

## *Dear Students of Social Work,*

Oftentimes as students or even social workers, you may become frustrated that social work becomes interpreted into a profession that is misunderstood and denied professional credibility. It is a profession where the good work is often seen and felt behind the curtain.



### **Our humble beginnings...**

So you may ask: where did this profession begin in Singapore? When can we say that social work as a discipline began here? One starting point is the setting up of the Department of Social Work at the University in Singapore in 1952. You can read about this in the book by the department. The beginning areas of social work intervention were poverty, public assistance, poor nutrition, child welfare and girls in moral danger. The leaders in the early years of the social work movement were involved in implementing social assistance schemes, participating in the juvenile court and justice system, the running of juvenile detention centres and crèches and medical social work. The work was largely in the remedial services. The work of Children's Services in the early years focused more on child welfare rather than child protection. Protection took the form of ensuring that children who were transferred to non biological guardians were supervised and that children thrived under the care of their guardians. The next phase of development was in the pioneering efforts of the Probation Services and the distinctive Volunteer Probation Officers scheme that is now widely known for its capability and capacity to win the support of volunteers to be trained to deliver statutory service.



### **Our journey to recognition...**

If we are to determine a point in time when social work began its journey of recognition as a profession, it would be in the late 1990s.

The first speech dedicated to the development of the social work profession could be one that was delivered by Mr Moses Lee, when he was PS of Ministry of Community Development in Aug 1998 when he launched a Ministry's email grouping called the Social Work Link which was to galvanise social workers and staff holding social work posts to promote interest in the profession.

In his speech, he focused on a few areas that raised the specialist work to a standing equivalent of what the public would see as a profession. These include understanding of what social work can do, recognition of social work and social workers and the building up of knowledge to deliver better services to citizens.

In his opening remarks, he said "Today's gathering is small, but significant, as you are meeting together for the first time as a corporate group of professionals with a distinct identity in the Ministry. Your work is demanding and affects the lives of individuals and families directly. This heavy responsibility should challenge you to attain a high standard of professionalism in the field - to tread where it is most difficult and challenging."

He then went on to take the opportunity to highlight a few measures to increase the standing of social workers in Singapore. These included:

### **Post grad diploma course in social work**

From a part time post graduate diploma programme of about 20 students, more than 100 have attained the post graduate diploma and a few have gone further into the Masters Program. Today, we have many social workers with Masters degree and from a wide range of reputable Universities. We have today, a group of local PhDs who contribute to the building of social work knowledge and thought leadership.

### **President's tea at the Istana**

At the same event, PS also announced that the President of Singapore will be hosting a tea session for social work professionals at the Istana grounds for the first time on 18 Sep 1998.

### **Outstanding Social Worker Award**

In the same year, the most prestigious award for Social Workers in Singapore was also inaugurated. Today, we have more than 50 who have received the Outstanding Social Worker Award. The Award is now expanded to include the Promising Social Worker Award.

In the recent decade, the number of scholarships for Social Work has also increased and the credentials of the candidates have included outstanding achievements in both academic and community service.



### **Professionalism...**

A high level of professionalism is a mark of a mature profession. It is marked by the ability to take charge and to be in control and accountable for what is a professional judgement and opinion. It involves a systems approach at viewing issues and goes beyond the individual cases. It is a professional wisdom that is drawn from among other things, the collective experience of intervening in many individual cases. Social work in Singapore is relatively young in comparison to many of the other professions such as engineers, lawyers or accountants. Even among the human services, social work is a more recent discipline compared with the doctors, dentists and nurses.

### **Publishing writing**

Key to the standing of a profession is also its ability to produce and publish knowledge about its professional expertise. The sharing of that knowledge through journals and other publications are hallmarks of a profession and adds to the public face of a profession. Writing and publishing writing are a reflection of the profession's capacity to produce knowledge and apply it to improve services to citizens.

Today, social workers in Singapore share their unique experiences and learning. Some have published their application of theories and practice. New perspectives to old problems and issues have helped us to deliver services better.

The academic leaders and professors with their current research interests will hopefully be recognized for their research regarding social challenges, trauma-informed interventions, and evidence-based solutions.

Today we also see many social workers sitting on influential boards and committees not because of the need for power but because of their advocacy for clients, and to participate in the design of programs and service delivery. Social workers today are co-creators of policies and programs. Our skills and knowledge are now visible in society.



### **Moving forward...**

Social workers must continue to stay abreast of developments in interventions, behavioural economics, and global dynamics that affect social issues in international borders and intergenerational pressures. Social work is an integral part of solutions that work because social workers have stood side by side with those who are distressed, homeless, unemployed and, more often than not, resilient. Social workers are present with people as listeners and beacons of hope. And because social workers often carry the sadness of people, caring and supporting each other is so important. Social workers in most instances need to safeguard themselves from becoming cynical, un-trusting, or unimpressible.

Now is the time for social workers to be the social architects that we are.

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