeners.

At other times, it could be "noises" from elsewhere such as physical noise from the environment, psychological noise from the pressures or worries we face, physiological noise from bodily discomforts or semantic noise from differences in how speaker and listener understand issues[3]. Many of these noises are not a direct fault of the listener, but steps can be taken to try to minimise such noises.

What Is Involved in Good Listening?

With the right heart, good listening is something that we can develop through training and practice. Below, I will list some helpful tips to develop good listening, which is helpful for any interpersonal communication.

1. Get Rid of Distractions

People can tell when we are distracted or preoccupied with something, and this affects their willingness to engage and to share. As much as possible, get rid of unwanted noise or distractions that may potentially hinder good listening and sharing. Some examples include choosing a location that is quiet or not bringing your handphone into a meeting. However, beyond just the physical distractions, we also need to ensure that we try our best to get rid of mental distractions or "psychological noises". Before a meeting, it is useful to prepare oneself to be mentally present with the clients or people that we meet. This could mean taking some time before the meeting to set aside any unrelated thoughts or worries and to focus one's mind and heart on the client or meeting at hand.

2. Be Slow to Speak

Many of us often find ourselves guilty of interrupting another person before they finish speaking. This may happen because we assume we know what the other person is trying to say, because we want our voice to be heard or because we do not have the patience to wait for the other person to finish speaking. The next time we engage a colleague or client, make a conscious effort to "be slow to speak". Has the other person finished what he has intended to say? Are you cutting in to finish the person's sentence, to change the topic or to say what is on your mind? Are you assuming you know what the other person is going to say before he even says it? Even if the other person may be a slow communicator, good listening involves being patient, and giving space and time to the other person to put across his message. When we

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[3] Wrech, J., Goding, A., Johnson, D. I., & Attias, B. A. (2011). *Stand Up, Speak Out: The Practice and Ethics of Public Speaking.* Flat World Knowledge, L. L. C.

are slow to speak, we acknowledge that what the other person has to say is important and thereby uphold their worth and dignity as persons. *Remember that the aim of listening is to try to make sense of what is being said, rather than to make your own opinions or thoughts heard.*

3. Be Open and Non-Judgmental

An important part of being a good listener is for others to feel comfortable sharing with you. People want to know that they will be heard without being judged or evaluated for what they say. Being non-judgmental does not mean throwing out all of one's personal views, values and beliefs, nor does it mean not challenging the views of others. Instead, it means that we do not discriminate against, despise or look down on others who do not hold similar views as us. Part of good listening also involves not trivialising the struggles of others, or dismissing their ideas when they do not cohere with ours. Even if there may be differences in opinions or beliefs, it must be communicated in a respectful and gentle manner. Many of us may not be aware of our personal biases, and so it's important that we constantly take part in reflective practice to know how our personal values and beliefs, or even mannerisms affects our engagement with others.

4. Speak with a Purpose

Good listening involves purposeful speaking. While we should be slow to speak, good listening does not mean that we do not speak at all. However, when we do speak, it should be with purpose. This involves asking questions that are relevant, clarifying what the other person is trying to say, or letting the other person know that he/she is being heard.

The Heart of Good Listening

Good listening is probably one of the most important life skills. However, it is one of the skills that is the hardest to hone and perfect. While the tips above may be helpful, the heart of good listening goes beyond just practicing these tips, towards acknowledging the importance of another person by actively paying attention to what they share. As we go on in our work, be it with clients or colleagues, may we continue to strive to become better listeners.

"If you make listening and observation your occupation, you will gain much more than you can by talk." – Robert Baden-Powell

11 February 2019

Social Work Supervision

With the growing complexities faced by our clients, it is essential for social workers to be well supported in their practice. Social work supervision helps to ensure that this support facilitates the professional development of social workers, and ultimately improves the well-being of our clients. Social work supervision and practice are tightly intertwined and we can think of supervision as a mirror reflecting how practice is and how it ought to be directed.

Two years ago, we saw the launch of the National Social Work Competency Framework. On 7 July 2017, we reached another milestone for the profession through the launch of the Social Work Supervision Guidelines at the "Social Work Supervision in Singapore: Innovative Ways to Chart the Bare Essentials" Seminar organised by the Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board (SWAAB). A softcopy of the Supervision Guidelines is available on the Singapore Association of Social Workers' (SASW) website[1].

Why the Production of the Supervision Guidelines?

Through the course of our meetings, SWAAB discovered a few problems that we faced regarding social work supervision:

- Uncertainty over the definition and purpose of social work supervision.
- No clear understanding of the standards for supervision. For example, how frequent social work supervision should be and who can be a social work supervisor.
- Weak support for social work supervision within certain sub-sectors. This causes social work supervisors to be unable to juggle their caseload while supervising younger social workers. The lack of support also leads to insufficient time being set aside by both supervisor and supervisee for supervision. In the worst-case scenario, social work supervision is neglected completely.

We hope that the Supervision Guidelines will:

- Help practitioners and organisations to appreciate the value and importance of supervision for social work practice.
- Be an aspirational document that helps to promote consistency in the social work supervisory community.

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[1] Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board. (2017). *Social Work Supervision Guidelines*. Retrieved from Singapore Association of Social Workers' website.

- Encourage organisations to ensure structures and resources are in place to create a culture of social work supervision within the organisation.

I encourage all social workers and social service organisations to read this set of Guidelines and to compare your current supervisory practices with the Guidelines. Be encouraged if you are on the right track, and be challenged to develop your current practice to meet the standards set out in the Guidelines.

Vision for Social Work Supervision

Here are three hopes that I have for social work supervision:

1. Firstly, I hope that social work supervision will ensure that our Social Work practice is governed by the Code of Social Work Ethics[2].

A mark of a mature profession is for practice to be bound by the code of ethics. Good practice in Social Work is about being able to consistently practice in an ethical and professional manner. Good supervision is key to the practitioners' professional learning and in developing good ethical practice[3]. Clients and communities will benefit from a good standard of practice that is regularly supported by supervisors who transmit good knowledge, skills and mentorship. In this regard, the educational function of supervisors is important in showing new workers how social work values and ethics are applied to practice and in developing the requisite attitude, knowledge and skills.

2. Secondly, I hope to see further development of social work supervision.

We have already seen the production of a sector wide framework to guide social work supervision in the Supervision Guidelines produced by SWAAB. Moving forward, we want to continue to grow the quality of supervisors and this is done in the form of training. The Family Resource and Training Centre at SASW took reference from the Supervision Guidelines in revamping its training for supervisors. There are currently 2 training courses available for supervisors, one at the beginner level for new or potential supervisors and another at the intermediate level for experienced supervisors.

Supervision training is not only for supervisors. There are also plans for an online module for social workers on the role of supervisees in supervision.

3. Thirdly, I hope to see the social work fraternity banding together to support each other in the journey of social work supervision.

This will take place through the pooling together of resources, documentation of best practices and sharing of practice wisdom. We already see examples of this taking place

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[2] National Association of Social Workers. (n.d.). *NASW Code of Ethics.* Retrieved from National Association of Social Workers' website.
[3] Centre for Substance Abuse Treatment. (2009). *Clinical supervision and professional development of the substance abuse counselor.* Retrieved from National Center for Biotechnology Information's website.
The National Association of Social Workers and The Association of Social Work Boards. (2013). *Best practice standards in social work supervision.* Retrieved from National Association of Social Workers' website.

through the workshops conducted at the Supervision Seminar organised by SWAAB, the supervision manual launched by Montfort Care and the Supervision Guidelines put together by the SWAAB Supervision Workgroup.

In the future, I hope to see more platforms for supervisors and social work leaders to band together to work at putting structures in place within organisations to support social work supervision.

For the Best Interest of the Client

As seen in the turnout of over 300 participants at the recent Supervision Seminar organised by SWAAB on 7 July 2017, I am encouraged to know that there are many in the field who see the importance of social work supervision and are committed to its development. The support of the management is also crucial in allowing social workers to grow and develop in their practice competency through supervision. These are all the necessary ingredients to realise supervision as a:

"relationship which can potentially create music out of melody a painting out of a palette and poetry out of words."

At the end of the day, we must remember that supervision is not an end in itself but rather a means towards the end goal of enhancing competent and ethical practice for the best interest of our clients.

"Super-vision" poem by Ms Ang Bee Lian follows on the next page.

31 July 2017

Super-vision

inner eyes which flicker enlightening insights
exhilarating, energizing or enlivening;
outer eyes which see what's in sight,
in perspective and beyond;
the vision of a state of being
which construes tentatively
with the inner ears, the inner eyes and the inner sense.
nurturing, pruning, flexing, supporting
another state of being.

Super-vision?

a dream for believing and becoming,
for holding on and developing
or letting go and growing?
aren't visions difficult to grasp?
elusive, ambiguous and dynamic?
tamed only by the heart?

Supervision

a relationship which holds subtle possibilities
as with a kaleidoscope,
for "being and becoming"
the player, the protégé and the professional,
the person in you and me.

Supervision

a relationship which can potentially create
music out of melody
a painting out of a palette
and poetry out of words.

Supervision

transactions of time, meaning and self
in mutual explorations and discoveries,
Risks worth the cost?
Isn't perfection born out of
Super beings?
Perhaps we'll begin to
sense the music,
see the painting and
hear the poetry
when we give up the perfection
for the wholesome.

Ang Bee Lian, June 1987

Multi-Disciplinary Team (Revisited)

In recent years, discussions over the medical-social divide have shifted towards health-social integration in a welcomed move. Among the various approaches that we see and hear are efforts in appointing dedicated persons, such as Chief Experience Officers or Group Chief Patient Officers, to take charge or focus attention on the user experience. The primary aim of such persons is to remind various parts of an agency or system that the benefits to the user should be the central reason for adjusting and re-engineering processes. This approach is not about having a one size fits all scheme but rather tailoring services with the client experience as the centre.

Citizen or Consumer-centric Service

Any agency, be it a public service, or a not-for-profit commercial service must be relevant to the people it serves. In the public service, we call it being "citizen-centric", while the commercial side would call it being "customer-centric". The aim is to improve experiences and outcomes for individuals and families who have care and support needs that cross traditional professional and organisational boundaries. Focusing on the journeys taken by service users often help to raise awareness, engender empathy and start conversations about involving users in the design of services. Such a focus requires an innovative spirit that is willing to abandon what has not worked before to embrace something that is worth experimenting.

In research, there is a term that is often used to describe a point where no new insights emerge: this point is called 'theoretical saturation'. Research in human services and design is nowhere close to this point. This is due to ever-changing social trends, such as family structures and function, that cause services to operate in fluid contexts. As such, more attention has to be given to observing, sensing, analysing and interpreting the environment and its implications for service delivery.

Those who appreciate how systems operate would often go back to basics and try to understand what works, where, for whom, and in what circumstances. One cannot simply 'lift and shift' a model that works in one area and expect it to work elsewhere. This is why "pilot projects" are often hard to scale.

Supporting Families Under Pressure

Individuals, regardless of age, conditions and needs, want services to be joined up around their whole lives and not just parts of it. This is especially so for individuals and families facing multiple hardships who often experience being passed from pillar to post when they contact services. However, complex relationships, businesses, transactions and contracts make interactions more complicated, resulting in them facing many roadblocks on their journey. Such roadblocks include information not being shared properly across agencies, proposed solutions being formulated by only one single agency, and a lack of coordination across services[1]. So if there is no one size fits all approach, how then can we provide individuals and families with more coordinated, holistic services?

Multi-Disciplinary Teams

One effort that could go a long way to benefit the user is that of convening multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs). MDTs are teams of professionals from different disciplines in health, community, social care, mental health, employment, education, criminal justice and community services who work together to plan services and support for people and families. MDTs aim to enable professionals and practitioners from different backgrounds and services to communicate better about each other's roles and responsibilities, share information and design services which better meet people's needs. It is especially necessary for social workers to provide inputs in these areas of social and emotional concerns. This is to ensure that medical or therapeutic issues do not crowd out what will contribute to the social well-being of the clients.

It is common to hear of MDTs being organised in many agencies. However, it is not the norm even when having an MDT is the appropriate approach. Reasons cited are obvious ranging from manpower shortage, busy schedules and conflicting ideologies. How can we make MDTs more prevalent as an approach to benefit patients, clients and citizens? The current public expectation for a more seamless service delivery that emphasises the usage of MDTs is a good opportunity to encourage wider practice.

Below are some principles that can make MDT as a daily practice a reality for those who can benefit. These are:

i.   A 'key worker' system through which care for those with complex support and help is coordinated by a named team member
ii. A committed and collaborative manager or practice leader who oversees and facilitates the work of the whole team
iii. Having a clear purpose and defined roles for each member of the MDT
iv. Having a single process to access the workers in the team, with joint meetings to share ideas, insights and concerns

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[1] Rankin, J., & Regan, S. (2004). *Meeting complex needs: The future of social care.* Retrieved from Institute of Public Policy Research's website.

v. Having electronic records of all contacts, assessments and interventions of team members with an individual and their family

vi. A willingness to interact across professional and disciplinary boundaries, investment in integrated IT systems, joint training and co-location where possible.

Source: Social Care Institute for Excellence (2018)[2]

MDTs help enable different disciplines and agencies focus on what needs to happen to help users of services support their well-being. It is one of the ways to bridge the medical-social divide. For patients and clients with complex needs or needs that require the services of more than one agency, department or professional, the experience of a coordinated response, advice and guidance from the team will enable them to make more informed decisions. The patient or client will have a more seamless experience in that the care, support and relationship with the professionals are holistically connected as one piece and not as multiple transactions. Now that we know that multidisciplinary work works, we should make effort to make it a more regular approach despite the hard work. It is a choice that agencies adopt and it is a commitment of time and expertise on the part of professionals.

8 March 2019

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[2] Social Care Institute for Excellence. (2018). *Delivering integrated care: the role of the multidisciplinary team.* Retrieved from Social Care Institute for Excellence's website.

Standards of Care and Due Diligence

Leaders, supervisors and organisations need to be mindful of safe practice when delivering services to clients and to ensure that there are policies in place for accountability for services. These policies will guide practice and prevent harm to clients. The details should be in a protocol or standard operating procedure that is reviewed regularly in order to stay relevant. It should take into consideration the latest developments and changes in the operating environment.

Exercising Standards of Care

For those who are delivering direct services and working with vulnerable persons, there are often situations where an agency, a service or a program is required to show evidence that it has exercised a particular standard of care. This can happen when there is an enquiry or incident. For example, an inquiry or report may require evidence that a program is providing the appropriate care and appropriate plan for the right client based on an accurate assessment of the needs and risks. "Appropriate" here would mean care and plans that are safe, ethical and effective.

To do this, there should be a clear appreciation of the profile of the person, group or community in need, and an assessment of the bio-psycho, social and spiritual dimension of the person, group or community. This will help in drawing up a holistic plan which should be followed up by those who possess the appropriate knowledge and skills. It is also necessary that there is ongoing review of the plan to adapt to fresh circumstances.

So how would we show evidence of appropriate care and due diligence in a plan? We could do this in the following way – (i) Show case notes or relevant procedure and policy documents and provide a sample of the actual documentation; (ii) Describe and explain the process of how an assessment is made and (iii) Show how the plan is followed up and revised with fresh information.

Documentation is Integral to Safe Practice

Good questions with regard to such evidence include how current the guidance and standard operating procedure are and the level of supervision or oversight of the practice and service standard. The documentation should show that there is proper

assessment, a plan that is followed and reviewed, and evaluation of interventions and outcome with some form of supervision. Assessment and evaluation must be made by persons with the *appropriate* knowledge, skills and judgment. In the case of a program, each requirement or cluster of requirements will aim to confirm one key domain in the standard of care or a key concern such as safeguarding the dignity of the person. It is important to explain the understanding behind a particular practice and how the practice complies with the standard of care or protection.

Evidence should also show the interrelationships that support the clients. Documentation should show (i) communication and respect for the clients; (ii) accountability of staff and the program and (iii) attention to the care, safety and welfare of the clients. Documentation is used for communication purposes among those involved in the care or protection of the client. It establishes the facts and circumstances related to the care given and assists in the recall of details in a specific situation. It is important to note that too much, too little or wrong documentation can cause harm.

As such, documentation should be clear, concise, factual, objective, timely and legible. Evaluation should reflect the knowledge and skills gained from good training as part of ensuring safe standards of practice and accountability.

Showing Due Diligence

Integral to due diligence is decision making by the *appropriate* level of authority or professional practice. By this we mean that an *appropriate* person is assigned a specific level of decision making. These decisions should be made based on a set of principles that are documented. Good practice begins with taking time to ask good questions. It continues with documenting the planning, implementation and decision-making process. The thinking behind key decisions made on the case direction and the persons involved in the decision-making process should also be clearly recorded.

Safe practice is about being professionally and ethically accountable and delivering services to clients right to the last mile. Due diligence demands that the person with the right level of training and experience or expertise is assigned to the appropriate complexity of the case.

How a Practitioner Can Ensure Accountability

One way to do this is to ensure that as a practitioner, you are supported by your agency through a protocol that sets out clear roles, responsibilities and accountability. This should be accompanied by adequate training and complemented by regular supervision. As practice decisions are based on the application of knowledge, skills and professional judgment depending on the clients' characteristics, it is useful that decisions for complex situations are made through consultation and collective wisdom.

As a professional, there is a need to be professionally accountable and it is good for us to be sure of what this might look like. In some situations, there is a clear need to comply with statutory or regulatory requirements, while at other times, dilemmas may

arise which require discussions with a supervisor.

Being clear about your role, the level of professional judgment required and your power in decision making will help in coping with the stress that resides in the tension between speedy compliance and professional dilemma. Being accountable is not only good practice but also helps to manage the stress in carrying the caseload and shouldering the responsibility.

As a practitioner, it is important to ask for information, appropriate training and supervision to enable you to be accountable for your practice and service to clients. Self-directed professional development, support from the agency and clarity about roles and responsibilities can help to fend off premature burnout in areas that are more demanding of professional practice.

16 September 2016

Planning and Management in Social Services

Setting Key Performance Indicators I

Performance Measurement as Part of Good Service Delivery

Performance measurement is part of good service delivery as it helps promote improvements and ensures accountability to funders and service users. It also helps policy and decision makers to have a deeper understanding of the intent of the policy, the process of implementation and the deployment of resources.

A reasonable standard of service involves meeting or exceeding an acceptable level of performance. While practice guidelines and professional knowledge or training can ensure a reasonable standard of service, it is useful to measure and monitor indicators as a proxy of the standard and to assure users of safe practice and improvements. Good monitoring will point out when a standard or situation falls to an undesirable level and hopefully trigger recovery without resorting to detailed investigations. It is also important as it allows us to calibrate the amount of resources invested into a programme.

Impetus for Accountability

Given that users in the social sector tend to be less informed, have less access to good information and often lack the bandwidth to make demands of services or even accept services, what are the motivating factors for agencies to improve services for the well-being of clients?

