



Social service veterans Abhimanyau Pal, 53, and June Tham, 67, said staff are now better trained, and have more professional and career development opportunities, which lead to better-run services. The recommended salary for a social worker fresh out of university is now \$3,400 a month, up 4 per cent from last year. ST PHOTO: LEE JIA WEN

Salaries up in social service sector with greater demand

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The growing need for social workers, therapists and teachers for children with disabilities has seen recommended salaries in the social service sector increase by about 28 per cent over the past five years.

While the salary guidelines have improved significantly, monetary rewards should not be the main reason why people join or do not join the social service sector, said Dr Fermin Diez, deputy chief executive officer of the National Council of Social Service (NCSS).

Still, salaries have to be competitive, and be commensurate with those for similar jobs in healthcare and education, which are vying for the same talent pool.

"Money should not be the reason why people join the sector, but it should also not be the reason why people do not join it," Dr Diez told The Straits Times.

He shared this when asked about the thinking behind the latest increase in salary guidelines for staff working in programmes funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), which took effect on April 1.

The NCSS and MSF review pay guidelines every three years to ensure that they are competitive, but these are also adjusted in between reviews to reflect wage movements

in the general labour market.

Dr Diez said that for the latest pay guidelines, the increase is about 6 per cent on average from its last financial year.

For instance, the recommended salary for a social worker fresh out of university is now \$3,400 a month, up 4 per cent from \$3,270 last year. For senior social workers, the minimum pay is now \$5,860, up 2 per cent from \$5,730.

For therapists, the recommended starting pay is up by 6 per cent from \$3,350 to \$3,550, while for senior therapists, it is up 8 per cent from \$4,690 to \$5,080.

Dr Diez said that while the 28 per cent increase over five years seems significant, it is comparable to wage movements in the broader labour market which averaged 4 per cent annually in the same period.

The NCSS wage guidelines are not mandatory, but charities inter-

viewed say they follow them in order to attract and retain staff.

About 75 per cent of staff in the sector are paid within the guidelines now, up from almost 70 per cent in 2013, according to Dr Diez.

The social service sector has been growing at about 10 per cent a year on average in the past few years to meet the needs of an ageing population and to address social issues which are growing in complexity, he said.

There are not enough therapists and those helping children with disabilities after early intervention services for young children with disabilities were ramped up in the past few years, among other reasons.

But Dr Diez stressed that pay is but one reason why people quit the sector.

Other factors include burnout, given the emotionally taxing nature of the job, and the prospects for pro-

fessional development and career progression.

This is why the MSF and NCSS have put in place a host of measures to help charities attract and develop talent in their organisations. These include paid sabbatical schemes, professional development schemes and leadership development programmes. For example, those under the Sun Ray scheme to groom leaders are rotated among charities so they can gain exposure.

And while many still have the perception that those working in the social service sector are poorly paid, this is no longer the case. Said Dr Diez: "If you look at our salary guidelines, it's more or less the same as any professional job out there."

The starting pay for a social worker at \$3,400 is on a par with that for a teacher with a postgraduate diploma in education from the National Institute of Education, who earns between \$3,100 and \$3,500.

The median monthly pay for fresh graduates was \$3,400 across jobs last year, based on the joint graduate employment survey of three universities released in February.

Social service veterans June Tham and Abhimanyau Pal noted that staff are now better trained, and have more professional and career development opportunities, which lead to better-run services for those in need. Ms Tham is the former executive director of Rainbow Centre and Mr Pal is the SPD's executive director.

Rainbow Centre executive director Tan Sze Wee said those who join the sector do so out of passion and a desire to help those in need.

"People don't come in expecting to get rich, but the opportunity cost cannot be so great that it is a barrier for people to join or it forces them to quit," she said.

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Burnout a problem among those helping special needs kids: Poll

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Half of the professionals surveyed in a poll on working with special needs children viewed burning out quickly as a key challenge.

While the problem is common, experts in the early intervention sector told The Straits Times that it does not usually lead to professionals leaving. Peer and organisational support can help those affected cope with it, they said.

A survey commissioned by the Lien Foundation and released last Tuesday showed that 51 per cent of the 423 professionals surveyed felt that burning out quickly was one of the key problems they faced.

About 44 per cent said salaries and benefits were unattractive, while 34 per cent pointed to manpower shortage as a key challenge.

Teachers, social workers and veterans in the sector that cares for children under six with developmental or special needs said the work is taxing, both physically and emotionally.

For Miss Dione Ng, a 25-year-old teacher at Awwa Early Intervention Centre, the stress and demands of the job have caused her to feel burnt out occasionally.

"Not only do we have to handle children with different disabilities and needs, we also need to deal with their parents or caregivers and coach them on strategies that suit their children," she said.

"It can take some time for the children to change their behaviour or for us to see improvements, and that can become quite frustrating."

She has been in the sector for three years and works with children with physical conditions, such as cerebral palsy, and developmental delays in areas like speech and motor skills.

Ms Melissa Yeo, 28, head of teaching at Thy Hua Kwan (THK) Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (EIPIC) Centre, has been in the industry for nine years.

She said: "These children need a lot of individualised attention at their eye level, which causes physical strain on teachers. Sometimes teachers also have to manage tantrums."

"There is always more that we can do for (them) and it is hard to draw the line. Burnout happens when the work-life balance is strained."

Senior social worker Junaidah Baharawi, 42, said: "In the job of caring for others, we might sometimes forget to take care of ourselves. So it's good to be aware of when you're feeling tired."

"For the social workers under me, I encourage them to talk and share about their challenges," added Ms Junaidah, who works at SPD, a voluntary welfare organisation that helps people with disabilities.

Early intervention centres and organisations have measures to help their staff avoid or deal with burnout. For example, SPD offers flexible working arrangements and when feasible, also allows staff to take no-pay leave to rest and rejuvenate, said executive director Abhimanyau Pal.

Supervision and case discussions are also held regularly to provide professional and peer support.

Ms Audrey De Cruz, assistant director of THK EIPIC Centre, said it is important that staff members lend a listening ear. Her organisation has welfare-centred policies which, for example, allow employees to work from home on days when there are no classes.

She added that support from the Ministry of Social and Family Development is key. "We are reassured whenever they review current processes and every effort they make to look into how staff are remunerated appropriately in our sector is cherished."

Mrs June Tham, a veteran in the special needs field, said most people join the sector because of passion but for them to stay, there must be initiatives to train and support them. "We want the right people in the job. However, they also need the right support and sufficient manpower."

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Miss Dione Ng, who teaches special needs children, says the demands of the job have caused her to feel burnt out occasionally.