

Thursday Mar 17, 2022

ComLink tackles family poverty with radical approach

MSF initiative reaches out proactively to those in need in a coordinated way, pulling together agencies to work with the family as a whole

On the ground



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After her divorce about 10 years ago, life hit rock bottom for a mother of three who wants to be known only as Madam Ho.

She had no home of her own, was in debt and became bankrupt as she was the guarantor for her former husband's loan, which they could not pay.

Then working as a part-time beautician earning about \$1,000 a month, Madam Ho, 42, got by with the help of the Government's ComCare financial assistance and aid from other government and community agencies.

Her family later lived in a heavily subsidised Housing Board rental flat, where she paid only \$50 a month in rent.

Life got better after she remarried two years ago. Madam Ho, a housewife, said of her current husband, who works in the army: "Now my husband is supporting us and I can rely on him."

The couple, who are both divorcees, have three children each from their first marriages and a baby from their current union. Their children are aged between one and 22.

The family of nine survives on her husband's income of more than \$4,000. While their finances are very tight, the couple managed to buy a flat last year.

It also helps that her children received free tuition and enrichment classes under the Community Link (ComLink) programme to help them with their studies, as she cannot afford to pay for tuition. One of her sons also has mild attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder.

Her main worry now is her daughter, who has exhibited self-harm behaviours, such as cutting herself. The teenager was counselled by a social service agency and Madam Ho was also taught how to better communicate with her, although she said her daughter's behaviour is still worrying.

Madam Ho's family is one household that has benefited from ComLink.

In 2019, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) started ComLink to help low-income families with children living in HDB rental flats through comprehensive and coordinated support. This is needed as the problems these families face are often "complex, deep-seated and interlocking" and they cannot be solved by one government or community agency on its own, said Mr Desmond Lee, Minister-in-charge of Social Services Integration at MSF.

These families may face multiple problems such as financial struggles, family conflict, health problems and children struggling to cope in school.

DEEP SHIFT IN HOW HELP IS PROVIDED

During the debate on MSF's budget last Thursday, Mr Lee pointed out that there has been a "deep shift" in how MSF delivers social services in the past few years.

The focus is now on "putting the family at the centre" and meeting families' needs in a proactive and coordinated manner across different government and community agencies, instead of organising social services around programmes or agencies.

He cited ComLink as the flagship initiative of MSF's 3C approach – support that is convenient to access, coordinated across different agencies and comprehensive in addressing problems and its root causes.

I would describe ComLink as a radical initiative and here are the reasons why.

First, the scheme proactively reaches out to the neediest families here, instead of waiting for them to seek help under the traditional approach.

MSF and its partners have so far successfully engaged more than 3,800 families to understand their needs, challenges and aspirations, and these discussions have helped to tailor programmes and services for them.

So far, there are 74 ComLink programmes and services, and they range from enrichment programmes for the children, to health services for adults and seniors, to support and life-skills programmes for parents.

But what is remarkable about the ComLink approach is that various agencies, such as the Family Service Centre, schools, Social Service Office (SSO) and various government agencies, come together to work with the family as a whole, instead of assisting individual family members or dealing with a particular problem, said Mr Martin Chok.

The assistant director at Care Corner Singapore, a social service agency, said: "Financial concerns are usually why families seek help, but there are often more problems at home. When we come together under ComLink, we find out more about the family and we work together to prioritise what needs to be done for the family in a coordinated manner.

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that support is no longer given in a piecemeal manner. We also address root issues (behind the family's problems) under ComLink to help them break out of poverty and inter-generational poverty."

NOT 'EPISODIC TRANSACTIONS' BUT LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

More than 14,000 families are expected to be on this nationwide programme over the next few years.

The scale and reach of the ComLink programme are significant and what is also notable is that ComLink offers longer-term support as its ultimate aim is to help families achieve social mobility, Mr Lee said.

For example, ComLink families who are not assisted by professional social workers will be matched with befrienders, who will provide support. The befrienders, who are volunteers, will also work with SSO staff, who will coordinate efforts from various government and community groups to help the family.

As Mr Lee puts it: "ComLink goes beyond episodic transactions with families, towards building long-term relationships with them, partnering them, empowering them to grow. This is a much more impactful but intensive approach, involving many agencies and partners."

Helping families break out of poverty is an endeavour that takes significant amount of time, resources and also patience as change is never easy, especially for dysfunctional families beset by multiple deep-seated problems.

But ComLink gives families like Madam Ho's a real shot at addressing the root causes of their problems and working towards a brighter future.