

THE STRAITS TIMES

Govt's support for family extends to unwed parents and their children: Sun Xueling



Helping single parents is a focus area of the Alliance for Action to Strengthen Marriages and Family Relationships. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: UNSPLASH



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SINGAPORE - Single parents are getting more support in the areas of employment, caregiving and children's development with the help of a network initiated by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

The Alliance for Action to Strengthen Marriages and Family Relationships (Afam) is working with its community partners on such ground-up initiatives to support single parents.

For example, the MSF is partnering with Daughters Of Tomorrow, a charity that helps underprivileged women, to pilot a childminding service for low-income parents, including single parents, who need alternative caregiving options.

This service will operate beyond regular childcare and student care centres' operating hours, as some of these parents have irregular work schedules.

This will help them juggle both work and caring for their children, said the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development released on Monday (March 28).

Helping single parents is one of six focus areas of Afam - an MSF partnership with community, religious and other groups and Singaporeans formed in August last year.

The focal area for single parents brings together professionals from various backgrounds, from social work to law, who are familiar with the needs of divorced, widowed and unwed parents.

It is championed by Dr Vincent Ng, chief executive of AMKFSC Community Services, a social service agency, and media personality Susan Ng.

Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling told The Straits Times: "For single unwed parents, we know that many are in their situation not by choice. We empathise with the challenges and pressures they face."

Ms Sun said the focal area has held focus group discussions with single parents, including unwed mothers, who raised the need for childcare support outside of childcare centre's operating hours.

Some single parents also said they faced difficulties caring for their children while looking for a job or holding a full-time job, the MSF spokesman said.

Ms Sun said the Government supports families with the twin goals of "upholding strong, stable families as the bedrock of society" and "achieving good family outcomes" for those who need more help, including unwed parents and their children.

She cited a MSF 2019 survey of Singaporeans social attitudes that showed that 60 per cent of those polled feel that parenthood out of wedlock is unacceptable.

"Most Singaporeans agree that marriage and parenthood within marriage provide the most stable and permanent environment to raise children. Our family policy upholds these social mores," she said.

Pro-family incentives, such as public housing, Baby Bonus cash gift and child-related tax reliefs send a "strong signal that our society continues to value family formation through marriage", she said.

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Ms Sun added: "But at the same time, we will continue to strengthen social support for all families in need, including unwed parents and their children, to help them overcome their challenges and enhance family outcomes."

The Government works with its community partners to better cater to the needs of unwed mothers and their children through its support programmes, she said.

A member of the focal area for single parents, Mrs Kim Lang Khalil, chief executive of HCSA Community Services, said it is also hoping to ease the stigma of being a single parent by sharing stories of single parents on various platforms.

"Sometimes, people can be judgmental. We want to create awareness that people are not single parents by choice," Mrs Khalil said. "We also want to tell unwed parents that they are not neglected and we want to support you in this journey."

HCSA runs a programme for single parents that provides practical and befriending support, she said.

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Mrs Jennifer Heng, director of Safe Place, which helps pregnant women in distress, welcomed the focal area's efforts to help single parents.

She said: "At the end of the day, it is also about helping the children to have equal opportunities in life, despite coming from a single parent family."

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