In recent years, professionalism, regulation and advocates have made accountability more prominent in the discourse about social service delivery and social service interventions. Professionalism has placed expectations of standards on practitioners through a system of governance, be it licensing, accreditation or registration. The state has also increased its influence over services through regulation such as establishing a certain code of practice or compliance to a service standard.

The Use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

A Key Performance Indicator (KPI) is a common form of performance monitoring. It is a set of measures that an organisation uses to gauge its performance over time. While it is a common form of performance monitoring, it is not the only one. Other

forms of performance monitoring include regulatory inspection, surveys of consumer experiences and third-party assessments[1].

KPIs cannot improve the quality of a programme or service but they can act as flags and alerts to identify good practice, and provide comparisons between similar services. They allow us to assess the efficacy of programmes, and can lead to proactive improvement or service recovery. At the agency level, measuring KPIs are useful to learn how to improve service provision, and at a national or system level, KPIs are useful as a tool to evaluate a provider.

When measuring performance through KPIs, it is important to note that the use of a single KPI, or even the use of a limited set of KPIs, may not provide sufficient information. Furthermore, having KPIs should not inadvertently encourage staff and agencies to focus on the activity being measured to the detriment of a service or programme as a whole. This may lead to a situation where only "what gets measured gets done".

Types of KPIs

KPIs should measure if a programme or intervention achieves the intended rationale or intent, the effectiveness of a programme or service delivery, as well as the results arising from the intervention or from receiving the service.

KPIs can be characterised according to whether they are generic or specific. General KPIs measure aspects of a service or intervention that apply to the bulk of service users. An example of this is the number of service users awaiting admission to an early intervention programme and the waiting period. Specific KPIs are related to a targeted service user population and measure particular aspects of the intervention related to those service users. For example, this includes the percentage of patients that have been referred for physiotherapy that have waited more than two months between a referral and an assessment.

Understanding that there are many types of KPIs allows us to appreciate the deliberations needed for choosing the appropriate one. It will surprise many to know that there can be up to 8 types of KPIs. Hence, it is necessary for these to be discussed, negotiated and agreed upon.

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[1] Health Information and Quality Authority. (2013, February). *Guidance on Developing Key Performance Indicators and Minimum Data Sets to Monitor Healthcare Quality: February 2013 (Version 1.1).* Retrieved from Health Information and Quality Authority's website.

Some common types of KPIs include the following:

1. **Quantitative KPIs** - a measurable characteristic that is usually collected by counting, adding or averaging numbers. It is the most common form of measurement.

2. **Qualitative KPIs** - a descriptive characteristic, an opinion, a property or trait. Examples are user satisfaction obtained through surveys which gives a qualitative report.

3. **Input KPIs** - a measure of the assets and resources invested in or used to generate business results. Examples include the amount of money spent on research and development, funds used for staff training and the quality and quantity of practitioners' hours in interventions such as counselling.

4. **Output KPIs** - a measure of the financial and non-financial results of the input activities. Examples include the number of new users or clients, number of people who are reached or attendance at activities.

5. **Process KPIs** - a measure of the efficiency or productivity of an intervention or service delivery process. Examples are the number of days to respond to a first contact, months to complete an intervention or completion of a full procedure.

6. **Leading KPIs** - a measure of activities that have a significant effect on future performance. These act as a measure or predictor of success or failure. Examples include school completion rates and school performance.

7. **Lagging KPIs** - a measure or indicator that reflects the success or failure after an intervention or activity has been consumed. Examples include the number of users or clients who return to the system.

8. **Outcome KPIs** - a measure that reflects overall results or impact of an intervention or activity in terms of generated benefits as a quantification of performance. Examples include the rate of not returning to the rehabilitation system or emergency services.

Source: Wootton (2020), speedcars (2012)[2]

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[2] Wootton, P. (2020, April 29). *Key Performance Indicators.* Retrieved from Project Management's website.
speedcars. (2012, February 15). *Key Performance Indicators.* Retrieved from Slideshare's website.

Collecting and Analysing Data

Choosing what data to collect and when to collect is important as there is a cost to data collection. Focusing exclusively on programme delivery, such as meeting delivery targets or compliance with delivery standards, may be appropriate when programmes are mature and the causal relationships between outputs and outcomes are well understood and established.

However, this may not always be the case especially when programmes are new and based on uncertain or unverified underlying assumptions. In such situations, we should consider how to measure the extent to which interventions actually contribute to observed results while taking external factors into account. This will help to deepen the understanding about how the input, output and results interact to produce an eventual outcome. This is particularly so for a new service or programme where the causal relationship is not yet well established and there could be missing variables that a qualitative evaluation could surface at a later stage. This is also to avoid having a service or programme claim undue responsibility for observed results - be it good, bad or neutral.

Any KPI needs to be interpreted on the basis of the quality of the data and the definitions that constitute the KPI. It is imperative that there are explicit definitions for each KPI and built-in data quality checks to verify that the required data is accurate, especially when the future of a service or programme is dependent on the data.

For the Client's Best Interest

For KPIs to be useful and contribute well to policy, service or programme evaluation and the deployment of resources, we should deliberate and have consensus on what measurements and data collection are meaningful and worth the time.

As social service sector professionals, this is part of our commitment to the best interests of our clients. We must not overlook the importance of performance measurement but should continually monitor and evaluate our programmes, policies and services to ensure that they are effective and best serve the needs of our clients.

12 January 2018

Setting Key Performance Indicators II

In my last letter on setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), I elaborated on the various types of KPIs. As the term indicates, KPIs measure how a programme or service performs following a process or standard procedure. In this letter, I will discuss important factors to consider when designing and choosing KPIs so that they are meaningful in telling us more about the results of an intervention and how it has contributed to outcomes.

Time and Resources

The first consideration in determining what indicators to use is to acknowledge that there is a cost to measurement. It is important that the data collected becomes information that can help with decision making and with understanding the effect of an intervention or service. To achieve this, it is critical to make reference to research or past learning in order to determine what data will be useful and how to collect them without too much strain on the procedure or system. Collecting and analysing data therefore requires time and resources.

Getting Started on KPIs

As we begin to brainstorm about what would make good KPIs, we should start by deciding <u>what</u> to measure (e.g. waiting time, change in condition, knowledge, behaviour or/and attitude, client satisfaction) and <u>how</u> to measure them. It is helpful to keep the measures simple, observable and clear (e.g. use a description if necessary to obtain consistency in interpreting a term).

Ideally, a programme or service should be designed using research because it helps to determine the level of change or prevention of deterioration that can be expected over time. The findings of existing research should therefore help in deciding the specificity of the data that can or should be collected.

Equally important is to be clear about the target group (e.g. who will benefit and who will not benefit from the programme or service). Being clear about the target group can help with data collection.

The Logic Model

One useful tool in identifying what to measure is the *logic model.* The logic model is a tool that provides an overview of how a programme is supposed to work and is often used in programme evaluation. It gives the story of how the components of a programme are intended to meet the identified need or produce the desired outcome.

An example of a logic model is as follows:

Programme Evaluation

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
Resources: • Funds • Staff • Volunteers • Equipment **Constraints:** • Laws • Regulations	**Activities:** • Provision of counselling • Training	**Products/ Units of Service:** • Participants • Counselling sessions conducted • Hours of service delivered	**Benefits for People:** • New knowledge • Modified behaviour • Improved conditions

Inputs: the raw materials required for the programme
Activities: the initiatives that are organised using the inputs
Outputs: the tangible and measurable products of the activity
Outcomes: the impact that the activity hopes to achieve (the change that occurred or the difference that was made)

Adapted from Community Tool Box (n.d.)[1]

Logic models are helpful in identifying disparities in the ideal programme and its real operation and to evaluate the attribution and contribution of a programme to outcomes. They are also useful to determine what one should measure in order to evaluate the usefulness of the programme.

Quality of Data

Next, it is important to think about <u>when</u> to measure (e.g. which part of the process or procedure to collect the data) as it can determine the quality of the data that is collected. For example, the more intuitive and part of a workflow the data collection is, the more likely the integrity of the quality. One should aim to collect the data at the

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[1] Community Tool Box. (n.d.). *Section 1: Developing a Logic Model or Theory of Change.* Retrieved from Community Tool Box's website.

most natural point of everyday activities. It is also crucial to obtain commitment from those collecting the data by explaining to them why they are doing it and how it will be used to make the programme or service more effective.

KPIs need to be interpreted on the basis of the quality of the data and the definitions that constitute the KPI. If the definitions are not explicitly stated or there are no checks to verify the quality of the data, then organisations may not be accurately recording the activity and this makes benchmarking impossible. This can be overcome by ensuring that there are explicit definitions for each KPI and built-in data quality checks to verify that the required data is accurate.

How the indicators will be measured depends on what resources are available. Examples of possible approaches to collect data include using surveys, pre and post activity questions, and goal attainment checklists. It is also useful to use qualitative observations to complement the measures as they provide fresh insights that may not have been captured by the checklists.

It is always helpful to consider what aspect of the service or intervention was most or least useful, and what other factors were important in achieving a change. At the heart of this is recognising that it may not always be possible to establish cause and effect, or to attribute a change entirely to the programme.

Cluster of KPIs

A useful cluster of KPIs to put together would usually comprise the output, the characteristics of the participants and the outcome. For example, in the area of training, common data collected are outputs such as the number of training hours clocked and the number of participants who attended. However, these data are insufficient to determine the effectiveness of training. The quality of the curriculum, the delivery and the profile of the trainees are more essential in determining the effectiveness of the training programme. These are the components that need to be considered when choosing indicators in order for them to provide good insights into the effectiveness of a programme. Further analysis of the data can also reveal more learning points.

As a general rule, about three comprehensive KPIs with good data serves the purpose of monitoring the results from a programme or service. They could comprise two KPIs that relate to performance or output and one that relates to the quality of the results or outcome. Quite typically, a cluster could comprise the volume, pace and extent of the outreach to the right target group and a measure of the conversion rate (e.g. the number of participants who moved from being passive recipients to active participants or the number of non-return or discharged participants).

Data and Measures

There may be limitations in collecting data or in determining what a good measure is. At times, we may have good measures, but not good data. Take the case of tracking well-being of children for example. Data on how many children have certain health conditions and how many repeated a grade in school may not be available in a way that helps to draw a contributory causal relationship.

At other times, we may have data but lack a good measure. Take the case of religiosity or religious beliefs and practices. Data from national surveys can tell us about the citizen's attendance, but attendance at religious institutions is an imperfect indicator of religious beliefs and practices. Other areas where good measures are lacking include parent-child communication and adolescent emotional health.

KPIs, however, can often complement social indicators to provide a strong composite picture of the effects of a programme or a policy. It is worth devoting time to determine what is good to measure and how to collect the data. After all, "what gets measured, gets done." This same adage conversely rings a caution that can encourage an agency to focus on the activity being measured to the detriment of the programme or service as a whole.

Shared Understanding of KPIs

When referring to KPIs, it is constructive to be clear about the meaning of each indicator, the purpose of collecting the data and how the analysis contributes to the evaluation of the programme or service. A meaningful set of KPIs should be derived with a shared understanding, where ideas and concepts are kept simple, contributory factors are clear and when attainment of the results are kept circumspect.

8 March 2018

Applying Integrative Thinking to Complex Social Issues

Many of you would have realised in the course of your work that there are often few simple solutions to complex social issues. There is a Chinese quote 摸着石头过河 (mo zhe shi tou guo he), which translates to "crossing a river by feeling the stones". As the quote goes, when crossing a fast flowing river, every step is uncertain and there is a need to feel your way carefully to be sure of your footing before taking the next step. Similarly, when solving complex social issues, we need to make on-going sensing about the environment with its dynamic interaction of factors and forces to ensure successful implementation of action plans. This person-in-environment concept is central to the social work perspective.

In addition, we need to be mindful of oversimplifying complex social issues in our zest to find innovative solutions. One example is the concept of the social impact bond. When this concept was first mooted, it represented the social sector's first steps towards innovative problem solving. Under the social impact bond, the public sector or governing authority establish a contract with private investors wherein the former would pay for better social outcomes in certain areas and pass on the part of the savings achieved to investors.

However, over time, it was found that the social impact bond may not be achieving its intended objective. The Stanford Social Innovation Review recently published an interesting article called, The Downside of Social Impact Bonds[1]. The article by Nadine Pequeneza, director of the documentary "The Invisible Heart", examines the challenges of viewing problems with too simplistic a lens and argued that social impact bonds might not be delivering as promised and might instead be doing more harm than good.

Simplistic Solutions to Complex Problems

While social impact bonds were mooted as a business model to solve social issues and promoted as a means to pre-empt costly services downstream by funding early interventions with private money, it has had unintended consequences. When applied to its fullest extent, the business model resulted in the lack of comprehensive

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[1] Pequeneza, N. (2019, May 31). *The Downside of Social Impact Bonds*. Retrieved from Stanford Social Innovation Review's website.

programme evaluations with reliance on sometimes singular intervention, factor or programme as outcome measures.

One main criticism by social service practitioners was that bond-linked programmes adopted a rather narrow perspective for helping families and has resulted in less comprehensive policy responses to unemployment, addiction and family violence. For example, a good intervention plan may require a holistic approach towards addressing the complex social issues faced by a family. However, as bond-linked programmes require direct attribution of outcomes to a single programme, the focus may shift away from a whole suite of programmes that might be able to meet the needs of the family.

In addition, investors have been backing social programmes with a proven track record, that were already evaluated or where success was well documented. What happened then was that resources were diverted from less well funded but right-sited programmes to these bond-linked programmes because of their incentives. The need to return profits in a timely fashion to investors has deterred the kind of comprehensive programme evaluation that could lead to possible programme improvement. These bonds were thus not structured with learning about possible programme improvement as a priority.

However, while social impact bonds have their limitations, the search for new ways to think and solve social issues (especially sticky ones), should continue. To do this, we need to adopt new mental models on the way we think about social problems.

Mental Models

There are various proponents of how mental models affect our thinking or how thinking shapes our mental models. Recently, Roger Martin wrote about integrative thinking in his book, The Opposable Mind (2009). Martin identifies three components that are often lost in most decision-making processes: metacognition, empathy, and creativity.

Metacognition allows us to make better sense of our own thinking and existing mental models that shape the choices we make. **Empathy** reveals our own logical gaps and enables us to understand how others think and how we might relate to others better. **Creativity** provides the imaginative spark for us to create new and better choices rather than to just accept the options in the tension before us. Joined by Jennifer Riel in her book, Creating Great Choices (2017)[2], the integrative thinking process comprising a four-step process was proposed as a way to change one's mental model on solving complex social issues.

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[2] Riel, J., & Martin, R. L. (2017). *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking.* Retrieved from Harvard Business Review Press's website.

The Integrative Thinking Process

01	02	03	04
ARTICULATE THE OPPOSING MODELS	EXAMINE THE MODELS	EXAMINE THE POSSIBILITIES	ASSESS THE PROTOTYPES
Metacognition and Empathy		Empathy and Creativity	

Adapted from Creating Great Choices (2017)[3]

When applying the integrative thinking process, we start off with **articulating the Models**. This includes framing the problem, teasing out opposing models for solving it and identifying the core elements of each model. The aim is to create a two-sided dilemma for a general problem, for example, using a centralised structure versus a decentralised structure or community participation versus expert opinion. Instead of choosing one model over the other, we want to take the best from each model.

We then move on to **examining the Models**, noting the tension between models, looking at the forces that drive the outcome or benefits that we most value and note the similarities and differences between the models. We look for assumptions that created the tension, determine the cause-and-effect forces and consider what benefits we would not want to give up from each of the models.

The next step is to create a new model by **examining the Possibilities**. There are three ways to do so through what Martin and Riel call the "hidden gem", "the double-down" and "the decomposition":

- The *Hidden Gem* requires us to tease out deeply valued benefits from each model, and discard the rest. The new alternative is then modelled around these gems picked up from each model. The discarded elements are then replaced with something new. For example, we will take one small element of A and B.
- *The Double-Down* requires us to identify the one model which we will choose if only it wasn't missing one critical element. So, we want A with a key element from B.
- In *Decomposition*, we want all aspects of both models even when they appear contradictory. To do this, we have to reach a different understanding of the problem that we are trying to solve, break the problem down into different parts and apply each solution to its respective part.

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[3] Ibid., 80.

Finally, we assess the Prototypes where we test out different solutions to find one that can be implemented to solve our problem.

How Integrative Thinking Can Help in Solving Problems

While integrative thinking may not be suitable for every problem we face, it adds to the thinking tools for solving social problems which are often quite intractable and complex. As a tool, it helps to shift the conversation, defuse interpersonal conflicts and move discussions forward. It helps discussants understand other people's views of the world and in turn inform and improve our own. It provides a way to work with opposing models to generate a new model that keeps the imperative of the opposing ideas.

9 September 2019

Compassion: At the Heart of Management and Leadership

This letter, written by Ms Ang Bee Lian, can be found in the book, "Weaving compassion: Relational Understandings and Practices" (2019) produced by the Counselling and Care Centre.

As you read this, you may be wondering what a chapter on management and leadership is doing in a book about compassion. When we think about compassion, we often think about it in the context of therapy or the helping professions. It is unusual for compassion to be the first thing we think about in the context of leadership and management.

In recent years, however, the concept of compassionate leadership has grown in importance around the world. An article in Harvard Business Review outlined that compassion is key to better leadership and to fostering stronger work connections[1]. This comes as no surprise as a heart of compassion values the inherent worth of people and takes active steps to move towards them in care and concern. Speaking at Wharton's graduation ceremony, LinkedIn Chief Executive Officer, Jeff Weiner, mentioned that compassionate leadership means "walking a mile in the other person's shoes; and understanding their hopes, their fears, their strengths and their weaknesses. And it (means) doing everything within (one's) power to set them up to be successful"[2].

What leaves a positive imprint on others is not so much the charismatic communication abilities or management skills of leaders, but the care and compassion that they have shown for those under their care. Cristiano Ronaldo recounted an incident of Sir Alex Ferguson's compassion in a BBC documentary that left an impact on him. This incident even led him to call Ferguson his 'football father'. In 2005, Ronaldo's father was in a coma in the middle of the Champion's League season. Ronaldo expressed concern to Ferguson over his father's condition, to which Ferguson replied, "Cristiano, if you want to go one day, two days, one week, you can go. I'm going to miss you, I will miss you here, because you're important, but your daddy is in first place"[3]. That was

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[1] Hougaard, R., Carter, J., & Chester, L. (2018, February 15). *Power can corrupt leaders: Compassion can save them.* Retrieved from Harvard Business Review's website.

[2] Weiner, J. (2018, May 17). *LinkedIn's Jeff Weiner: How compassion builds better companies.* Retrieved from Knowledge @ Wharton's website.

