

Fewer volunteer in off-peak periods

VWOs struggle to keep level of volunteerism high throughout year

By AUDREY TAN

VOLUNTEERISM may be on the rise in Singapore, but during certain periods of the year, voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) often find themselves short of helping hands.

As VWOs prepare to cope with a spike in volunteer requests in the days leading up to Chinese New Year, they are also hoping to find a solution to deal with a slump in volunteer numbers during the off-peak periods.

Every year, VWOs report a surge in volunteerism during festive seasons and school holidays.

Chinese New Year, Christmas and the June as well as year-end school holidays in November and December are the peak periods for corporate organisations and student volunteers, respectively.

The Singapore Children's Society (SCS) typically reports volunteer numbers during these periods of up to two times more than off-peak periods, according to its executive director Alfred Tan.

Volunteers cover duties like manning the telephone helpline and chaperoning outings.

Alzheimer's Disease Association volunteer coordinator Gregory Li said: "The spirit of giving is high during festive seasons. (There) could also be the moral obligation to do something good."

But beyond the two festive seasons and the school holidays, there is a dearth of volunteers who can help the VWOs in any given year.

The Alzheimer's association, for instance, said the number of volunteers it gets can fall by about 25 per cent to 40 per cent during the non-peak periods, compared with the peak periods.

The problem persists at VWOs despite the fact that volunteerism in Singapore has been growing steadily. The growth is a trend noted by Mr Hosea Lai, head of the volunteerism division at the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC).

Ms Gillian Tan, head of community development at social enter-

prise Start Now and campaign manager of last year's President's Challenge Volunteer Drive, said there was a 23 per cent jump in the annual volunteerism drive last year.

To ensure that the level of volunteerism remains healthy throughout the year, SCS' Mr Tan said a sustainable solution must come from both volunteers and VWOs.

"A spirit of volunteerism must be sustained in well-meaning individuals so they volunteer for longer periods of time," he said.

Similarly, VWOs must also create opportunities for volunteers to do so regularly, he added.

At RSVP Singapore - The Organisation of Senior Volunteers, volunteers can take part in programmes that "run continuously throughout the year".

These include its mentally disadvantaged outreach programme, which involves volunteers befriending patients with mental illnesses to help ease them back into society.

Some companies such as OCBC Bank have also extended their corporate social responsibility activities to span the calendar year.

Ms Koh Ching Ching, head of group corporate communications at OCBC Bank, said the bank has



The YMCA's Y Guitar Club performing Christmas carols at Thye Hua Kwan Seniors Activity Centre in Telok Blangah Crescent last December. The Christmas festive season is one of the peak periods for volunteerism here. PHOTO: YMCA OF SINGAPORE

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IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

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received feedback from social workers that “beneficiaries tend

to feel neglected and despondent” after the festive season.

Because of this, OCBC has a planned programme of giving back all year round “because the needy require regular support and encouragement”, she said.

NVPC's Mr Lai agreed that it is important for VWOs to engage volunteers in meaningful experiences. He said: “Doing so increases the likelihood for volunteers to continue giving.”

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