

# Central system of social service leaders to kick off

**NCSS will recruit, pay and develop them; they will be rotated across various VWOs**

**Janice Tai**

A centralised hiring system that aims to help attract, develop and deploy social service leaders will start recruitment at the end of the year.

It will be run by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), which will take charge of the salaries, training and career development of these social service professionals, who will be rotated across various Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs).

The aim is to groom future leaders in a labour-tight sector plagued with staff quitting because of low pay and the lack of a structured career pathway. It is also hoped that by being sent to different organisations, they gain exposure to various areas of social work, instead of spending years in a single agency.

"Increasingly, the issues we will face will be complex and so the ability to see things from multiple perspectives and build networks across agencies are useful," said NCSS chief Sim Gim Guan.

Some 200 to 300 individuals with leadership potential will be hired over 10 to 15 years. They can be fresh graduates, mid-career workers or existing leaders within the sector. Eventually, they will be groomed to occupy senior-level positions such as executive directors or centre directors.

This is the first time such a

scheme for social service leaders is being designed. Currently, there are 8,000 people working in the sector, of whom 1,400 are registered social workers and social service practitioners.

Mr Sim said this model is similar to how teachers under the Ministry of Education are sometimes seconded to special schools run by VWOs.

Under this system, social service leaders would be on the same pay and benefits structure, regardless of which organisation they go to.

This will help smaller VWOs which find it hard to pay competitive wages, offer less room for career growth, or spare staff for upgrading courses. Bigger VWOs may also find it easier to replace leaders who wish to retire.

A recent study of 700 social service professionals by the council and the Institute of Policy Studies found that four in 10 workers suffer from burnout. Those polled said they were less satisfied with their jobs because of the lack of career mentoring and advancement and the discrepancy between the pay they are drawing and the salary they think they should be getting.

The scheme will address these concerns by putting them on the same pay scale, depending on their experience and expertise, and move them between organisations when necessary so that they occupy strategic positions.

Some in the social service sector have raised one concern. If key positions are occupied by social workers who are employees of NCSS – a statutory board under the Ministry of Social and Family Development, will this lead to the Government having too much influence over how charities work?

In response, Mr Sim stressed that these leaders will not be "serving" the council but the welfare groups. "It is not about the Government exerting control over VWOs. The executive directors will report to their individual boards, and it is the board's prerogative to drive the organisation," he said.

Mr Alfred Tan, executive director of Singapore Children's Society, says the new initiative is good, especially for smaller VWOs.

"They will benefit more because they tend not to have enough positions for staff to advance. But the frequency of rotation should not be so frequent. By the time the VWO grooms a leader, who has adapted to its culture, the person has to move on to another organisation."

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ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

National Council of Social Service chief Sim Gim Guan (left) chatting with a resident while distributing hampers to low-income families last week. The statutory board will have a central system to recruit and train social service leaders.

## HR EXPERTS TO HELP RAISE SALARIES IN WELFARE SECTOR

The National Council of Social Service (NCSS) has been bringing in human resource experts to help welfare groups tackle a key issue in the sector – pay.

Salaries of social service professionals lag behind those of their peers in other sectors, statistics show.

The team of HR experts will consult voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) on how to raise the pay to benchmarks suggested by the Ministry of

Social and Family Development (MSF) in 2012.

Under its guidelines, a social worker fresh out of university should be paid \$2,760.

Figures from the Graduate Employment Survey by several universities here showed that the median pay for all new graduates last year was \$3,050.

So far, the council has worked with 31 VWOs, with 13 of them intending to increase the salaries of their

staff from July. Most of the others will adjust their staff's salaries later, when the new salary cycles of their organisations kick in.

NCSS chief Sim Gim Guan said: "We believe the salaries will rise and their pay should be competitive, as those in other sectors such as health and education."

Increasing pay is key in attracting more to the sector – especially given the needs of an ageing population and the manpower crunch facing the industry.

For the next three years, the MSF estimates that there will be an annual shortfall of about 130 social workers.

Currently, there are 8,000 people working in the sector, of whom 1,400 are registered social workers and social service practitioners.

In 2012, the MSF pumped in an extra \$10 million, with a large portion used to help VWOs provide competitive pay to attract and retain staff.

**Janice Tai**