[3] Lang, J. (2015, October 7). *Cristiano Ronaldo reveals Sir Alex Ferguson's compassionate side: 'He was a football father for me'.* Retrieved from Mirror's website.

compassion in leadership.

So where does compassion come in for leaders in our many walks of life? How exactly does it look like to practise compassion when we lead and manage people? Let us first begin by exploring what compassion is.

Compassionate Leadership: More Than Empathy

Tibetan scholar, Thupten Jinpa, the English translator for the Dalai Lama, defined compassion as "a mental state endowed with a sense of concern for the suffering of others and (an) aspiration to see that suffering relieved"[4]. For Jinpa, compassion has three components:

a. **A Cognitive Component**: "I understand you."

When people know that you are seeking to understand the situation that they are in – be it the pressures of juggling work and family life, or a challenging project or colleague – they gain a sense of assurance that you are listening to them, that you are not minimising their struggles and that you are trying to 'get' what they are going through.

b. **An Affective Component**: "I feel for you."

Going beyond the cognitive level, people also want to know that you understand how they are feeling in response to the situation they are in; that you 'feel' what they feel. This is where leaders have to learn to have empathy. It may involve recalling uncomfortable emotions that you may have felt before, but it is a crucial step in allowing oneself to truly connect emotionally with others. However, leaders need to be careful not to be overwhelmed by the emotions of both their staff and themselves.

c. **A Motivational Component**: "I want to help you."

This is the part where compassion becomes more than just empathy. It involves a commitment to and an attitude of wanting to do all within one's power and ability to help the other person. This gives those whom we lead the assurance that their best interests are being sought. It is this kind of assurance that makes it easy for staff to take leave or a day off, especially in urgent situations, without the fear of rejection or being marked down.

For those in leadership and management positions, compassion means that we view staff not just as a means to an end of getting work done, but as individuals to care for and nurture. Compassionate leadership then is not merely a skill that we need to learn, but a shift in the mindset and attitude in how we view those whom we lead and manage. It involves our mind, heart and will.

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[4] Tan, C. M. (2012, September 11). *Compassionate leaders are effective leaders*. Retrieved from Greater Good Magazine's website.

Practising compassionate leadership may involve more energy and time on the part of the leader or manager. Compassion seldom fits neatly into a busy schedule. However, it will create a working culture of trust and encourage those under us to innovate and to explore without the fear of being marked down for failure. Just as how a child needs an attachment figure to provide him with a sense of security and safety in order to explore the world, employees also require that sense of security and safety from their leaders as they learn to take risks and develop in the workplace.

Misconceptions About Compassionate Leadership

Being Nice

While compassionate leadership has its many benefits, some may be sceptical about its application because of the fear of being seen as a push-over or the fear of producing employees who lack respect for them and who will take advantage of them. These fears likely stem from a faulty understanding of compassionate leadership. For example, some think that showing compassion as a leader simply means being nice to subordinates and being in perpetual agreement with them. However, this is far from effective leadership. Compassion does not mean that leaders are soft and let their employees have or do anything they want. There will be times when leaders have to say no or challenge the views of their staff. However, this should not be done from a place of impatience, spite or harm, but with a desire to guide, challenge and mentor. When people are assured that their well-being is well looked after by their bosses, they are likely to have greater respect for them and receive challenges with more openness.

Accountability

Another myth is that compassionate leaders cannot hold people accountable for their actions. This is not true. A leader can be compassionate and simultaneously hold those under them responsible for their actions. Effective leaders ensure that their staff understand the expectations that they are held to and the effects of their actions and behaviour. When they fail to meet these expectations, compassionate leadership does not mean we overlook their responsibility, it means that we seek to understand the circumstances and motivations behind their actions or inaction. This will then shape the way we respond to them.

Emotional Responses

Compassionate leaders also need to remember that they are not responsible for the emotional responses of their staff. For example, staff may respond in tears or anger towards disciplinary action, however, this should not stop leaders from enforcing them when necessary. Leaders cannot control how their staff respond to the various circumstances that happen at work or in their lives. But the way leaders respond can make a huge difference to their experiences. We need to listen attentively, put across our concern for them, and possibly assist them in discovering solutions for work and even non-work issues. Compassionate leaders help to guide their staff to process their

emotions, yet not play the role of a therapist to them. This is an art that requires skill and wisdom when putting into practice: to be compassionate and yet not cross the line into emotional dependence.

Organisational Goals and Excellence

Some may think that by focusing too much on the welfare of our staff, we end up neglecting the work at hand. However, compassionate leadership does not mean that leaders are not committed to the production of excellent work or the pursuit of organisational goals. Compassionate leaders are not called to throw their visionary and strategic minds out of the window. They continue to do what leaders do – to support teams, build collaborations, manage outcomes, produce quality improvements and raise productivity[5]. However, being motivated by compassion ensures that this pursuit is not done at the expense of the well-being of those they lead.

Learning to Be More Compassionate

For many people, practising compassion while meeting the demands of management and decision making are not easy twins. While the outworking of compassion can be a trainable skill, the transformation must start from within oneself. Leaders who desire to be more compassionate often go through a transformation within themselves that enable them to stop focusing on their personal ego needs but instead, to focus on the well-being of their staff, on ameliorating the suffering of others and on the challenges that they face. It requires a daily reminder to place the well-being of our staff above ourselves or the work that needs to get done. The more we adopt a compassionate mindset and attitude, the more our compassion muscle will strengthen and the more intuitive it will be to have compassion for others.

Compassion helps to establish trust and creates a safe space for feelings to be shared and mistakes to be made without the fear of being condemned. If we are compassionate, and look to understand others before we react, they will feel safe in expressing their feelings, knowing that we will not leap to judgments but will instead help them figure out how to navigate their situation or difficulty.

Sometimes, leaders show compassion only towards people who seem perfect or whom they personally favour. This should not be the case. Compassion should be shown to all staff regardless of who they are or whether we 'like' them or not. As leaders, we need to be mindful of any personal bias we may have in the way we view and treat different people. Compassionate leaders should be ready to act effectively when members of their team look for support or when they need help. This does not mean condoning bad conduct, but it means creating a safe space for clear and transparent communication where even undesirable behaviour and attitudes can be addressed. This will encourage healthy relationships as well as a more empathetic work environment. Remember that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.

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[5] Ang, B. L. (2015, January 2). Letters to Social Service Leaders #2. *Letters to Social Work Students, 1*(27), 142-147.

Leading with Compassion

So how does compassion look like in practice? How do we integrate a compassionate mind and heart into the way we manage and lead those under us? While there is no fixed instruction manual on how to be a compassionate leader, I will explore some ways in which compassion can be demonstrated as a leader at work.

a. **Building Relationships and Knowing Your People**

As mentioned above, compassion involves seeing our staff as human beings and not simply as work machines. We may not intentionally set out to do the latter but it is easy to fall into it, especially when we are overwhelmed with work or face pressures and challenges from our own management or supervisors. Even staff who are not in managerial positions can easily fall into this trap. For example, when a new intern joins the team, it is not uncommon to see workers getting excited because more hands are on deck to help with the menial work. Sometimes, they give them work to do without even bothering to get to know them as persons. While it is not wrong to get interns to help with the work, we are not being compassionate when we see them only as 'work helpers'.

One fundamental aspect of being a human being is to exist in the context of relationships. Compassionate leaders build relationships with their employees. They get to know their ambitions, fears, strengths and weaknesses, and beyond work, to find out more about what matters to them like their families or hobbies. This is not to blur professional and personal boundaries, but to aid leaders in serving their employees better. For example, if one knows that a staff member has been facing burnout looking after her mother with dementia, a compassionate leader should try not to overload her with work and gently refer her to external support if necessary. While getting to know our people may take time and effort, it will allow us to take necessary steps to ensure the welfare of our staff. This is especially necessary in the social service sector to prevent burnout.

As leaders in the social service sector, we should exemplify the values that we want our workers to show clients – to be one who journeys alongside another with a non-judgmental and compassionate attitude. Workers who feel well-supported by their bosses in this manner are likely to produce better work and serve their clients more effectively.

b. **Investing in and Developing Others**

Because compassion is about the well-being of others, investing in others and nurturing them is often one of the natural responsibilities that come with leading with compassion. Compassion provides the motivation to nurture others and facilitate their growth. It is not satisfied with staff simply doing well in the present but is more concerned about their personal and professional growth for the future. It secures the long-term performance, growth and development of people in their own right, whether they eventually remain in your team or not.

To invest reasonably well, we need to appreciate the future and the opportunities and risks it entails. We can then invest in helping our people gain broader insights into the complexities of social issues and a greater capacity to continue being the best that they can be in spite of constant frustrations and disappointments. We need to stay on course as leaders to instil a sense of having a shared mission and to be considerate leaders who can lead and inspire employees to take an interest in higher-level concerns. To do this, leaders need to be intellectually stimulating and be able to articulate a shared vision of jointly acceptable possibilities. We need to frequently raise standards, take calculated risks and get others to join us in our vision of the future.

Mentoring is one way in which we can invest in and develop others. At its core and at its best, mentoring is a highly customised activity that considers a person's skillsets, context, and opportunities. With the guidance and support of a good mentor, one can realise his full potential. Such relationships, if well-developed, can have significant payoffs even though they are time-intensive and can be more expensive than group training. In the social service sector, however, mentors often offer their time as a gift. Good mentoring pushes the individual's thinking skills, challenges his assumptions, and holds him accountable for improvements. Mentoring is about customisation so that the individual can develop a contextualised approach to applying his skills. Mentoring as a relationship then enables the individual to do his best work without having to follow a prescribed path to achieve the desired results.

c. Identifying with Our People

Leadership requires courage to do what is right even when this means taking people to task. Exercising compassion, however, will shape the approach and the handling of the delicate situation. When a project goes awry or someone makes an unsalvageable mistake, it is natural to react with disappointment, and sometimes anger or anxiety. Compassion brings the moment back to being human. Compassion steers the leader to think about how those involved would be feeling and get a better sense of what he would need to do as a leader to repair the situation.

Some people get stressed and restless in their work. They may face conflicting pressures to be compliant with the demands of changing expectations to produce results for the organisation. Good leaders will be brave enough to meet these fears and struggles, subjecting themselves to the same pressures faced by our people. Whatever burdens are placed on our people, we must be sure to bear those burdens as well. Practising compassion then cultivates a sense that 'we're all in this together'. When our people see us enduring the same difficulties as them, we gain their respect and their loyalty. Good leaders meet their teams where they are, and position themselves as a resource. If someone is in a stressful situation, or carrying a lot of anxiety, practising compassion can unleash the 'stuck' feeling in the person.

Leadership Moving Forward

As leaders, we should continually develop our brains, courage, soul and heart when leading and managing our organisations and teams.

- *Brains:* We should develop a deep knowledge in our area of work and stay updated on the current research on what works and how different elements or factors contribute to or influence outcomes. Good leaders will want to ensure that they remain competent and continually refresh their vision.
- *Courage:* We should have the nerve to be bold enough to move toward our vision even with incomplete information or risky odds after deep thinking and analysis.
- *Soul:* We should be clear about the values that we stand for. Good leaders should lead with a compass and not by radar. While being aware of the world around them, good leaders are oriented to a true north that does not waver. In contrast, a leader who makes decisions by radar will be constantly changing in response to external stimuli.
- *Heart:* We should be passionate about what we believe in and show compassion. Passion and compassion will be the root of our decisions and concern for others.

As we enter an era of fresh young, mid-career, diversely-skilled people entering the social service sector, our challenge is to stay focused on what the people we serve need from us to make their lives better, whether it be in protecting them, giving them hope or helping them reach their potential.

Data Storytelling

Communicating to Show Impact

The current decade is filled with discussions about outcomes, evaluating social impact and translating research into improved service delivery. These are pertinent topics, and perhaps more so in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment that tends to defy consistent relationships. Embarking on research, evaluation and review is therefore necessary but not sufficient to generate knowledge and application of learning. What is needed are measures and strategies that can help us to communicate our work in a way that is impactful.

In a previous letter, I touched on the importance of asking good questions at the start of a project in order to have more clarity about the kind of information that is needed and the kind of data that should be collected. In this letter, I will touch on how to make full use of the data that has been collected and how to present them in a manner that creates impact.

Rigorous Analysis

Brent Dykes, Forbes Contributor, mentioned in an article that "data may hold tremendous amounts of potential value, but not an ounce of value can be created unless insights are uncovered and translated into actions or business outcomes"[1]. It is useless to simply collect data without analysing them and drawing insights from them. What is of greater value is to translate these data into useful information and knowledge.

Most leaders will work with data and information and oftentimes the data are in raw observations and measurements. So how do we translate them into information? We do this by analysing relationships and connections between and among the data. Good questions can help us to organise the data to find answers. For example, a park authority may have data about every single tree in the city, including when it was planted and how it was pruned. A good question to ask would be if pruning trees in one year would reduce the number of hazardous tree conditions in the following year. Data then becomes alive when they are analysed for answers.

By analysing the data, we can answer the "Who/What/Where/How many/When/Why is" type of questions. Quite often, when we talk about data driven decision-making, it

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[1] Dykes, B. (2016, May). *Data Storytelling: The Essential Data Science Skill Everyone Needs.* Retrieved from Forbes' website.

is information and not data that feeds into the actual decision-making. Information is a message with an (implied) audience and a purpose. This is the reason why we often ask who needs the information we provide.

When does information become knowledge? Information becomes knowledge when information is understood and judgment, opinions, predictions and decisions are formed based on that understanding[2]. Knowledge answers the "How" question. Decisions are often made based on information and knowledge and not data alone.

Data Storytelling

Once the data is converted into information and knowledge that is useful, we can then consider how to communicate that effectively. This is where we can learn from great data storytellers by studying what they do differently. Data storytelling is a way of communicating insights gathered from data.

Most of the time, we will find that storytellers communicate this way.

They answer the most important question: So what?

Typically, data storytelling involves three elements: data, visuals and the narrative. Brent Dykes elaborates to say that a narrative coupled with data explains to the audience what is happening in the data and its significance. Visuals coupled with data enlightens the audience to patterns and trends that would otherwise go unnoticed without charts and diagrams. Coupling narrative and visuals can then engage the audience. The three elements work together to encourage and facilitate change[3].

Good storytellers bear in mind that not every audience can engage easily with numbers, statistics, technical concepts and accounting data. As such, the message behind the numbers needs to be clear.

The "So-What" Question

So how do we do that? We can start by asking good questions. For instance, why should someone care about our findings? What will they do differently after learning of our findings? An example of going straight to the "so what" question is to focus on one key message such as deaths from abuse or violence resulting in lost/stolen years and how this information affects the way practitioners deliver their services. In communicating this, the exact number of years in this context is less important as it is anticipated and based on an actuarial assumption. What the audience should go away with is the powerful feeling of sadness and loss that can move people into action.

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[2] BBC. (n.d.). *Data, Knowledge and Information*. Retrieved from BBC's website.
[3] Dykes, *Data Storytelling*, 90.

Good storytellers often inspire us to ask more questions. They help people investigate a topic further rather than to simply tell a conclusion. When presenting complex data or a potentially controversial topic, it may be better to package the story into an accessible format that takes the audience on a guided journey to discover the information and knowledge that arise from the data rather than to lecture the audience with claims or arguments. Having the audience to reflect and consider is more likely to move people to act than a passive receiving of data or reading a conclusion.

Data Visualisation

Data visualization refers to representing data in a visual context, like a chart or a map. However, as Scott Berinato puts it, "automatically converting spreadsheet cells into a chart only visualises pieces of a spreadsheet; it doesn't capture an idea"[4]. It is crucial for storytellers to consider how the chart or graph presented captures and supports the message that one is trying to put across. Data visualisation then helps the audience to extract meaning from the data more easily. It helps to make data interesting and relevant by showing trends, ranking, comparisons, relationships and surprising or counterintuitive information.

Start with a Good Story

To use data to communicate social impact, we can adopt a process of finding data, analysing them and creating visuals to tell the story. It is indeed hard work. Start by focusing on a story that is interesting to the audience. Then begin to discover what the data show and what they reveal sometimes as untold stories or fresh angles to stories that have already been told. This engaging way of communicating impact would hopefully move the audience to reflect, to act and to add to learning and improvements.

17 May 2017

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[4] Berinato, S. (2016, June). *Visualizations That Really Work*. Retrieved from Harvard Business Review's website.

Identifying Leaders and Talents

Identifying and deploying leaders has been a recurring topic in the social sector. This is not surprising, given that our sector relies heavily on people such as social workers, counsellors, and therapists, to serve the vulnerable and needy. Yet, some of the more rigorous recruitment practices used in the private sector are not practiced in the social sector. This could be due to the cost involved in conducting certain private sector recruitment exercises such as situational tests and assessment models that evaluate a potential employee's capabilities. Some social service agencies may also have particular preferences and methods used in identifying potential employees and are less open to try other recruitment methods.

Organisations will often say that they are looking for talent that will take the agency to the next level. However, it is not always clear what type of talent the organisation is looking for, or what the "next level" will look like. One way of defining talent would be to refer to people who have the necessary skills and abilities to excel in their individual positions and are capable of bringing the agency to a higher level. People with this talent of bringing organisational transformation are exceptional and hard to find. Regardless of the organisation's aspirations, finding talent requires a combination of factors - knowing where to look, openness on the part of the organisation, and sometimes, sheer circumstantial luck.

Rethinking Talent Matters

When we think about finding talent, we may think that "talented" individuals can only be found externally. This overlooks the possibility of finding talent from within the organisation, which is probably not the usual method to search for talent. We need to rethink the way we view talent and how talent can be sourced. For example, we often use resumes to assess an individual's abilities and experience, before considering employment. However, can we forecast one's future successes based on the person's past and current attributes? How do we know if these attributes are genuine? We need to avoid over-relying on an individual's past qualifications to predict his or her future success in a new work and operating environment. Resumes can be impressive but they are not foolproof in identifying the right type of employee for the agency.

Well-planned and executed interviews incorporating situational assessments should therefore be used to gauge a candidate's potential. These forms of assessments require candidates to immediately respond to various situations that they cannot predict. This is befitting of the reality of the current operating environment - volatile, uncertain,

complex and ambiguous. Trained and experienced interviewers are also important. They take on the crucially important role of reading and assessing candidates as well as making the final decision on who to take in. This is increasingly critical as candidates today receive more training and preparation for job interviews and are better able to "market" their capabilities at a level higher than what it really is.

Finding Talent Within the Organisation

A good place to start searching for talent is to look within your organisation. There is often talent within the organisation that can be nurtured to take on bigger roles and duties. Human and resource development strategies, which have become more readily available in today's context, can be used to develop budding talent. Identifying talent and potential leaders from within can work to the advantage or disadvantage of the candidate and organisation. The organisation would have a good grasp of the candidate's personal attributes and more importantly, values, and whether these are in line with the new job position. On the other hand, the character and shortcomings of the individual would already be known to the organisation. These are things that cannot be anticipated when an organisation hires externally.

