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PRESS RELEASE

Seniors with dementia volunteer weekly at temple and schools in new daycare model

SENIORS attending a dementia daycare centre in Ang Mo Kio will no longer be cooped up within all day as is usually the case elsewhere, as part of a pilot launched by social service agency AWWA and philanthropic organisation Lien Foundation this month.

Instead, as a formal part of the seniors' Individualised Care Plans, AWWA's social service professionals assign them to volunteer weekly on a long-term basis at host organisations such as a preschool, primary school, and temple, factoring in the senior's life histories, interests and residual abilities.

30 host organisations by 2024

In these host organisations, the seniors - affectionately dubbed the Silver Brigade - take on carefully-selected tasks with both practical value to the host organisation, and therapeutic value to the seniors' mental, emotional and physical health, similar to benefits they would have received inside the daycare centre. They are accompanied by AWWA staff and volunteers throughout.

At Elias Park Primary School in Pasir Ris, the seniors upkeep a vegetable farm with Primary 4 to 6 students as part of the school's eco-stewardship programme. Unlike an excursion or a performance, this is a weekly school experience for the school's Eco-stewards to nurture citizen leadership with empathy and resilience.

At the Sri Darma Muneeswaran Temple in Serangoon North, the seniors prepare wicks for clay oil lamps used by devotees and arrange plates of offerings comprising alternating rows of bananas and betel leaves, alongside temple staff and volunteers.

At Jamiyah Childcare Centre at Ang Mo Kio Ave 6, the seniors conduct story-telling sessions for preschoolers as part of the school's programme on early literacy, alongside preschool teachers.

AWWA is targeting to increase the number of host organisations from the above 3 to 30 by March 2024.

The Silver Brigade is an example of social prescription, a healthcare model whereby instead of medicine, seniors are prescribed “treatments” in the form of participation in natural, routine community activities alongside non-medical professionals, but with the same goal of improving their social, mental and physical well-being.

Social prescription is one of the five features of Healthier SG, the government’s new healthcare transformation strategy announced in early 2022 which focuses heavily on preventive care to reduce the toll on the healthcare system due to the ageing population.

During a recent speech by the Minister of Health at the Healthier SG White Paper Debate 2022, the topic on ageing-in-communities was brought up and the value of shared spaces for seniors to congregate and socialise acknowledged.

A social prescription service operated by a Social Service Agency

The Silver Brigade is designed as a social prescription service professionally operated out of a dementia day care centre. It enables persons with dementia to use their residual skills, abilities and cognitive reserve to participate meaningfully in community activities, so as to promote a continuation of self and normality, and to age with confidence, dignity and purpose.

Such a service aims to raise the quality and attractiveness of dementia daycare centres. Despite being the lynchpin of Singapore’s plan to cope with its rapidly-ageing population, daycare centres’ appeal may not endure. The care such centres provide tend to be custodial, relying heavily on recreational and rehabilitative activities that can be administered safely and efficiently, such as fitting jigsaw puzzles or filling in colouring books. The new old may have different expectations.

Mr Sairam Azad, Director of Health and Senior Care at AWWA, said: “Many seniors don’t find traditional daycare centres attractive so the advantages of that model, such as cost, efficiency and safety, may not mean much ultimately. In order to boost the self-esteem of the seniors, the activities conducted should be meaningful, functional and aligned to their personal preferences and provide opportunities to use their residual skills.”

As part of the on-boarding, AWWA staff train staff at host organisations on the basics of working with people with dementia. At Elias Park Primary School, for example, training sessions were conducted for the school leadership, teachers and students. This is to help host organisations develop the confidence to interact with and facilitate persons with dementia during the sessions.

AWWA is focusing on finding organisations as well as community groups to host the seniors, as the former may strengthen the sustainability of the volunteering programmes through the

provision of more structure and support. AWWA is also focusing on sectors that comprise a large number of potential host organisations that operate the same way and face the same needs so the volunteer programme, once piloted successfully with one host organisation, can be easily replicated.