It is important to remember that even if we do compromise on an individual's experience and industry knowledge, **we must not compromise on their character.** An individual's values and character are crucial in determining how big and small things will be handled at work and in life. One's skills and knowledge can be trained and built up over time, but character is hard to change. This leads us to the next question: how can we determine whether these character traits are genuine? Conducting a reference check is one useful way and can be coupled with an assessment test or asking the candidate to present on a certain topic that would showcase his or her character or value system. For candidates with past work experiences, it will be useful to look for consistent clues that contribute to the person's successes; instead of focusing on occasional flashes of brilliance during the interview.

Resilience is another virtue which is crucial for employees to have but is difficult to identify. One's resilience is often only known and tested in different contexts and situations, and over an extended period of time. These small impressions that we have of an individual over time will add up to a decisive judgment of the individual's abilities, attributes and character, as noted by George Anders in his book, "The Rare Find: Spotting Exceptional Talent Before Everyone Else" (2011)[1]. A candidate's true values, attributes and thinking will only be known to the organisation when he or she starts work – that is when the real test begins.

How to Identify the Right Leaders for the Right Organisation and Job

In the social sector, it would be helpful for an agency to be clear about its mission and what the agency is required to do in the immediate and near future. The agency may need to revisit its mission and update it, if necessary. When the agency mission

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[1] Anders, G. (2011). *The Rare Find: Spotting Exceptional Talent Before Everyone Else.* Portfolio Penguin.

is clear, what is required of the new leader will be clear as well, in terms of his or her knowledge and skills as well as job requirement in order to fulfil the agency's overarching goals. The process of identifying a particular leader or group of leaders then becomes more purposeful as it is tied to a bigger goal – to drive organisational goals and outcomes for the community. Board members and agency heads should also be aware of what they are looking for in an employee who can work alongside them to fulfil the organisational mission. Such complementary working relationships will allow the organisation to function well and adapt to the changing global environment.

So are there ways to pick candidates from within and outside an agency who are able to take the organisation to the next level? Are there certain traits that should be identified among potential leaders? There are many answers to these questions, but what is clear is that **character, resilience and diligence are important attributes** to look out for among many others, for prospective employees and leaders.

Making a Good Judgment Call

The process of identifying the best candidate for an organisation has become more complex in relation to the varying mental models and perceptions on what talent is, or the type of leadership that is required for the future. The assessment styles and preferences of those involved in selecting candidates also impacts the way in which candidates will be chosen for the organisation. While these factors may make the selection process complex, **each and every component of the selection process is important** in ensuring that the right candidate is chosen for the organisation. Should the selection process be outsourced to someone else, such as a headhunter for example, certain intrinsic traits that the organisation or the selection panel is looking out for may be overlooked.

What is worth noting is that the present social service context has become increasingly unique and complex. Those involved in recruitment or identifying talent within the organisation should thus have prior working experience in the social sector, so that they would know the type of workers who can handle the current social service context.

To identify suitable and good candidates who can bring the organisation to the next level, one needs to be clear and judicious about the mission of the agency, expectations for the candidate and job scope. As team and collective leadership are important in driving social service agencies forward, it is important to be receptive to your staff's opinions on the type of employees they would like to work with and who can help the agency progress. These are crucial elements for deliberation prior to the interviews or before a headhunter is engaged. Where possible, we should keep an eye out for candidates within the agency who are capable of leading the agency and bringing it to a higher level. They should be among the natural choice of potential leaders we want to identify and deploy.

26 June 2019

Innovation in Social Services

We live in an unpredictable world with a volatile economy as well as shifting social demographics, trends and cultural practices. In Singapore, some trends we see are an ageing population, a greater number of blended families and the rise of the "gig economy". All these changes have an impact on the focus and effectiveness of our social policies, programmes and interventions. Innovation is therefore key to ensure that we remain relevant and impactful in protecting and enhancing the well-being of those we serve.

What is Innovation?

Innovation may seem like a big word and a tall order. However, as we shall see, innovation is less about conjuring up that "big idea", but more about having a spirit of curiosity and creativity, taking the initiative to question the status quo, thinking out of the box and building upon or enhancing existing ideas. Simply put, innovation is a new way of doing things. Innovation can even come about through re-arranging processes and the smart application of technologies to meet unarticulated needs.

Where Innovation Comes From

Innovation comes from the spirit of **seeking opportunity in the face of challenges and adversity.**

This was the spirit of our founding fathers when we came out of colonial rule in the early years of Singapore's independence. We faced many challenges such as racial tensions, high unemployment and housing shortages. It seemed almost "impossible" then to survive as a nation. Yet the pioneer generation looked beyond those limitations, worked with the strengths within them and within the nation and turned the constraints and adversities into opportunities to build the Singapore we know today.

For example, the early government tackled the challenge of insufficient housing and the lack of rootedness of the people by introducing the Home Ownership for the People Scheme. This scheme helped foster a sense of loyalty and commitment in Singapore by giving a largely migrant population a stake in the country.

One way we can seek opportunity in the face of adversity is to look not only at what we lack, but at what we have and create solutions from them. SkillsFuture, for example, is a national movement that builds upon what we have - our human capital - to be

ready for the challenges of the future. It aims to equip Singaporeans with new and deeper skills that will help them continue to perform their jobs well even as the nature of work evolves. It also cultivates a spirit of lifelong learning among our citizens. With upgrading of skills and redesigning of jobs, we can ensure that our people have the means to maintain employment and financial stability amidst an ever-changing environment.

In a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, we know that the social issues that we face are not just complicated, but increasingly complex. When things are complicated, we know how to fix them – they just require more time, effort and good know-how. Complex issues, however, are not so easy to resolve and usually require a collective effort, a lot of creativity and an innovative mindset. As such, tackling the problems of the future calls us to have a mindset shift not to be defeated by adversity but to keep seeing every challenge as an opportunity to innovate.

Innovation comes from **knowing the people – by seeing things from their perspective**.

As policymakers and programme designers both in government and non-government settings, it is important to know what goes on in our communities. At times, we may attempt to solve problems by applying our own approaches. However, knowing our people helps to broaden our perspective and to ensure that we adopt a more user-centric lens in designing our policies or programmes. Knowing our people does not mean that we cater to their every want, but it means that we ensure that our policies, programmes and services are designed in such a way that is able to meet a need or close a gap.

This is what we aspire towards in our Social Service Offices (SSOs). From 2013 to 2015, we set up a network of 24 SSOs across Singapore, to provide more accessible and coordinated social assistance to Singaporeans in need. Our starting point was the client, which is why SSOs were intentionally situated close to major transport nodes and residents. Today, 95% of SSO beneficiaries live or work within 2 kilometres of an SSO. We also applied a design thinking approach in shaping the physical layout of SSOs.

But "knowing the ground" goes beyond tracing people's physical journeys. It is also important to understand their needs, pain points and psyches. That is why alongside providing financial assistance, the SSOs also get to know their communities well through community profiling as well as numerous engagements with residents and community partners. This was how we realised that families with certain complex needs were often receiving piecemeal help, having to approach multiple agencies for help and recounting their circumstances and challenges several times. Such experiences could be demoralising and could diminish their will to follow through with their action plans while receiving financial assistance.

This thus led to the piloting of two "Integrated SSOs", where clients receive assistance in three areas of need that we found overlap very frequently – finances, employment, and family services – all at a single touchpoint. Besides simplifying the client journey,

such service integration also simplifies the service provider journey, as it allows for a more holistic assessment of the client. So rather than just creating more schemes and policies, it is also looking at how to coordinate and implement existing systems so that they become more effective.

At the Committee of Supply debates this year, MSF also introduced plans to improve social service delivery for individuals and families in need. These include the integration of service delivery through video-conferencing and the co-location of services (e.g Silver Generation Office with SSOs), and the sharing of information and assessments so that clients do not need to repeat their circumstance and to submit the same documentation multiple times when applying for help schemes or services. These are examples of incremental innovations that can be made to better our services to those in need.

Innovation comes from **changing the status quo**.

As I mentioned earlier, we live in an ever-changing environment which means that the context in which our policies sit in will always evolve. Furthermore, research continues to emerge which may challenge our conventional wisdom. As such, we need to be our own sceptics and to keep asking ourselves if the current design of our policies and programmes is the best way of doing things. This often requires us to challenge the assumptions we have made because they tend to shape the quality of our solutions. When we do so, we begin to identify new and better ways of doing things which can complement our current efforts.

An example of changing the status quo is shifting the focus of the care of our vulnerable children from residential homes towards family-based care in recent years. Recognising that family-based care such as fostering is the best form of care for most children, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) has moved to focus our resources on growing family-based care options and increasing the ratio of children in family-based care. Furthermore, riding on the advent of social media, the Ministry has complemented the traditional publicity methods such as through word-of-mouth to non-traditional methods such as roadshows, radio talk shows, media publicity including social media, in order to raise public awareness on fostering and to recruit more families to open up their hearts and homes to care for vulnerable children.

Change is often uncomfortable as we are stepping into the unknown. However, as policy and programme designers, we have to be careful of the status quo bias which is a preference for things to remain the same. Instead, we should not be afraid to change the status quo when necessary, and to continue to think of new and innovative ways to improve the way we do things.

Innovation in a Complex Environment

As we move forward, there will increasingly be no easy or fixed solutions to solve the multiple, interacting problems that we see in our cases or society. With every challenge we face, we need to take it as an opportunity to challenge the status quo, to think of new and creative solutions, to advocate for our clients and to improve our policies, programmes and systems. Being innovative is an important means of ensuring that people are served in the best way we know how, within the limitations and challenges we face today. This is something that we need to strive for whether in the government or in the community.

19 April 2018

Strategic Thinking

At the Roundtable on The Stewardship Edge organised by Stewardship Asia[1] in August last year, the views exchanged centred on values, the passing on of values and the standard for stewardship. Stewardship was spoken of as securing the long-term performance, growth and development of resources. Discussions were intense and incisive as participants were made to consider the tensions arising from taking short and long-term perspectives in decision making. The Roundtable also discussed the importance of having the skills of strong operational leaders being undergirded by a heart of integrity, service and a desire to improve the well-being of others.

Stewardship

At the Roundtable Dialogue, Deputy Prime Minister, Teo Chee Hean shared three points on stewardship for the future to better prepare for the rapid changes of globalisation and technology[2]. Firstly, how organisations serve their stakeholders. DPM Teo mentioned that "beyond their shareholders, how companies engage their employees, ecosystem and the environment as stakeholders will …. define what they stand for and differentiate them from their competitors." Secondly, the importance of driving innovation. This includes "exploiting the potential of the digital superhighway networks of tomorrow to open up opportunities in the digital and sharing economy". Thirdly, the value of values. DPM Teo used the Singapore Public Service's values of Integrity, Service and Excellence as an example of this. Public officers "serve with dedication to Singapore and have empathy, compassion and respect for others". These officers also "strive to be quality-oriented, working with others as a team and seeking continuous improvement to achieve excellence". Ultimately, our values and beliefs guide us "in weathering the highs and lows in a rapidly changing operating environment".

Drawing from his message, strategic leaders in social service must make decisions that position the sector for the future, while meeting current demands.

To ensure that we can collectively sustain ourselves for the future, we need to focus on the multiple facets of the sector instead of ensuring success in a single area. The quest for leaders and for organisational development must involve the enabling and coaching of individuals and teams to think, act, and influence others in ways that

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[1] The Stewardship Asia Roundtable 2016: The Stewardship Edge brings together the region's influential thinkers and leaders for an exchange of ideas on advocating sound stewardship and governance in their organisations and businesses.
[2] Teo, C. H. (2016). *Speech at the Stewardship Asia Roundtable Dialogue: "Stewardship for the Future – Taking Action Today with Tomorrow in Mind"*. Retrieved from Prime Minister's Office.

promote the enduring success of the social service sector.

Moving from Strategic Thinking to Acting and Influencing

Thinking – We can start with strategic thinking. In a sense this is about understanding the complex relationship between an agency and its environment or the rest of the social service sector. It calls for an ability to respond adaptively and creatively to change in order to devise ideas. It is about being able to embrace the seemingly "hard-to-control mess," the diversity and the disorganised web of connections and to see these as opportunities for value creation and not just value conversion (which is about reorganising). Strategic thinking happens when we formulate a clear and actionable vision that is neither too broad to the point of being unhelpful nor too narrow that it blurs the distinction between ends and means. The vision should have sufficient power to inspire and activate people both within and outside the agency to think big, do big, and invest big.

Acting – We need to move from strategic thinking alone to acting which involves taking decisive and sometimes courageous action that is consistent with the strategic direction of the agency in spite of ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty. This may mean having a theory of change and concrete action in the architecture of change. Strategic action involves bringing about change through the relevant levers of power such as institutions, people, policies and resources. Sometimes it requires us to re-organise them in order to achieve the desired end-state.

Influencing – Ideally, as leaders, we can also build commitment to the social service sector's strategic direction to serve well and to do good well by inviting others to participate in the strategic process, and through forging relationships inside and outside the agency.

There needs to be more strategic leaders today. Organisations that coach and develop strategic leaders throughout their ranks are better positioned to weather the changes ahead.

Translating ideas into outcomes. If strategy is nothing more than an organised way of thinking about change, then devising and implementing strategies is a disciplined intellectual process that transforms *what is* to *what could be*. However, having a vision, a plan and a strategy does not guarantee good outcomes. What is key to achieving outcomes are knowledge, skills and resources that are organised and deployed with a clear priority. Good leaders prepare for and manage change. They do this with a plan that describes in detail the "what, how, where, and when" of the journey. It is a journey as the circumstances will evolve and are dynamic and require adaptation and changes to the plan.

Values and Strategic Thinking

So, can the art of strategic thinking, acting and influencing be taught? Maybe. But cultivating the ability to imagine alternative futures, to think big, to never be fully satisfied with "what is" can be a start. But core to ensuring a better future for social services are values embraced by the sector and by the leaders. What differentiates good leaders from bad leaders are values such as humility, integrity and selflessness.

We all know that leadership is about shared values, vision and results. It is exemplified through the conduct of leaders and the attitudes they adopt *and* the potential they realise in others. It all begins with an intention to influence others towards shared values and the vision and to create the results. Mentoring provides an avenue to impart the values, philosophy, principles and capacity to others.

9 January 2017

Social Work: From Direct Practice to Administration

The growing complexities of social needs call for social administrators[1] across the public and private sector to have a good grasp of the "psychographics" of clients and the work of frontline social service practitioners. This will help them to craft policies and manage social service agencies in a way that better accounts for the needs of both clients and workers. It is not uncommon to hear of frontline practitioners taking on these roles as they carry with them the necessary experience and skills that can value-add to these positions.

In this letter, I will elaborate on the benefits of having social work practice background in social service administration work. I hope to discuss some strategies to facilitate the transition from frontline social work practice to policy, administrative and managerial roles. It is my hope that social workers would consider taking up these leadership positions to strengthen the service orientation and philosophy for social administration.

Social Administration in the Curriculum of Social Work Education Programmes

The current curriculum of social work education covers social policy and planning, programme evaluation, models of accountability and social research. These components are part of good social administration, policy thinking and programme design. They collectively enhance administrative competence. The challenge then is to provide ongoing professional training for both clinical and administrative methods even after formal education ends, and to enable more social workers to be more familiar and competent at these no matter their specialization.

What will augur well for social services in the future is a balance of social administrators trained as social workers and social workers trained in administration. It is useful to consider how to better support social workers, who primarily have practice-focused education and field experience, transition into policy and administrative roles.

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[1] In this article, social administrators refer to those in administration positions. They are decision makers concerned about the well-being of a total system versus a single client. The work requires knowledge about social policy and the delivery of services. This may include policy and budgeting work, creating programmes to meet the needs of the population, identifying areas that lack support, evaluating existing programmes and managing the overall strategy of the community or department. Taken from "Social Work License Map. (2021). *Social Work Administrator*. Retrieved from Social Work License Map's website."

Same Same....

Many skills, which are often said to be missing amongst social administrators, can be acquired through direct practice and can contribute to good social administration. These include skills such as communication, problem-solving, empowering others, and self-awareness[2]. Social administrators and managers, for example, must be self-aware and understand how their personal biases and perceptions may affect the way they shape policies and the way they relate to and manage their staff. The skill of empowering others can also prevent the micro-management of staff and encourage staff to take ownership of their work.

Social workers with direct practice experience are also well-equipped for policy positions. As mentioned in an earlier letter (Social Work, Social Policy, Social Change)[3], policies that are informed by frontline practice can better solve problems, meet needs and improve the well-being of people and communities. The systems approach to assessing clients' circumstances can aid social workers in policy positions to better identify the macro and systemic barriers to change, and thereby shape policies in a more nuanced way.

Social workers who take on the role of social administrators also carry with them important values and perspectives, which can greater align social policies as well as organisational practices with social work values. The danger of having these positions filled by managers trained in other disciplines and with little or no experience in the social sector is when these "mainstream" business managers do not share social work values and end up prioritising cost-effectiveness over client-centredness[4].

... But Different

While there are transferable skills between direct practice and social administrative work, there is perhaps one key difference between the practitioner's philosophical orientation and that of the administrative priority that a social work direct practice practitioner needs to be very conscious of. This difference arises from the context of their responsibility and accountability. As Andrea Freerksen writes, "certain philosophical orientations that are valuable in clinical work act as hindrances in administration"[5]. For example, social workers who are clinically orientated tend to focus on the "here and now" which may hinder their ability to be future-oriented and to plan strategically for the larger system[6]. The focus on client-centeredness, self-determination and priority in quality service may also conflict with administrative priorities of resource management and agency priorities[7]. For example, applying self-determination and

[2] Tolleson Knee, R., & Folsom, J. (2012). Bridging the Crevasse Between Direct Practice Social Work and Management by Increasing the Transferability of Core Skills. *Administration in Social Work, 36*(4), 390-408.

[3] Ang, B. L. (2016, June). Social Work, Social Policy and Social Change. *Social Insights: Letters by DSW*, 113-118.

[4] Wuenschel, P. C. (2006). The Diminishing Role of Social Work Administrators in Social Service Agencies. *Administration in Social Work, 30*(4), 5-18.

[5] Freerksen, A. (2012). From Clinician to Administrator: Skills, Struggles, Strengths, and Strategies. *Advocates' Forum*. Retrieved from University of Chicago: School of Social Service Administration's website.

[6] Jones, L. K. (2007). The Future of Social Work Administration: An Interview with Felice D. Perlmutter. *Social Work Today, 7*(4), 22. Retrieved from Social Work Today's website.

[7] Freerksen, *Advocates' Forum*, 104.

a client-centred perspective to manage staff and their personal problems may go against organisational policies, blur boundaries and threaten productivity[8].

The lack of formal training in organisational management such as budgeting, public relations and staff management, also poses a challenge for direct practice social workers who take up administrative and managerial positions. It can be argued that they often "lack the analytical skills and methods knowledge necessary to evaluate services and complete performance measurements"[9]. Exercising authority is also something that may not come naturally for direct practice social workers. A study on the difficulties faced by transitioning workers found that "the use of authority, particularly as it implied directing, supervising, and changing subordinates, was the most difficult area of adjustment for respondents when they assumed their first administrative job"[10].

These differences and challenges are not surprising as there is a fundamental realignment of focus for the direct practice worker who takes on an administrative role to be less on the client but more towards the health of the agency[11]. How then can direct practice social workers best transit into the role of social administration? What are the necessary preparations that they need in order to flourish as a social administrator?

The Transitioning Process

As with all transitions, accepting change and being comfortable with not knowing what the learning curve is will be the best way to adapt. There is a need to learn many new skills and to re-learn how to apply the same skills to an entirely new context. Being conscious about the new role and yet being reflective in the transitioning process will help with making time to learn while "letting go" of what might have been the previous motivation and satisfaction derived from direct work. While some transitioning practitioners retain a client caseload initially, this is often difficult to sustain in the long term if one is to focus and do a job well.

Organisations and departments should help direct practice workers adjust to their new role as social administrators by appointing them mentors, preferably social work practitioners who have successfully transited to become good social administrators. These mentors are crucial to help them navigate ethical and moral dilemmas, better understand organisational structures and politics and to learn how to adapt their direct practice perspectives and behaviours to new situations that managers encounter[12].

It is also important for transitioning workers to go through training and preparation before they take on their new roles. These learnings can take place through informal

[8] Tolleson Knee, R. (2014). An Analysis of Direct Practice Social Work Perspectives and Behaviors in Middle Management. *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance, 38*(2), 146-157.

[9] Freerksen, *Advocates' Forum*, 104.

[10] Patti, R., Diedreck, E., Olson, D. G., & Crowell, J. (1979). A Study of Social Worker's Transitions from Clinical to Management Roles, Part I: Analysis. *Administration in Social Work, 3*(2), 131-51.

[11] Freerksen, *Advocates' Forum*, 104.

[12] Tolleson Knee, *Human Service Organizations*, 105.

sessions such as job shadowing more experienced colleagues or formal training in social administration that includes executive coaching and extensive reading and research. The purpose of these trainings is to help transitioning workers to be clear about their new job scope, what is expected of them and how to "reconfigure their personal paradigms or collection of internal perspectives, beliefs, values, and feelings so they are more closely aligned with their current career reality"[13].

Taking up the Challenge

While there are many challenges a social work practitioner will face in adapting to an administrative role, there are lots of knowledge and skills in the social work training that one can draw from to become an effective social service administrator. The direct work practice background can be an asset as it serves as the lens that such an organisation will need to deliver well for social service clients. Social work education programmes should consider how they can better prepare social work students for both direct practice and administrative roles.

It is a satisfying experience to be able to imbue the orientation of any agency with the social work perspective. More specifically, it is about being able to shape and ensure that the delivery system reflects a deeper understanding of the clients and appreciation of the specific provision of good social services.

27 April 2017

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[13] Ibid., 105.
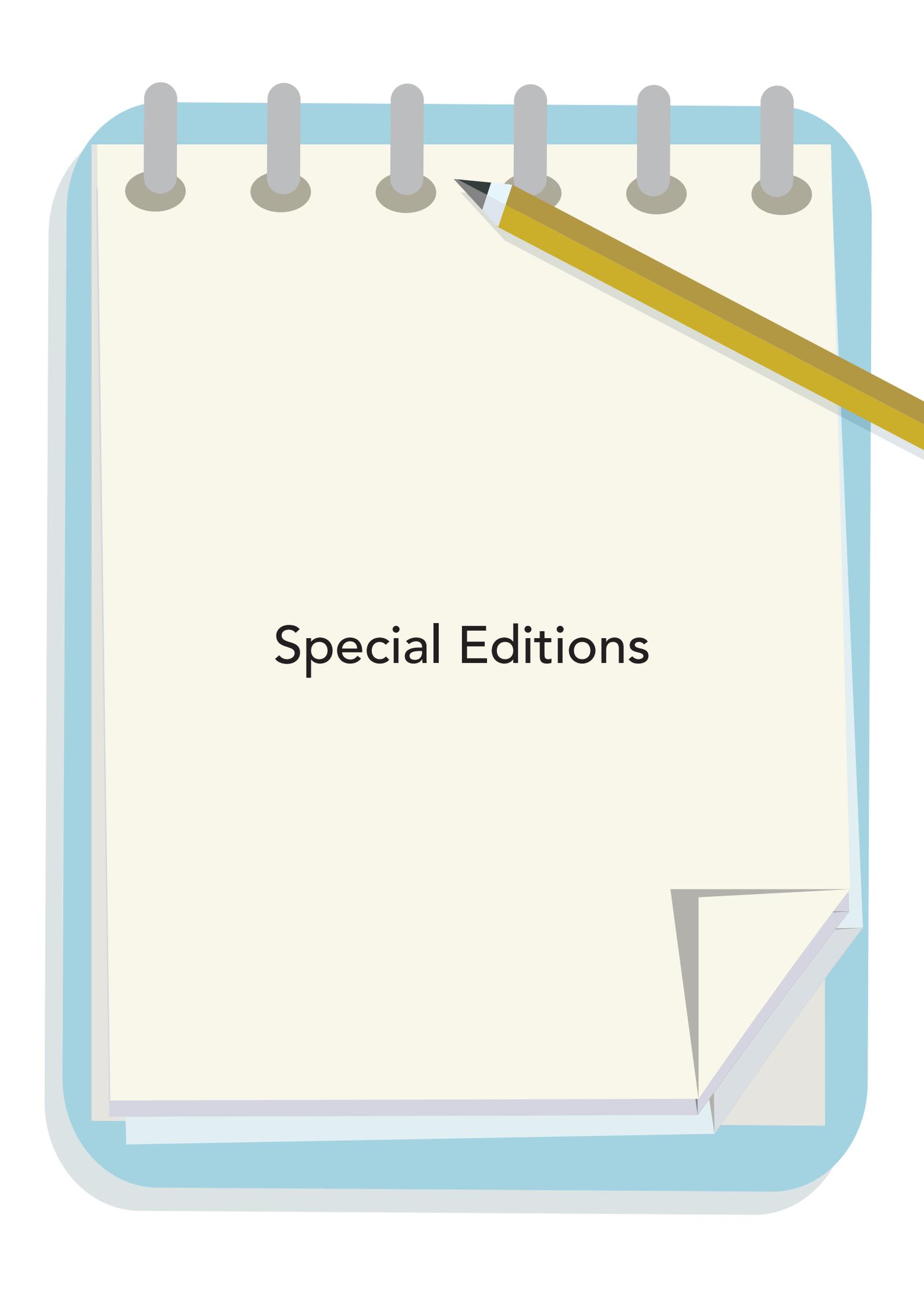
Special Editions

Lessons from the Journey

Lessons from the Journey

As we commemorate Singapore's bicentennial year, we should take time to remember Singapore's history and the people and events that have shaped our lives to be what it is today. As we reflect, we gain a better understanding of our present, we learn from mistakes made, and we build upon what was done well in the past. Reflection is, and should always be a big part of our journey as social service practitioners in order to continually improve ourselves and our society. In this letter, I will share some of my reflections and observations throughout my journey in the social services which, I hope will serve as learning points for your own journey as well.

Continuous Learning

Through my years in the sector, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of continuous learning. Often times, we may think of education as simply passing a major examination, obtaining certain qualifications or a means to the end of getting a job. However, these views are narrow and miss the call of education. Education is the process of learning and equipping oneself in order to give back and contribute to the individuals and society we serve. With this end goal in mind, we can see why education is something that is lifelong and a commitment that we make to pursue.

This is particularly important for social service practitioners. Social issues have become increasingly complex, and we are called to be able to handle a variety of cases and complexities ranging from mental health, persons with disabilities to family violence. We need to be properly equipped to be able to handle a whole range of cases. Beyond classroom education or training, one can take initiative in equipping oneself through talking to older and more experienced colleagues who often have tacit knowledge to share that is not always taught in classrooms.

As we advance in our careers, some of us may consider specialising. Specialisation has its benefits as it allows us to go deep in a particular area of work that requires deep expert knowledge and skills. However, I would like to highlight that opting to specialise does not mean that one chooses depth versus a breadth of knowledge. The deepening of knowledge in a certain area should only happen after a certain breadth of knowledge is present. The danger of specialisation is to become too narrow in knowledge and exposure in one's specialisation, without having the know-how in broader issues. It is helpful therefore to take a step back every now and then

to evaluate where we are and how we can develop both in depth and breadth of knowledge.

Courage

As social service practitioners, we are often called to exercise moral courage to pursue what is right despite the cost of doing so. This could mean going against the flow at times and not simply accepting the choices we have been handed. To do this, we need to reach down into the desires of our heart and the passion to do what is good and right, and to revisit our own definition of success.

Being morally courageous could mean rethinking a particular programme design and challenge our own assumptions about clients or partnership; it could mean taking the initiative to collaborate with a partner on a particular case notwithstanding the challenges anticipated; or it could mean taking time to pause and rest when you find yourself overly caught up with tasks and losing focus of the purpose of your endeavours. Whatever it is, we should always consider our clients' best interests and have courage to pursue it even when faced with great difficulties. Such moral courage must not be impulsive but should be tampered with deep reflection, critical thinking and analysis.

Take Time to Remember

1. Humility and Gratefulness

There is a Chinese phrase (饮水思源) which means "when you drink water, think of its source". It is a phrase used to remind us not to forget one's origins and to be grateful for the blessings that we enjoy. This is an important principle to uphold as one journeys and progresses in one's career or job.

Remembering helps us to be humble as we recall that who or where we are is not merely a result of our own achievements or hard work, but a product of the opportunities that have been given to us and the foundation that was laid by others. Nestled in humility is a sense of gratefulness that others have contributed to where we are in the present, and a sense of awareness of how small we are in the larger scheme of things.

2. Keeping True to Your Calling

Remembering also helps us to stay on course and to remain faithful to our calling. Many of us enter the social service sector because of a particular passion, conviction or mission. It may be the desire to help others, to better the lives of the vulnerable, or to stand up for the marginalised. Whatever it is, it pushed us to enter the profession and it is that which will keep us going when the work gets tough.

3. Remember the Giants

"We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours."
– John of Salisbury[1]

As we continue to reflect on our journey in being professionals and specialists, it is useful to be mindful that we are often standing on the shoulders of giants. The work of pioneers and giants could be likened to seeding the ground and paving the way forward for growth and development. The operating environment of pioneers and giants were often demanding and with less resources. The conditions demanded creativity and tested imagination. What was created, developed and tried gave form to what could be charted and directed today.

Moving Forward

We should continually develop our brains, courage, soul and heart wherever we are on our journey in the social services. Whether we have 5, 10 or 20 years of experience, let us keep in mind the following:

- *Brains:* We should develop a deep knowledge in our area of work and stay updated on the current research on what works and how various elements or factors contribute to or influence outcomes. Good professionals will want to ensure that they remain competent and continually refresh their vision.
- *Courage:* We should have good nerves to be bold and able to move toward our vision even with incomplete information or risky odds after deep thinking and analysis.
- *Soul:* We should be clear about the values that we stand for. Good professionals should lead with a compass and not by radar. While aware of the world around them, good professionals are oriented to a true north that does not waver. In contrast, a professional who makes decisions by radar will be constantly changing in response to external stimuli.
- *Heart:* We should be passionate about what we believe in and show compassion. Passion and compassion will root our decisions in concern for others.

As the issues of our clients become more complex, our challenge is to stay focused on what the people we serve need and require of us to make their lives better, be it in protecting them, giving them hope or helping them to reach their potential. Let us also acknowledge with gratitude those who have helped us grow in our professional development, nurturing our strengths and honing our rough corners to be a better professional.

18 April 2019

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[1] Goodreads, Inc. (n.d.). *Quotable Quote.* Retrieved from Goodreads' website.

Reflections on Social Service Practice

In recent months, there has been much discussion about the subject of inequality. Academics to political office holders have actively contributed to the discourse. Although there is great interest in the topic, inequality is not unique to any country – it is an issue which inevitably surfaces with the growth of an economy. As professionals committed to promoting social justice, social upliftment, and cohesion, it is crucial that we stay relevant to the ongoing discussions on inequality, and reflect on what we can do as practitioners to ensure that the vulnerable are cared for.

Ongoing Recalibration

In the early days of Singapore's independence, unemployment rates were high, the economy needed rapid development and the quality of education was relatively low. The primary aim of our policies back then was to ensure the progress of the nation and more importantly, our survival. In the pursuit of growth, we subscribed to the principle of meritocracy, and rewarded our people based on their merit. A strong emphasis was placed on education and personal responsibility, hard work and resilience. Through education and new jobs, coupled with the hard work of our people, all boats were lifted.

However, though boats were lifted, not all were lifted equally. The gap of the experiences between classes within our society has intensified over time with economic advancement. As both economic growth and social inequality are related, one way to mitigate the latter would be to consider the solutions to the problems that arise from advanced economic development, while addressing the present and more immediate issues. Inequality has an impact on the social fabric of our nation – it affects social cohesion, integration and social mobility. We should thus continue to examine the extent to which policies have contributed to such effects, and the changes that we need to make moving forward.

In the course of implementing changes, one has to think twice before throwing the baby (our social policy system and the principles on which it is built upon) out with the bathwater. Our system has always sought to nurture the strengths of individuals, families, and communities. This is done via a combination of equipping them with resources alongside promoting a strong work ethic and self-determination, and maximising their respective potentials. Such intentions and efforts have safeguarded

the well-being of both individuals and the society, and thus should continue to be embraced.

Among the discussions on inequality, there have been calls for change – for current systems and policies to emulate the qualities of a universal welfare model, as a solution to mitigate inequality. However, a good discussion on the feasibility of such a change will need to consider the concrete forms which the model can assume in relation to our current context. These include the sustainability of, as well as the fiscal impact of implementing such a model. The matter of who pays, and for whom, will have to be deliberated. Our current provision which ensures state subsidy in primary healthcare, the ease of access to education, as well as housing and social intervention support has tremendously improved our society over the last three to four decades. Nevertheless, more can and should be done so that the needs of the vulnerable are more actively met, in the complex and volatile environment that we live in today.

Along with other governmental efforts to ensure that the more vulnerable members of society are supported and included, we already see policies being recalibrated, readjustments made in implementation, a focus on the last mile of service delivery and a call for community participation. These will close up the differences resulting from social inequality.

The Important Role of Social Service Practitioners

Social service practitioners are inarguably the complements to effective social welfare policies for they implement and oversee the implementation of policies at the local level. They play an indispensable role in our efforts to alleviate social inequality as they collaborate directly with individuals and families who are experiencing resource constraints. As active agents of social welfare policies and systems, they are crucial in providing support, empowering and journeying with vulnerable individuals and families in our society. Below, I list some roles that social service practitioners take on in assisting and journeying with their clients through difficult circumstances.

As an Enabler in a Collaborative Partnership

Supportive partnerships are key in human services – they collectively serve as a medium through which change is facilitated. In such supportive relationships, practitioners must always bear in mind the importance of respecting the dignity and worth of each client regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances. Practitioners should establish non-judgmental relationships with clients and nurture strong connections based on trust, such that they feel supported and empowered throughout the entire process.

Relationships are developed and strengthened gradually, through constant follow-ups and reconnections with clients instead of one-off meetings. Such client-worker relationships are collaborative partnerships, through which the decision-making process, actions, responsibilities and information are shared between the practitioners and the client. Clients are better able to provide information with regards to their circumstances, and/or that of their families, while practitioners are "experts" in their

respective disciplines. The two should always try to sync up to formulate practical action plans, which can generate better results, than if each party were to work and plan independently.

As a Leader, Communicator and Change Agent

The collaborative partnership that is mentioned above is necessary, but not sufficient by itself to ensure change. This is because the determining factor is still commitment to pre-agreed plans by clients that have been drawn up together with their practitioners. By solely relying on the provision of financial resources or the support of their practitioners, clients would not be able to develop their ability to better their circumstances, or cope with their situations in the long term. Thus, social service practitioners must take on the role of the leader, motivating clients to take on opportunities through which they are able to nurture skills and strengths that will empower them in the long run. This includes motivating them to upgrade their skills, and applying for suitable jobs within their field of interest. When conveying such information to clients, it is important to ensure that they are clear about what should be done, by whom, under what circumstances, and with what objectives and goals in mind.

Apart from propelling action, practitioners must educate clients on the relevant information to manage their life, such as managing finances. For instance, some clients go into arrears not appreciating the full impact of what up-front interest-free instalments of purchases mean, and end up with spiralling hefty interests that compound their debts.

Social service practitioners also play a key role as evaluative leaders. Many of these vulnerable individuals and families experience inter and intrapersonal issues. Thus, a good bio-psycho-social assessment by social workers, or other helping professionals is required. If deemed necessary after the initial assessment, practitioners have to guide and assist clients in navigating through the systems when different agencies are involved. This is especially applicable, for practitioners of clients with multiple and complex needs.

As a Voice: An Advocate for Clients

Systemic barriers should not hinder the vulnerable from receiving the help they require. As practitioners, and especially as social workers, this is where advocacy becomes an important task. While doing casework, a practitioner may come across clients who experience situations that reveal the need for systems to be more responsive, for programmes or services to be adjusted or made more accessible. For example, there may be times during which clients were unable to utilise a particular form of service as they just missed the criteria, or have difficulty accessing it. Such situations call for practitioners to play the role of the advocate through dialogue and feedback on policy or programme design, to ensure that policies and processes targeted at uplifting the vulnerable are well-designed, fairly accessible and kept relevant. To ensure effective advocacy and collaboration, good communication between ground workers and policymakers is key. A healthy and functional feedback system would ensure that

people who are served by these policies and programmes are kept in focus, and at the centre of the design.

Everyone Has a Part to Play

Everyone - the government, citizens, corporations and service providers - has a part to play in mitigating inequality, and in ensuring that those struggling to keep pace with the rest of society are not left behind. While government agencies continue to review policies and step up efforts to foster a more inclusive society, the key to mitigating inequality lies with the rest of society. The work of alleviating inequality is ultimately a collective effort determined by individual choices, a willingness to interact with and understand the lives of those beyond our social circles, as well as how we choose to view others from other walks of life. Each of us play an important role in narrowing the gap. To do this, we should continue to treat each other with dignity and respect, be aware of differing perspectives that exist among us, as well as learn to empathise with and care for those who may be experiencing circumstances that are different from ours.

18 June 2018

The Next Lap

Presented by Ms Ang Bee Lian at the Closing Plenary, "Mobilising Community for Upstream Preventive Work" at the National Family Violence Networking System (NFVNS) Conference on 17 November 2016.