“The key lies in the match-making: Finding activities that are non-mission-critical which can be completed by the residual abilities and time of our seniors,” said Mr Azad. “As the name of Silver Brigade suggests, we want seniors to play a bigger supportive function in Singapore’s community life.”

Added Ms Chua Shi Jia, Senior Occupational Therapist at AWWA: “Therapeutic activities don’t have to be done only within the dementia daycare centre . In fact, they shouldn’t. You will be surprised how many seemingly ordinary activities have a therapeutic benefit for seniors.”

At the Hindu temple, Ms Chua explained, the simple activity of arranging temple offerings on a plate requires the seniors to memorise the sequence of steps, practise fine motor skills and manage hand-eye coordination due to the need to position the betel leaves and bananas at the correct angles. Many engage in reminiscence therapy naturally, through their recollections and sharing of childhood memories on chewing betel leaves.

“Most importantly, it gives the seniors purpose. They know they are doing something greater than themselves,” said Ms Chua. “When they are motivated, it’s easier to keep them healthy.”

Mr D. Vellappan, President of Sri Darma Muneeswaran Temple, said: “Clearly, we want to do this to help the seniors. But it’s important to recognise that what the seniors do here is also real and valuable to us because in a temple, there’s always a lot to do. We serve the seniors and they serve us.”

Mr Koh, a retired 81-year-old part-time coffee shop worker and former accounts clerk who attends the dementia daycare centre, said: “I enjoy working at the Hindu temple. I am not Hindu, but it doesn’t matter, because this is how we grew up in Singapore last time.”

At Elias Park Primary School, Primary 6 Eco-Steward student Syarafana Faqihah Khairullah said: "Working with the seniors made me more patient and because of this programme, I am able to bond with my grandfather, who also has dementia, better. This experience made me a better person by developing my character while having fun at the same time."

Ms Nur Milawati , principal of Jamiyah Childcare Centre, said: “There is something special about listening to a story-telling session told by a senior. They have a presence that draws the children in. They may not be a professional educator, but in our children’s world, it does not matter.”

The project aims to elevate the definition of what counts as Dementia-Friendly Communities, which the government has been setting up in different neighbourhoods, by designing ways for persons with dementia to not only be accepted, but also contribute to the community in practical ways.

Ng Tze Yong, Programme Director at Lien Foundation, said: “Building a Dementia-Friendly Community requires art and engineering. Besides shifting public mindsets, we need programmes like the Silver Brigade that are sustained not only by goodwill, but also by KPIs they help to meet.”

Part of a larger transformation project named Care Beyond Walls

The Silver Brigade is one of several components of a \$3.56m transformation project taking place among some of AWWA’s centres and services in the vicinity of Ang Mo Kio St 12. Named Care Beyond Walls, the project is developed by AWWA and the Lien Foundation in partnership with two design agencies The Care Lab and IELO DESIGN, and a social impact consultancy firm Tri-Sector Associates.

Phase 1 is now completed and, besides the Silver Brigade, comprises the extension of the operating hours of the AWWA Dementia Day Care Centre at Blk 123 Ang Mo Kio Ave 6 from 7am until 7pm, to 7am until 10pm. The extension commenced in July this year.

A weekend respite service for caregivers of seniors with dementia has also been launched. A third service - night respite for caregivers of seniors with caregivers - is currently pending approval from the regulatory authorities.

The extension of operating hours has helped caregivers in ways such as providing more time to complete their chores, fulfill work commitments and self care. In a needs analysis conducted by AWWA Dementia Day Care Centres, about 60% of 48 caregivers expressed their interest for regular or ad-hoc subscription to this service.

The weekend respite service has seen increasing utilisation since its commencement in May 2021. It has enabled caregivers of persons with dementia to pursue their interests or rest over the weekend, while offering additional engagement to the seniors. Currently the service is supporting about 26 seniors and their respective caregivers.

Taken together, these aim to offer flexibility of care for caregivers with the goal of delaying institutionalisation for persons with dementia. Currently, extended hours and weekend respite services are rare in Singapore. Night care is only available in a handful of nursing homes.

Phase 2 of Care Beyond Walls, to be completed next year, will involve the redesign and renovation of the dementia daycare centre at Blk 123 Ang Mo Kio Ave 6 and the set-up of a next-generation centre nearby at Blk 130 Ang Mo Kio Ave 3 that will increase porosity with the community.

More details will be released next year.

About AWWA

AWWA is a Singapore-based registered charity, founded in 1970 by a group of volunteers supporting low-income families. It has since evolved into one of the largest multi-service social service agencies in Singapore, delivering a wide range of programmes and services. These include early intervention for pre-schoolers, education and integration support for children and adults with additional needs, social assistance for vulnerable families, and care services for seniors.

AWWA is constantly striving to fulfil its mission of empowering the disadvantaged, and identifying and filling key social service gaps in the community. AWWA's services are focused on empowering clients to participate in society as fully as possible, whether through achieving independence, integration in mainstream settings, or aspiring to full inclusion. In recent years, AWWA has been advocating for greater inclusion in the education sphere. In 2016, it started Kindle Garden, Singapore's first truly inclusive preschool, with the support of Lien Foundation.

To learn more about AWWA, visit www.awwa.org.sg.

(AWWA is a registered charity with an Institution of a Public Character (IPC) status.)

About Lien Foundation

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action at the intersection of health and social care.

For more information, visit www.lienfoundation.org.

Annex A - Information on Organisations

AWWA Dementia Day Care Centre

Dementia Day Care Centre (DDCC) operates out of two locations, Ang Mo Kio (started operations in 2015), and Yishun (started operations in 2018).

DDCC provides maintenance day care services to clients who have mild to severe dementia. It aims to slow down the deterioration of clients' physical and mental functions, thus delaying the need for institutionalisation. DDCC adopts a person-centred care approach and also seeks to provide respite for caregivers of persons diagnosed with dementia.

To learn more about AWWA Dementia Day Care Centre, visit www.awwa.org.sg/our-services/seniors/dementia-day-care-centre/

Elias Park Primary School

Elias Park Primary School is located at 11 Pasir Ris Street 52 and is the third primary school constructed in the suburban town of Pasir Ris. The school was part of the Public Works Department 4th Primary School Building Programme, built to meet the demand for primary education by children living in Pasir Ris areas.

The school was officially declared open by Mr Charles Chong, Honourable Member of Parliament for Pasir Ris GRC, on 12 July 1997. The school commenced to function on 3 January 1995 with a student population of 770 in 24 classes.

To learn more about Elias Park Primary School, visit <https://eliasparkpri.moe.edu.sg/>

Jamiyah Childcare Centre

Jamiyah Childcare Centre (JCCC) was established in October 1994. Officiated by then Minister of State for the Environment and Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs, the Honourable Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, the centre now operates three bays that cater to the different age groups (from 2 months to 6 years old).

With an understanding that each child develops at their own pace, our conducive learning environment not only nurtures them individually, but encourages and builds upon their unique interest and capabilities.

To learn about Jamiyah Childcare Centre, visit <https://jccc.jamiyah.org.sg/>

Sri Darma Muneeswaran Temple

The Darma Muneeswaran Temple at Serangoon North Avenue 1 has been in existence at its current site for more than one hundred years. Upon its official consecration, one of the first things Darma Muneeswaran Temple did was to firmly establish itself as not just a place of worship, but also as an active member of the community. The temple was steadfast in its

desire to give back to the community which had generously donated for the building of the new temple.

The temple till the current day continues to assist the community. The temple serves from the youth to the aged. Every year, the temple encourages students to apply for the bursaries. These serve and motivate future generations in our community. Through the 'Munneru!' program, the temple has established itself as a support function to further develop and motivate the student through enrichment classes. The temple also actively supports social and community events to give back to the society.

To learn more about Sri Darma Muneeswaran Temple, visit www.dmt.org.sg