Achievements from a Multi-Pronged Approach

We have done much in the last two decades in systematically building a system for responding to family violence in Singapore. We chose, from the start of the journey, to adopt a multi-pronged approach based on the extensive research made in this area of work. We drew insights from the studies of individuals who had made significant contributions in advocating for services in the very early years. The research was clear. Victims needed protection and a responsive response from agencies. Victims would be better protected when agencies share a common perspective of their roles and minimise ambivalence and uncertainty when someone calls for help.

Victims in family violence situations experience a heightened sense of risk for their lives. This is particularly so for victims who are children because of the close proximity of the tension and escalation.

With the research in mind, we embarked on the challenging task of collaborative work. The family violence work and the systems approach in interventions that we see today were built on collaboration way back when the word was less heard of. That was what we probably did right with the strategic thinking behind the building of today's network of services and interventions.

Collaborative work, working with systems, communicating understanding and appreciation of situations and contexts are ongoing work. Our system is only as strong as the weakest link in the system. The system needs ongoing oiling and I shall talk about that later.

We have gone beyond responding to calls for help. We have, as a government and a social service sector, worked on preventing escalation in family violence situations and raised public awareness of this social problem. We have made improvements in these areas:

- Increased public awareness on spousal/family violence and dating violence;
- Intervention for both victims and perpetrators mandated through legislation -

the Women's Charter, and attended to by services in the community; and

- Strong partnerships forged among the Courts, police, crisis shelters, healthcare sector and other professionals to provide safety, support and intervention for victims and perpetrators of family violence.

Pioneers in Their Ground-Breaking Work in Violence

All these efforts would not have been possible without the pioneers who have done ground-breaking work in family violence management more than two decades ago. There were several individuals who advocated for services and they began by primarily deepening understanding that family violence is not a class-related social problem. It was not about the haves and the have-nots. It was about how relationships can escalate to violence when individuals are unable to manage their anger and their deep-seated beliefs about power and control.

To dare to put these on the table in the very early years in our context took courage, gumption and tenacity. These individuals challenged the system to respond to victims who were often powerless and depended on the system for help. They went one step further in advocating for the law to better protect victims. Children too were involved and that made a difference as it was no longer a problem affecting the adults. Family violence was a very uncomfortable subject.

One agency we wish to make special mention of is PAVE. Today, it has consolidated its years of research and practice wisdom to deliver services for the specialised needs of victims of violence and working with perpetrators. In its work with male perpetrators, the agency recognises that key issues such as the men's worldviews on gender roles and relationships, capacity for empathy, mental health and addictive behaviours influence how they will respond to intervention[1]. PAVE has been running support groups for male perpetrators of violence with good outcomes. This is commendable as the work with perpetrators is challenging due to the clients' strongly held cultural and social beliefs as well as other underlying mental health issues.

Another agency that has honed its specialism in targeting intervention in the area of elder abuse is TRANS SAFE Centre. It has handled several landmark cases in elder abuse which was commendable in alleviating further physical and emotional turmoil in the elderly victims. It has been an active partner to the Ministry in the drafting of the Vulnerable Adults Bill in providing the ground realities for operationalising the principle of "policy is implementation".

Another agency that specialises in helping older persons and persons with disabilities who are victims of abuse is Care Corner Project Start. Their service has given a dedicated voice to the often invisible vulnerable persons.

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[1] Pang, K. (2010). *Engaging Men who Abuse: The PAVE Experience.* Retrieved from PAVE's website.

Linking Systems and Galvanising the Community

It is useful in my mind to focus and reinforce three main areas in community mobilisation in the next lap of our work especially in holding back the tide if not reducing family violence.

First, we need to **build on the strengths of existing system linkages to respond and prevent escalation of family violence.** We need to continue to review whether our current National Family Violence Networking System is meeting its initial objectives and whether there are areas which require further reinforcement. Our system is as strong as its weakest link and we need to, while maintaining the overview and vision, keep an eye on the weakest link. The weakest link can be at anywhere in the system and unfortunately it is often in communicating and sharing information which has to be our ongoing effort. Research has shown that there is an approximately 30% - 60% of cases which saw both domestic violence and child maltreatment co-occurring in families[2]. We must draw on these findings to inspire us to do better in seeing linkages to better protect children.

Another cluster of research has shown a strong association between witnessing domestic violence and childhood mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, becoming a victim in teenage dating violence, low performance at school, and being bullied. Accumulated research by the Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child[3] showed that early childhood exposure to family violence, amongst other high-risk circumstances, moulds the children's brain development resulting in them displaying hyper-responsivity to adversity. At the Center, insights from these studies and cutting-edge science are used to challenge us with the opportunity to affect the trajectories of children and minimise the adversity that disrupts the healthy development of children and build their resilience. Here in Singapore, we too should seize the opportunity of using research findings to strengthen the engagement of the community and community agencies to better help children in such situations.

To develop effective responses to families victimised by domestic violence, it is imperative that we continue to forge close linkages among the three primary systems:

- Child welfare system;
- The Courts; and
- Domestic violence service organisations, such as our Family Violence Specialist Centres (FVSCs), Child Protection Specialist Centres (CPSCs) and the network of Family Service Centres (FSCs).

Source: Malik, Wark & Janczewski (2008)[4]

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[2] Appel, A., & Holden, G. (1998). The co-occurrence of spouse and physical child abuse: A review and appraisal. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *12*, 578-599.

Daro, D., Edleson, J., & Pinderhughes, H. (2004). Finding common ground in the study of child maltreatment, youth violence, and adult domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 19*, 282-298.

Edleson, J. L. (1999). The overlap between child maltreatment and woman abuse. *Violence Against Women*, *5*, 134-154.

[3] Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2019, October). *Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems*. Retrieved from Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University's website.

[4] Malik, N., Ward, K., & Janczewski, C. (2008). Coordinated Community Response to Family Violence. The Role of Domestic Violence Service Organizations. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 23*(7), 933-955.

These systems have their individual goals and it is often necessary to invest time and leadership to pull and knit them in a healthy tension to respond to those who depend on them for protection. Partnerships are not static and we need to constantly remind ourselves that these bonds, linkages and relationships and clarification of roles in the system are part of the work that builds the safety net of services for the victims. The partnerships are equally important in the work with perpetrators.

Secondly, **we should encourage the community to play a pro-active role to detect and prevent the escalation of violence in families** that they know of. First and foremost, in designing community-based violence prevention programmes that are sustainable and effective, these factors should be considered:

- Violence prevention programmes should be integrated into the community;
- Strengthen community ties and resources; and
- Mindful of individual and familial factors, social norms and legislation[5].

We can consider how pockets of "community" – e.g. Residents' Committee/grassroots leaders, neighbours, volunteers, parent-support network in schools, parent volunteers can be active promoters in preventing violence including bullying behaviour. We can adopt a pro-social approach in educating the communities through education to raise their understanding of the issue and thereafter learn how to respond as neighbours, friends and grassroots volunteers. As part of the education, we should open up discussion on how to maintain privacy for the family while safeguarding the safety of vulnerable persons.

Let me share one example of how this can work. A member of public, say a Mr Lim, called TRANS SAFE Centre to report on a concern. Mr Lim had seen a young man shouting loudly with vulgarities at an elderly woman, and pushing her aggressively. This elderly woman was working as a cleaner in a hawker centre. Mr Lim saw the young man demand money from the elderly woman and later found out that he was her son.

Mr Lim offered to show the social worker where the woman was and shared some of his observations. Due to Mr Lim's detailed description of the woman, the social worker was able to identify her almost immediately. Several stall owners whom the social worker spoke to had already observed that the elderly woman's son was aggressive towards her for over a year. The stall owners perceived the incidents as private family matters and as such did not want to interfere although they often served her food. They were able to provide additional observations that helped the social worker to plan how to help the woman.

Mr Lim's action shows us how the public can play a part to prevent the escalation of potential hurt and harm to vulnerable persons. It does require taking the additional step to note observations and details and to call an agency.

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[5] Sabol, W. J., Coulton, C. J., & Korbin, J. E. (2004). Building Community Capacity for Violence Prevention. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 19*(3), 322-340.

The Ministry has engaged various community groups through awareness raising sessions that aim to help Singaporeans from all walks of life to recognise the signs and symptoms of family violence and how to refer individuals for help. Groups are trained in a simple and easy to remember 3-step process using the acronym A.C.T – A: Acknowledge the abuse; C: Comfort someone in need; and T: Tell someone how and where to get help.

To further engage community stakeholders, we have in May this year reached out to 75 participants from companies, social service professionals, and groups in the arts, sports and grassroots to gather inputs on how the community can be involved in preventive work. The inputs will be used to plan and work with communities for early detection and prevention.

As more community groups, both formal and informal, become better informed that everyone can play a part in helping victims of family violence, they will be more effective in reaching out and providing early alerts and referrals for help.

Thirdly, we should **explore more targeted, one-to-one outreach**, such as having rehabilitated perpetrators with violence issues, and encouraging non-perpetrators to reach out and influence their acquaintances, family and friends, to prevent and stop violence.

Overseas studies have shown that approaches of outreach are effective in educating and generating changes in behaviour and attitudes. More specifically, male perpetrators do choose to adopt healthier and more positive communication patterns and relationships with their loved ones with help.

We should also pay attention to educating youths. Several examples are worth emulating, especially for their messages that evoke empathy and inculcate values on building healthy relationships at a young age. Here are some examples.

- Looking through the eyes of male perpetrators' daughters - "how do you want your daughters to be treated?"
- Providing mentoring to youth on healthy relationships in schools or youth organisations
- Parenting programmes that address the needs of children and spouses using non-violent methods of resolving conflicts
- Community education and training in schools

Adapted from various sources[6]

In Singapore, there was a recent Futsal tournament which aimed to emphasise father-

[6] Casey, E., Carlson, J., Sierra, T., & Yager, A. (2018). Gender Transformative Approaches to Engaging Men in Gender-Based Violence Prevention: A Review and Conceptual Model. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse, 19*(2), 231-246.
Tolman, R., Casey, E., Allen, C., Carlson, J., Leek, C., & Storer, H. (2019). A Global Exploratory Analysis of Men Participating in Gender-Based Violence Prevention. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 34*(16), 3438-3465.
Douglas, U., Bathrick. D., & Perry, P. (2008). Deconstructing Male Violence Against Women: The Men Stopping Violence Community-Accountability Model. *Violence Against Women, 14*(2), 247-261.

son bonding. Helmed by the Centre for Fathering and Home United Football Club, the activity generated a lot of interest with key messages of building healthy parent-child relationships. Such efforts should be more widespread and reach out to more families and perhaps on a more systematic, timely and regular basis.

Build on What Worked and Expand the Reach

For the next lap, we can do three things. Firstly, we need to build on the strengths of existing system linkages to respond better by embarking on regular reviews to ensure the National Family Violence Networking System continues to be an effective network.

Secondly, to develop effective responses to families caught in domestic violence, it is imperative that we continue to forge close linkages among the three primary systems:

- Child welfare system;
- The Courts; and
- Domestic violence service organisations, such as our FVSCs and the network of FSCs.

To strengthen alerts, we can leverage on existing pockets of natural community groups to prevent the escalation of violence and early referrals for help.

Thirdly, we should explore more targeted, one-to-one outreach, such as having rehabilitated perpetrators with violence issues, and survivors of family violence reach out with their testimonies to influence their acquaintances, family, friends and the public to prevent and stop violence.

Effective community mobilisation provides the frontline support to prevent and reduce incidents of family violence at an early stage. Working together in partnership, the government agencies and the community play a critical and complementary role in promoting healthy positive relationships in our families.

Sense of Safety

Let me end by leaving us all with a motivation to continuously be mindful of why we do what we do, what do we do and how we do what we do. We can appreciate that systems must have objectives and we need to do what we do. In a climate where we are continuously constrained by resources, we need to remind ourselves about where we place our priority when we make decisions, especially about deploying resources. Let us be guided by the notion that our system needs to attend to the victims' sense of safety, and that they can depend on the system. In working with parents, we need to help them know and feel that they are safe and their child is safe. Only when they feel safe, can they make informed decisions for themselves and in the interest of their children. In the case of the elderly and persons with disabilities, we can also be challenged to communicate in a way to help them feel safe to exercise what is possible to work on a plan for their safety. This must be the ongoing challenge that keeps us awake.

Renewing Our Purpose

Having a sense of purpose is extremely important when we consider the work we do. It keeps us grounded and motivated in times of adversity, when we are faced with challenging and seemingly impossible tasks, or cases that seem to have no solution in sight. Research has shown that being able to cope with and embrace life's uncertainties are strongly tied to having a deep sense of purpose in life. A strong sense of purpose allows us to treat adversities as part of the journey to achieve this purpose, and create meaning in all that we do, motivating us to overcome difficult challenges.

To understand the importance of purpose, we must first know what it means. New York Times bestselling author, Simon Sinek, writes in his book, Start with Why, "Your WHY is the purpose, cause or belief that inspires you"[1]. Purpose is the inner compass that provides us the drive to do the work that we do and the energy to persevere. It reminds us why we are doing what we are doing and allows us to continue to find joy and meaning in our work.

A Diminishing Sense of Purpose

However, this sense of purpose may fade out over time. As some of us reach the mid-point of our career or life, it is common to feel a diminishing sense of purpose when work starts to become more mundane and repetitive. For others, we may feel a greater sense of stress, despair and lack of motivation from the growing workload. This is further compounded by the current pandemic, where plans were abruptly changed and many new challenges surfaced. However, at the same time, these challenges encourage us to rethink our purpose, serving as an important push for us to renew this purpose and remind ourselves why we started out in the first place.

How to Re-find Our Purpose

Asking Questions

To find our purpose, we first need to start by looking within. Asking questions aids in our self-reflection on purpose and life, just like how we ask questions to clients to understand their circumstances. As Burch[2] suggested, we can start by considering more personal questions like the following:

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[1] Axtell, P. (2018, March 5). *Purpose: The Foundation of Motivation (Part Four)*. Retrieved from What's Next's website.
[2] Burch, R. (2020, May 29). *3 Questions to Help You Define Your Purpose*. Retrieved from Career Contessa's website.

- What are your intrinsic strengths? What are some of your unique and positive attributes?
- What do you enjoy doing?
- What do you care for?
- What are your principles and values?
- What is the reason that you entered this profession?
- What was something that you previously did that you may wish to revisit?

Once we have a better understanding of ourselves, we will be able to better discover our values in life and find out what activities we are willing to invest time and energy into. From here, we can start to craft our purpose in life and frame it such that our purpose is a goal that we want to achieve. For some, this purpose could be about making a positive impact in someone's life, to build a better community or to share knowledge and wisdom with others. It could also be more individualistic, like focusing on your learning process or achieving certain milestones at work. Regardless of what your purpose is, once we are aware of it, we can pen the steps to achieve this purpose. Be clear and specific about the steps that you will take. Note the actions you will take to fulfil your goals and break them down into small steps to make the path less daunting[3].

At the same time, you could also zoom out and see the bigger picture and review how your purpose aligns with your organisation's mission. Find specific areas in your organisation that are aligned to your purpose and come up with ways to fulfil your purpose. Being able to see yourself contributing to the organisation will imbue a sense of meaning and fulfilment into your daily work. If you find that what you are currently doing no longer aligns with your purpose, there are multiple avenues for you to explore other options as long as you seek these opportunities.

Mentoring and Coaching

Being able to do the above is not easy. Although not essential, engaging a life coach or mentor will be a great help in this process. The support you receive from mentors and coaches will stretch you beyond your comfort zone, especially when you face difficulties in aligning your purpose with your organisation's mission. A life coach or mentor can help you discover your strengths and goals. They will keep you accountable on the steps that you have to take to achieve your aspirations[4]. A life coach or mentor can also provide new and different perspectives, helping you discover new things about yourself and the work you do. They may even find other ways that can align your purpose to your organisation's mission[5]. It is recommended to seek your own coach or mentor and initiate the mentor-mentee relationship, rather than be assigned one formally where the coach or mentor may not suit your style and beliefs.

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[3] Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention. (2017, April 25). *Evaluation Guide: Writing SMART Objectives*. Retrieved from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website.

[4] Miller, K. D. (2020, September 30). *30 Proven Benefits of Life Coaching & Mentoring*. Retrieved from PositivePsychology's website.

[5] Bundrant, M. (2019, May 26). *Benefits of Life Coaching: 33 Impressive Facts You Need to Know*. Retrieved from iNLP Center's website.

For Leaders in the Social Service Sector

Having a team of members with a strong sense of purpose is important to effectively realise the organisation's mission. With this shared sense of purpose, members would be motivated to put in their best efforts in their work, improving productivity and quality of services delivered[6]. This positive work culture would also give team members a sense of purpose and dignity in what they do.

To achieve this, leaders could take time to get to know members and understand their needs. Tailoring learning opportunities to every individual will help them realise their potential. Leaders could be flexible and allow for small changes in organisational structures and the workplace environment, to provide ample time and space for members to find their purpose in their work. When members can try out different things at work, they gain more opportunities to discover their interests and talents that they were not aware of.

Leaders can also step forward and mentor others, sharing knowledge and wisdom gleaned from past experiences. A long-term mentorship is more effective as you would be able to understand your mentee at a deeper level and thus provide better support. Having a less-structured mentor-mentee relationship, where you connect with your mentee in other ways apart from one-to-one sessions, such as having meals in a group setting, will allow for a more honest and open discussion about your mentees' goals and desires. It is also important that the messages that you send to your mentees are timely and are able to support their learning, to help open doors for them to develop as a person.

Living a Purpose-driven Life

Finding your purpose can be challenging, but it is worth the effort. Being able to be purpose-driven enables us to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. When we are equipped with a strong sense of purpose, we become more open to improving ourselves and to work towards our goals despite the obstacles that stand in the way. We are motivated to give our all in everything we do and develop into better versions of ourselves.

24 March 2021

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[6] Gatty, A. (n.d.). *Building a Shared Sense of Purpose in Your Organization*. Retrieved from AllBusiness' website.

A New Better

The **"New Normal"** is a term that has been used so often to describe the times we live in now. The pandemic has brought about tremendous challenges across many fronts, especially the economic and social fronts, on a local and global scale. However, we cannot deny that it has provided a world of opportunities and impetus for massive change, adaptation and innovation. We can thus view the "New Normal" as the "New Better" – where we welcome positive changes and gains that the pandemic has brought about.

The "New Better"

One key benefit that COVID-19 has brought about, which could not be achieved previously, is that it has trained us to be more technologically-savvy. People who normally stay away from technology have now come to embrace technology to survive and have even thrived on it. For instance, during the circuit breaker period, when going outdoors was largely restricted, we had to depend heavily on technology to stay connected with our loved ones and colleagues. Even seniors, who tend to be more hesitant with technology, were driven to start using mobile applications and telecommunication to cope with the new reality.

We have also adjusted to a different way of working - a way that is potentially more efficient, convenient, and prompts us to be more conscious of how we convene our meetings. In the social service sector, the idea of communicating with clients virtually using video conferencing platforms and WhatsApp has since been normalised. The Courts are no exception to this as well, with the State Courts and Family Justice Courts using online video conferencing for court hearings and sessions[1].

The Art of Pivoting

The pandemic has significantly disrupted the local and global economy and has severely affected businesses and job markets across many sectors. While these challenges paint a seemingly grim future, we must learn to pivot accordingly, instead of dwelling on the challenges that the pandemic has posed. Pivoting involves some form of modification or shift, which may be necessary to adapt to a new situation - just like how some businesses have learnt to heighten their online presence and use their

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[1] Lam, L. (2020, March 26). *Some Singapore court hearings to take place via video conference as judiciary rolls out COVID-19 measures.* Retrieved from Channel NewsAsia's website.
Vijayan, K. C. (2020, June 29). *Family court cases via Zoom the new normal.* Retrieved from Straits Times' website.

virtual platform as their main method of sales during this pandemic[2].

At the social service agency level, we learned to pivot by changing the way we keep track of vulnerable clients as we ensured their safety through virtual platforms instead of face-to-face meetings. We worked with one another, even across agencies, to adapt and collaborate with the same goal in mind – to keep our clients safe.

During the circuit breaker and the period after, some agencies tapped on food and meal delivery operators to make essential deliveries to clients. These delivery networks have a wide reach, especially to vulnerable groups. This is one potential channel of obtaining feedback on the well-being of vulnerable clients whilst ensuring that client confidentiality is protected. Partnering with delivery networks who do regular delivery to corroborate important information on vulnerable clients would also complement our current check-in efforts with clients. This holistic gathering of information on the safety and well-being of clients is an idea that should be embedded in practice.

Like other industries who are changing their ways of doing things, it is time for us to adopt a "New Better" mentality in seeking fresh and enhanced ways of delivering services during this rough time.

Don't Forget to Self-care

During this pandemic, it is crucial for every individual to be familiar with the idea of self-care, conscientiously practise it and encourage those around us to do so as well. As practitioners, we may be familiar with this idea as we often preach it to our clients, but we must remember to practise it too. We need to understand that all humans need to rest and recharge and that we each have different ways of doing so. With the pandemic, it has become even more important for us to practise self-care to pull through this long and tough marathon.

Particularly relevant is the Japanese concept of *ichigo ichie* (一期一会), which translates to "one moment, one meeting" and can be further interpreted to mean "once in a lifetime". It calls us to cherish every moment of our lives as these moments cannot be repeated[3]. As social service professionals, this is a good reminder not to overwhelm ourselves by constantly putting the demands of our clients over our self-care. We need to balance taking care of ourselves and caring for our clients so that we can go the distance in social service.

Working Together to Turn Crises into Opportunities

With a "New Better" mindset, let us move forward together and build a different and better future as we actively seek to learn to overcome the challenges brought about by the pandemic. New obstacles will continue to surface. Each of us has the power to

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[2] Guan, C., & Chan, C. M. (2020, April 7). *Commentary: Has COVID-19 made e-commerce and online shopping the new normal?* Retrieved from Channel NewsAsia's website.
[3] García, H., & Miralles, F. (2019, December 30). *What Is Ichigo Ichie? 10 Rules of the Japanese Way to Happiness.* Retrieved from Mindbodygreen's website.

determine how we face them – do we stay defeated, or do we stand our ground and turn these challenges into opportunities?

Let us adopt the "New Better" mindset in facing the pandemic - learn to find and value opportunities that arise out of challenges, and constantly seek better ways to help those affected by this crisis. Together, we can pull through to create a better future, and a stronger Singapore.

12 January 2021

Built to Last — The Social Service Ecosystem

This letter is an adapted version of the chapter "Built to Last – The Social Service Ecosystem" written by Ms Ang Bee Lian in "Doing Good in Singapore: Part 1 – Adapting to the Future" (2019), a publication by the National University of Singapore Centre for Social Development Asia.

This chapter explores how Singapore's social policies and social service ecosystem are shaped by changing social needs. Two key population trends that will particularly impact the social service ecosystem are the ageing population and changing family profiles such as the increase in small families with fewer children. This chapter considers how stakeholders in the social service ecosystem can adapt to changes in the population and ensure sustainability in their service delivery.

1. The Changing Social Service Sector

The emerging shifts in social trends and changes to Singapore's social context require the social service ecosystem to adjust accordingly to meet the needs of society. While policies, practice, and delivery methods may change, the principles on which the ecosystem is built upon remains core to its survival and flourishing. In Singapore, the social service system is built upon the principles of shared responsibility among individuals, the community, and the state. Beyond social spending, this shared responsibility is about the continuous calibration of the collective responsibility among individuals, community, and the state.

The evolution of the present system and the principles upon which it is built serve as a foundation for the social service ecosystem of the future. To ensure its sustainability in the long run, the social service ecosystem needs to be critically adaptable to the changing environmental trends and social expectations. With this in mind, this chapter will consider the principles underpinning Singapore's social policies and how they have evolved, and explore the key factors that contribute to a sustainable social service ecosystem.

2. Foundation of Social Policies

Social and economic policies in Singapore are inextricably linked. In the early years, the country's expenditure was mainly on education, the creation of jobs, and housing in order for Singapore to survive as a newly independent country. Singapore's focus on home ownership, rather than the mere provision of a house, also gave people a sense of pride and belonging. This allowed Singaporeans to not just survive, but thrive. Prior to understanding the social service ecosystem, it would be useful to understand the context of Singapore's social and economic policies, namely healthcare, education, and housing.

2.1 Housing

One of the first social policies that created substantial impact was housing grants. The Housing Development Board (HDB) was more than a housing authority – it was the state's mechanism to raise the standard of living of almost every citizen through a range of grants or subsidies for citizens to own a home. Low-income and middle-income households can apply for the Additional Central Provident Fund Housing Grant (AHG) and the Special CPF Housing Grant (SHG) respectively when buying Build-To-Order HDB flats for the first time[1].

The Singapore population has an estimated 87% home ownership rate, one of the highest home ownership rates in the world[2]. This is made possible through the Central Provident Fund (CPF) which citizens can use to pay off their housing loans. CPF is a comprehensive social security system that enables working Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents to set aside funds for retirement. It also addresses healthcare, home ownership, family protection, and asset enhancement[3].

Why is housing a crucial social policy related to social services? It is because housing promotes social mobility, financial security, and provides individuals and families with a safe and comfortable place to live. Housing is at times taken for granted in Singapore's social service deliberation. In many other countries, social services face greater challenges in securing permanent housing for clients.

For example, in the United States, low-income households can receive housing vouchers to pay for housing in the private market. The intention of providing these vouchers is to promote residential mobility, where low-income families can use these vouchers to purchase houses in better neighbourhoods with lower crime rates.

However, this is not the reality for many Americans. Not all families who receive vouchers are able to find suitable housing, due to the lack of moderately priced rental housing, ethnic discrimination, and poor local administration[4]. It also takes many

[1] Housing & Development Board. (n.d.). *First-Timer Applicants.* Retrieved from Housing & Development Board's website.
[2] Prime Minister's Office. (2018, January 11). *The Straits Times Interview with DPM Tharman: Social Policies, Spending and Taxes.* Retrieved from Prime Minister's Office's website.
[3] Central Provident Fund Board. (2019). *CPF Overview.* Retrieved from Central Provident Fund Board's website.
[4] Tighe, J. R., Hatch, M. E., & Mead, J. (2017). Source of Income Discrimination and Fair Housing Policy. *Journal of Planning Literature, 32*(1), 3-15.

years for families to find a place of residence using the vouchers. This has an effect on the families' personal safety, social networks, and schooling options for children.

2.2 Education

The provision of education is a policy that has a strong social dimension. From the start of Singapore's independence, education has provided the foundation for a literate and thinking workforce to drive economic development. Not long after independence, education for adults was strongly promoted. This often took the form of night classes for working adults to enhance their competencies and to ensure that the workforce was sufficiently skilled.

Subsidised education has always been an integral part of Singapore's education policy. In the recent decade, subsidies in education have become more targeted for the lower income group, who have been receiving more subsidies from pre-school to tertiary level. Currently, the government spends about 50% more, per student, on those who have a weaker start in learning compared to the average student[5]. Having more specialists, smaller-sized classes, and activities to enhance confidence among students are some of the efforts to better engage these students[6].

In recent years the Early Childhood Developmental Agency (ECDA) started KidSTART, an intervention programme, which enables young children from low-income and vulnerable families to have a good start in life. KidSTART supports and monitors the developmental progress of children from birth, up to the age of six. The programme builds a strong ecosystem of support for the child by coordinating holistic services among stakeholders such as preschools and hospitals for families, where needed[7].

2.3 Healthcare

The provision of primary healthcare is another policy that acts as a strong base for the social service system. The health of an individual is intricately tied to one's well-being that it often affects the level of social service support that the individual needs. For example, in Singapore's early years, healthcare provided by the state comprised of home visitations and support to almost all mothers and babies known to the health[8]. These provisions have helped to reduce the chances of poor developmental growth among very young children. The provision of basic and affordable healthcare services in Singapore has been essential in ensuring that the population's health and social needs are being met.

Based on the philosophy of personal responsibility and shared payments with the government, the 3Ms were introduced — MediSave, MediFund, and MediShield Life[9].

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[5] Prime Minister's Office. *Social Policies, Spending, Taxes*, 128.
[6] Shanmugaratnam, T. (2015, August 19). *The relentless effort that goes into keeping S'pore inclusive.* Retrieved from The Straits Times' website.
[7] Early Childhood Development Agency. (2017). *Fact Sheet on KidSTART.* Retrieved from Early Childhood Development Agency's website.
[8] Ministry of Health Holdings. (2015). *Caring for our People: 50 years of healthcare in Singapore.* Retrieved from Ministry of Health Holdings' website.
[9] Ibid.

MediSave is a medical savings scheme to help Singaporeans meet immediate and future medical expenses, while MediShield Life is an insurance scheme that pays for large hospital bills and selected outpatient treatments. Finally, MediFund is an endowment fund that helps the needy who are unable to afford their medical expenses, even after subsidies[10]. The 3M framework provides multiple layers of protection to ensure that no Singaporean is denied basic healthcare treatment due to affordability issues.

There has been a growing recognition of the need for agencies to provide both health and social support to clients as one's health and social well-being are closely intertwined. The Community Networks for Seniors (CNS), which will be expanded nationwide by 2020, is one example[11]. CNS provides social and healthcare support to seniors through a team of volunteers from the community, as well as government agencies. The CNS team promotes active ageing practices and care for seniors when they turn frail, such as accompanying the seniors for health screenings and encouraging them to participate in group exercises with other seniors[12].

Mental health support is also an important part of the social service continuum. Increasingly, community-based teams have been conducting mental health outreach and extending support to affected clients and their caregivers. One example is the Community Resource, Engagement and Support Team (CREST) which is made up of social service professionals who support residents with mental health issues as well as those who may be at risk. Their role is to link up their clients with the appropriate services and assistance. The Community Intervention Team (COMIT) is another community-based team that comprises multi-disciplinary professionals, such as counsellors and occupational therapists, who offer counselling and psychosocial therapeutic interventions and support for clients with mental health needs and their caregivers[13].

These policies on education, housing, and healthcare serve as the three pillars that support the social and economic well-being of Singaporeans and the foundation of the social service ecosystem. It is essential to ensure that these policies are continually examined to foster social inclusion.

3. The Social Service Ecosystem

A social service ecosystem constitutes a system of individuals and organisations functioning with a social purpose to serve various groups, such as families, children, youth, and seniors, as shown in the diagram below by National Council of Social Service. Similar to an ecosystem, the social service ecosystem consists of interconnected parts that constantly interact and adapt to one another[14].

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[10] Ministry of Health. (2018). *Healthcare Schemes & Subsidies*. Retrieved from Ministry of Health's website.
[11] Ministry of Finance. (2018). *Budget 2018: Together, A Better Future*. Retrieved from Singapore Budget's website.
[12] Siau, M. E. (2017, July 24). *Community support services for the elderly to cover more areas.* Retrieved from Today Online's website.
[13] Agency for Integrated Care. (2015). *Community-based Care-Health and Social Care Service Directory 2015/2016*. Retrieved from Agency for Integrated Care's website.
[14] Mattaini, M. A., & Meyer, C. H. (2002). The Ecosystems Perspective: Implications for Practice. In M. A. Mattaini, C. T. Lowery, & C. H. Meyer (Eds.), *Foundations of Social Work Practice: A Graduate Text* (16-27). National Association of Social Workers.
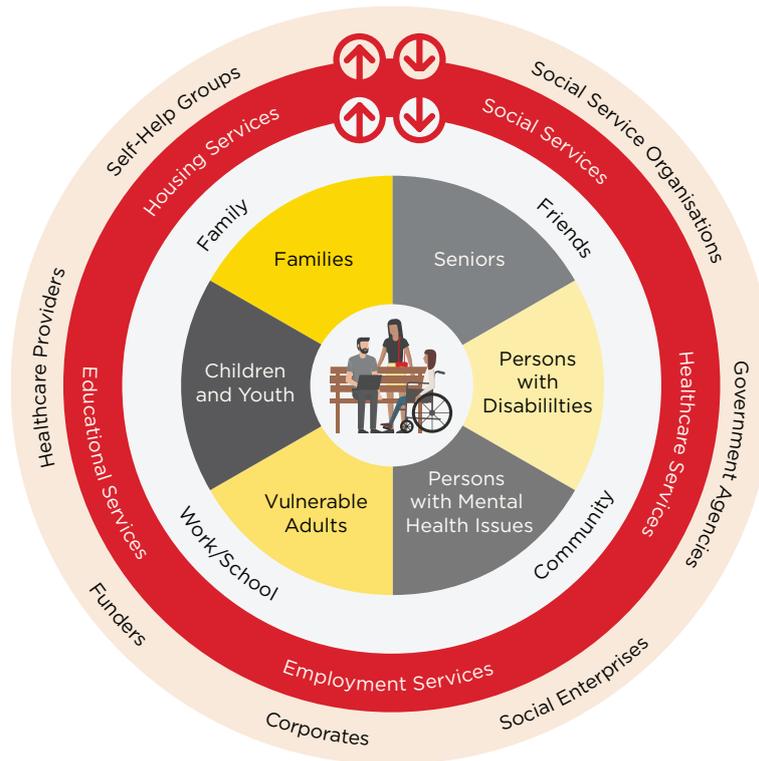
Figure 1: Diagram of the Social Service Ecosystem
Source: National Council of Social Service (2017)[15]

The main players of the social service ecosystem are:

i. The people sector — consists of individuals, non-governmental organisations, and service providers. Individuals support the community's access to services and help by participating, providing help and giving constructive feedback to service providers and policymakers. Service providers provide good and safe services, which are regularly evaluated to ensure that they meet the needs of the population.

ii. The private sector — fuels the growth of services and programmes by adopting or sponsoring them and lending their expertise to service providers.

iii. The public sector — which includes the government, provides essential services to the population. It also provides funding for some programmes and social transfers for the most vulnerable members of society.

The people, private, and public sectors are all interconnected, such that each of their actions has an impact on the entire system. A successful ecosystem is premised on effective collaboration among these sectors. To understand how these sectors interact, it is useful to understand Singapore's social compact and the Many Helping Hands (MHH) approach. For the past few decades, Singapore's social compact was largely based on the MHH approach. Within this approach, many partners including government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and the community, provided

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[15] National Council of Social Service. (2017). *Social Service Sector Strategic Thrusts: 2017-2021*. Retrieved from National Council of Social Service's website.

a wide range of services to meet the needs of vulnerable people[16].

This approach aspires to create a fair, inclusive, and caring society, with an emphasis on collective responsibility among individuals, the community, and the state. The role of the government would be to provide social assistance for basic needs and focus on helping lower socio-economic groups gain self-reliance, by keeping their jobs to provide for their families and pay for their homes.

Since 2010, there has been a shift in Singapore's social compact in terms of the balance of roles among individuals, the community, and the government, with the latter injecting stronger support for grants and services. Beyond just co-funding social services, the government has started to play a more active role by giving more support and intervention for certain individuals and groups in society.

4. Trends Influencing the Social Service Ecosystem

In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, social issues are not just complicated, but increasingly complex. The landscape of social needs and trends is also changing as Singapore's population increases, ages, and becomes more diverse and educated. The effects of migration and globalisation have also gradually transformed the fabric of society[17].There is a need to be critically aware of changing social trends and needs, and equip the social service sector to anticipate and respond accordingly. This will ensure a relevant and tenable social service ecosystem in the long run. There are two rising trends that the sector needs to take note of — an ageing population and the changing profiles of families.

4.1 An Ageing Population

In the last decade, the size of the elderly resident population in Singapore has increased. The proportion of residents aged 65 years and over has increased from 8.5% in 2007 to 13% in 2017[18]. Between 2018 and 2030, the elderly population will grow by about 450,000 to 900,000[19]. By 2030, the proportion of Singaporean residents aged 65 and above will more than double[20]. From the diagram below, in 2015, 1 in 8 Singaporeans were aged 65 years and above. This is compared to 1 in 4 Singaporeans who will be aged 65 and above in 2030.

[16] Ang, B. L. (2015). The Soul of Nation Building in Singapore: Contributions from Social Work. In D. Chan (Ed.), *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore* (133-145). World Scientific Publishing Co.
[17] Singapore Department of Statistics. (2018). *Population Overview*. Retrieved from Singapore Department of Statistics' website.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ministry of Finance, *Budget 2018*, 130.
[20] National Population and Talent Division. (2016). *Older Singaporeans to Double by 2030.* Retrieved from National Population and Talent Division's website.
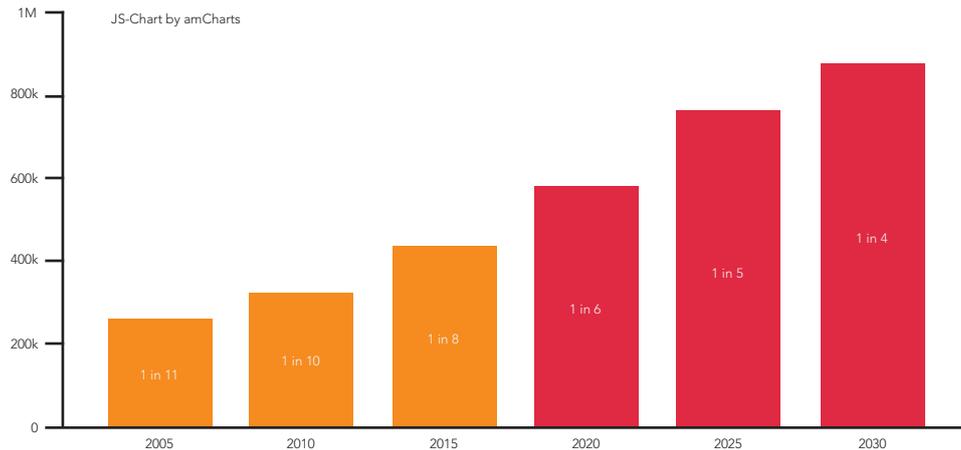
Figure 2: Number of Singapore Citizens Aged 65 and Above
Source: National Population and Talent Division (2016)[21]

This is a major shift in the composition of Singapore's population. This phenomenon is occurring at a faster pace in Singapore, compared to many other developed or mature countries that are also experiencing an ageing population as the baby boom generation moves into their senior years[22].

The government has been expanding its social and healthcare schemes and initiatives to meet the needs of the growing ageing population. This can be seen in recent developments such as the Pioneer Generation Package, which was introduced in 2014, and CareShield Life, which will be launched in 2020. CareShield Life will address the long-term care needs of the ageing population, especially those with severe disability.

Aside from the government providing programmes and services for the elderly, there is also a need to challenge the social mindset on ageing. The common misconception that ageing is a physically and mentally deteriorative process needs to be corrected. Instead, ageing should be seen as an active and progressive stage of life continued. The concept of active ageing encourages seniors to have active lifestyles, be engaged in suitable work opportunities and be socially connected. Creating socially inclusive communities where the elderly can interact with different age groups is also important as this reduces the social stigma of ageing and furthers the active ageing concept.

Programmes, such as CNS and CREST, are some examples of the community stepping up to play a bigger role in engaging and caring for the elderly population. Social engagement and support are key in sustaining the mental and physical health of seniors. This will be increasingly important with the rising trend of single seniors who lack family support. It will also be helpful to involve seniors in the co-creation of programmes and services. The elderly will be able to design programmes that are more attuned to the needs and interests of their population, and will thus enable a wider participation in the service delivery process.

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[21] Ibid., 132.
[22] Shiao, V. (2017, December 7). *Singapore's ageing population a ticking 'time bomb'*. Retrieved from The Business Times' website.

To keep the elderly population socially engaged, digital platforms can be used to create support networks on mobile platforms, in addition to their current communities. Digital platforms and tools can also be utilised to transform jobs to be more elderly friendly. Some examples include using technology to do laborious aspects of the job or teleconferencing for seniors who are less mobile. This will be welcomed by the more digitally savvy elderly population of the future.

4.2 Changing Profiles of Families

Singapore's household family structures are changing, with a growing proportion of nonnuclear types of households. More than a decade ago, a typical two-generation family (married couple living with their children or parents under the same roof) made up 60% of all resident households in Singapore. In 2014, this proportion had fallen to less than half of Singapore's households[23]. From 2000 to 2014, the proportion of married couples who do not live with their children had increased from 11% to 14%[24]. One-person households have also increased from 8% to 11.9%, from 2000 to 2014[25]. Another trend is the rise in smaller families where couples are having fewer children. All these changes impose different demands on the type of social service support needed.

As Singapore's ageing population grows, more families will experience the phenomenon of caring for older family members, as well as their growing children. This group of people is referred to as the sandwiched generation. In most of these families, both parents are working. Besides facing pressures at work, they are responsible for the caregiving of the children and older family members.

Those in the sandwiched generation need to make deliberate efforts to manage their work, caregiving, and household responsibilities. On top of the complexity of juggling work and caregiving, they have the responsibility of ensuring that young children do not have unprecedented and unguided access to information and influences in this digital age. Given the multiple responsibilities that families face, support services for families have to be more intuitive and accessible in their daily lives. A good example would be flexible work arrangements which would be crucial in helping families cope and thrive.

Another emerging trend is the rise in marriage dissolution rates among recent marriage cohorts. In 2016, there was a 1.2% increase in marital dissolutions from the year before, tallying to more than 7,600 divorces and annulments[26]. The impact of divorce goes beyond the husband and wife. In 2014, around 4,728 children, below 21 years of age, were affected by their parents' divorce[27].

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[23] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2015, February). *Ageing Families in Singapore. Insight Series Paper 02/2015.* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.
[24] Mathews, M., & Straughan, P. (2015). *Overview of Singapore Families. Presented at Social Service Partners Conference (SSPC) 2015.* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.
[25] Channel NewsAsia. (2017, July 18). *Fewer marriages, more divorces in 2016: Singstat.* Retrieved from Channel NewsAsia's website.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Goy, P. (2016, March 6). *Protecting Children Caught in Divorce.* Retrieved from The Straits Times' website.

Over the past few years, there has also been a significant increase in transnational families in Singapore, which often takes on a multi-cultural dimension. More than 3 in 10 marriages in Singapore involve a foreign spouse[28]. These transnational families face significant challenges in areas such as obtaining citizenship for the foreign spouse, housing, employment, finance as well as assimilating foreign spouses to the new culture and environment.

As family structures change, assistance schemes and policies need to be re-examined to ensure that the needs of families are met in relevant ways. Families are the first line of care and support in Singapore's initiatives. However, this principle will be increasingly tested, with the emergence of family structures which lack family support, such as couples with fewer or no children and single-person households. Hence, it will be helpful to see if a broader sense of family support can be encouraged, such as roping the community in to play a bigger role in caring for individuals who do not have strong family support.

In 2014, the Divorce Support Specialist Agencies (DSSAs) were set up to provide stronger support to divorcing and divorced families and children, as well as to encourage cooperative co-parenting for divorced families with a child-centric approach[29]. The agencies offer specialised services for divorced families, such as counselling, parenting, and family dispute management. Parents with children below the age of 21 will need to attend the Mandatory Parenting Programme, a consultation session conducted by DSSA counsellors, prior to the couple's act to file for divorce. The programme encourages divorcing couples to make informed decisions that prioritise the well-being of children and better understand the importance of co-parenting[30].

Transnational Family Support Programme agencies were also established in 2014, to help the growing number of transnational families prepare for their cross-cultural marriages. These agencies run programmes to help couples manage cross-cultural differences in their marriages and integrate into the community. These include the Marriage Preparation Programme, which is offered prior to marriage, and the Marriage Support Programme, which provides information on community resources for foreign spouses to adapt to life in Singapore[31].

5. Building a Sustainable Social Service Ecosystem

The sector is mindful of the increasing challenges that lie ahead. On the economic front, business cycles have become shorter and more volatile, causing workers who are less skilled or older, to be concerned about whether they can keep up. On the social front, the increasing life-span of Singaporeans indicates new demands for social support.

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[28] National Population and Talent Division. (2017, September). *Population in Brief: 2017. Strategy Group, Prime Minister's Office.* Retrieved from National Population and Talent Division's website.
[29] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2018). *Divorce Support.* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.
[30] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2016). *Overview of Divorce Support Specialist Agencies (DSSAs).* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.
[31] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2018). *Preparing for Marriage.* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.

As family structures and population demographics change, the social service sector plays an important part in addressing emerging trends and challenges. This will ensure that services and programmes stay relevant, which will be important in keeping the social service ecosystem sustainable. Investing in people, driving transformation and innovation, having a strong continuum of service, and enhancing service delivery and collaboration are key factors that contribute towards a sustainable social service ecosystem.

5.1 Investing in People

People form the core of social service sector work. There is currently a social service industry manpower plan to build a future-ready sector, which already employs more than 13,000 people across a range of professions[32]. Investing well in people, in terms of their capabilities and competencies, is important in preparing the social service ecosystem to face present and future opportunities and demands.

As identified in the 4ST, one of the challenges that the sector faces is resource constraints. The social service industry manpower plan aims to tackle organisational and manpower challenges in the sector[33]. The plan intends to build up the sector's manpower by expanding the volunteer pool, reviewing professional conversion programmes, and using resources in a more optimised manner. It also aims to enhance career and professional development through the development of a Skills Framework to promote a better understanding of job roles and career pathways, and to enhance training delivery to upgrade the skill sets of professionals[34].

Social service leadership is also key in the development of social service professionals. Unique to the social service sector is the promotion of team leadership where leaders from various sub-sectors collaborate with each other, rather than to compete with one another. The sharing of expertise, best practices, and vision among sector leaders will help raise the standards of different sub-sectors and bring the entire sector to greater heights. The ability to innovate, implement, manage outcomes, and produce quality improvements are important qualities to cultivate among social service leaders too.

5.2 Driving Transformation and Innovation

Being innovative is important in ensuring the social service sector remains relevant and impactful in enhancing the well-being of service users. Innovation is about having a spirit of curiosity and creativity, questioning the status quo, thinking out of the box or enhancing existing ideas.

This is particularly salient in the current environment, where emerging research and changing trends may challenge conventional wisdom and assumptions. Social service agencies (SSAs) need to constantly re-evaluate current designs of policies and

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[32] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2017). *Social Service Industry Manpower Plan 2017*. Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.
[33] National Population and Talent Division, *Older Singaporeans to Double*, 132.
[34] Kinzel, H. (2017). Industry 4.0 – Where does this leave the Human Factor?. *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 15, 70-83.

programmes, and question if they are the best ways of reaching the desired outcomes. One possible idea to encourage innovative thinking would be making innovation a key criteria of funding proposals. This would incentivise agencies to be inventive in planning and implementing services and programmes, and to constantly examine how they can improve.

The current age of digital disruption is another reason why innovation is ever so crucial in today's context. The present Fourth Industrial Revolution represents new and unanticipated ways of technology becoming embedded within societies and even in human bodies[35]. This can be seen in recent technological advancements, such as big data analytics and real-time Internet-based communications[36]. These digital changes have completely revolutionised the way things are being done. It has changed the way consumers demand for services such as expecting services to be delivered instantaneously or having greater control over service delivery, as seen in the increasing use of self-service portals.

While the sector has started to use some technologies, such as tele-rehabilitation for seniors and e-counselling, there is still much room for the sector to harness the potential of technology to transform services and work processes. For example, data analytics is an area that can be greater utilised in the social and healthcare services. One possibility would be using data analytics to turn complex medical information from clients into insights so that doctors, social workers, and healthcare providers can make better decisions from the data presented[37]. These technological innovations will raise productivity so that professionals and practitioners can focus on more important and client-centric aspects of work such as casework and intervention. Social service professionals need to be open to continue learning and adapting to new technologies in creating client-centric and sustainable services in the long run.

5.3 Continuum of Service

Having a continuum of service refers to having an array of services such as preventive services, rehabilitative and protective services, acute services, step-down support, and long-term maintenance services in the social service sector. A strong continuum of service is key in ensuring that the social service sector can appropriately respond to a demand or supply of resources that arises from the social service ecosystem. The wide range of services also better facilitates a match between the presenting need and the required services.

A good outcome of a well-designed system and continuum of service promotes the values of individual responsibility over one's welfare and self-reliance while receiving support from neighbours, the community, and acute services when necessary. The unified responsibility and action of individuals, community, and the state will continuously shape the ecosystem. One of the challenges in service delivery is not to assume that more is good but to apply wisdom gained from deep experiences

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[35] Davis, N. (2016, January 19). *What is the fourth industrial revolution?* Retrieved from World Economic Forum's Website.

[36] Kinzel, *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, 136.

[37] Getz, L. (2014). *Big Data's Impact on Social Services. Social Work Today, 14*(2), 28. Retrieved from Social Work Today's website.

to stretch the continuum of service for appropriate deployment of resources and capabilities. There is a need to regularly identify changing needs and environmental trends, analyse whether services meet these needs, and re-design programmes if necessary, in order to ensure a strong continuum of service. Relevant resources should be set aside for the needs and services identified, ensuring that there are adequate resources for current and future use for social services.

5.4 Enhancing Social Service Delivery to the Last Mile

A client-centric social service ecosystem is one where services are delivered seamlessly to the last mile. It must be grounded in strong planning and coordination to support individuals and families in need. How can holistic and integrated help for clients and their families be achieved?

Firstly, help from government and organisations from the social service sector must be accessible so that those in need can seek and receive assistance easily. MSF has 24 Social Service Offices (SSOs) that are located in HDB towns. Their core function is to assess clients who are in financial need and administer ComCare assistance to those eligible[38].

To ensure that client's needs are addressed holistically, these SSOs may refer these clients to other agencies if needed. Since 2015, MSF has been piloting various integrated service delivery models, to enable clients to access more services with greater convenience. Through co-location with other service providers, some SSOs are able to offer family services and employment assistance to their clients at the same premises. Other SSOs have started 'virtual co-location' through video-conferencing. In these SSOs, clients can be virtually linked up with HDB and SG Enable, so that they can have their queries addressed immediately[39].

Secondly, there must be close coordination across agencies to minimise unintended friction for clients and help them resolve their issues more holistically. With good information sharing across agencies, clients need not repeat their circumstances or submit similar documents multiple times. When agencies collaborate to align their action plans, their interventions can reinforce one another to help clients regain stability. Where cases are complex and difficult to advance, agencies should consider escalating these cases to relevant ministries or agencies for prompt resolution.

Lastly, the community-at-large has to be involved to complement the work of the government and organisations from the social sector. Last mile service delivery depends critically on resources like networks and volunteers. Since 2018, regular community networking sessions have been organised by SSOs and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), under the ambit of SG Cares. These sessions bring community partners like SSAs, schools, government agencies, and grassroots

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[38] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2018). *Strengthening Social Service Delivery on the Ground.* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.
[39] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2017). *Updates on the Social Service Offices.* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.

organisations together to build relationships and collaborate to serve local needs.

Taken together, these efforts will bring more holistic and integrated help for clients and their families, and give them greater opportunities to regain stability and fulfil their potential.

5.5 Collaboration is a Necessity

To build a sustainable social service ecosystem, collaboration is a necessity, not a 'good to have'. Collaboration will enable agencies, professionals, and funders to have a holistic view of the problem. Once these stakeholders share a common goal, they create synergy. Collaboration is crucial due to resource constraints in the social service sector, especially in manpower and expertise.

The collaborative synergies amongst stakeholders help to fill the gaps in knowledge, skills, and capacity which individual entities may not be able to address if they work independently. By working together, these stakeholders can pool their resources to create and provide integrated service delivery that is highly valued by clients.

To help clients resolve their issues more holistically, there must be close coordination across agencies. When agencies collaborate to align their action plans, their interventions can reinforce one another to help clients regain stability. Complex issues require multidisciplinary interventions and inputs from relevant stakeholders. Where cases are complex and difficult to resolve, agencies should consider escalating these cases to relevant Ministries or agencies for prompt resolution.

For practitioners to collaborate effectively, specific skills are required. To work together, all practitioners must have a clear understanding of the purpose and vision of their collaboration. Communication, trust, and a healthy culture of give and take are essential for practitioners to work together.

Collaboration should not be limited to just within the social service sector[40]. The social service sector could bring expertise in areas less familiar to the social sector, such as supply-chain management, social media, knowledge management, and customer care needs to collaborate with the private sector. Private sector involvement could bring expertise in areas less familiar to the social sector, such as supply-chain management, social media, knowledge management, and customer care.

5.6 Contributing Towards Sustainability

What other factors are necessary for a sustainable social service ecosystem? A sustainable social service ecosystem has to be maintained by the principle of collective responsibility. It should not be just reliant on policies and funding. Instead,

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[40] Ministry of Social and Family Development. (2016, July 19). *Opening Address by Mr Tan Chuan-Jin at the Social Service Summit.* Retrieved from Ministry of Social and Family Development's website.

a sustainable social service ecosystem should be backed by strong support networks on the ground.

The social service ecosystem is built on a sense of care and inclusion that sustains the community. At present, there are several networks that reach out extensively to the community. These networks include the SSOs, SSAs, CNS, and childcare centres. These networks are touchpoints for those in need to access services.

The key factor in maintaining a sustainable ecosystem is who pays for the service. In the case of healthcare, there is a tested system of sharing the payment responsibility amongst the individual or family, the state, and the community through a national insurance scheme. It is crucial to have the right balance in the distribution of collective responsibility. Too much reliance on the individual and family to pay for healthcare costs may be deemed inequitable.

It is also worth understanding that when the state pays, it comes from taxes, be it personal tax, corporate tax or the Goods and Services Tax (GST). If there is a high dependence on insurance schemes, consumers may overuse the services. This will inevitably lead to an increase in the state's cost of maintaining the insurance scheme. Ongoing calibration on who bears what proportion of the cost is necessary.

The individual and family, in particular, have the greatest impact on the preventive part of the continuum. Strong social support and community bonds also help to combat deterioration. While the state continues to play an active, interventionist role, it must not be the sole provider as it is unable to singlehandedly shape Singapore's social service ecosystem.

The responsibility remains largely with the social service providers, community, and the philanthropic circle in society. Having partners from different backgrounds come together to support the social service ecosystem will contribute to its sustainability, by drawing on each other's expertise to resolve the increasingly multi-dimensional and complex problems.

6. Looking Ahead

The future offers opportunities and challenges. The trends and changes in family structure are not unusual in the current environment that is dynamic and constantly open to change. If the social service sector adheres to the principles that build its foundation, it will be able to continue building an inclusive and progressive society. A more caring social service ecosystem will lead to greater social acceptance of the vulnerable and influence the community to play a bigger role in supporting them. Embracing the concept of active and productive ageing will also change mindsets towards seniors and enable them to participate and contribute back to society. Nurturing a culture of collective responsibility further motivates us to take initiative to offer help as individuals, as voluntary bodies, and as businesses.

These networks of support and empathy will encourage individuals to take more responsibility for themselves and make the right choices in life. It is about how people relate to one another and the respect they extend to each other as fellow citizens in their contributions to the community.

The social service sector will be part of Singapore's fair and inclusive society, with a foundation built by government social policies and redistributive schemes, urban planning strategies, and economic capabilities. It is after all a sector that upholds the dignity of individuals who desire to take ownership of their lives and their family, and to continually do better and lead better lives.

NOTES

About the Author

Ms Ang Bee Lian is currently the Director-General of Social Welfare at the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). Trained as a social worker, she started as a child protection staff and practised in several settings. She holds a Masters in Social Policy & Planning from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Ms Ang holds statutory responsibilities and provides views and advice on the standards and practice of social work and capability in the sector. She has worked extensively with statutory and voluntary sectors across children, eldercare, disability and juvenile rehabilitation settings. Ms Ang has also worked in a variety of policy, practice and management roles in MSF and the National Council of Social Service. Among the distinguished leaders in the social sector, she developed and oversaw policies and programmes that were key to the growth of Singapore's social sector.

Ms Ang was awarded the Outstanding Social Worker Award in Singapore in 2000, the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2002 and the Public Administration Medal (Gold) in 2018. In 2003, she was conferred the Leader Mentor's Award by the Global Leadership and Mentoring Congress in Singapore. At present, she is actively involved in a range of inter-disciplinary committees and Boards in the social and public service sectors.

An avid writer, Ms Ang has written and published two books on social work practice and the social service sector titled "Letters to Social Work Students" (Volume 1) and "Social Insights" (Volume 2).

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