

INTERVENTION BY MS. PHYLLIS CHOO, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING, SG ENABLE, SINGAPORE AT THE GLOBAL FORUM ON THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, 3 AUGUST 2020

- Singapore is honoured to co-sponsor and participate in this important event together with Ecuador, Hungary and Liberia, with the support of UN DESA.
- The world is facing unprecedented times. We recognise that persons with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and everyday friction and barriers have taken on graver implications at this time. Yet this is also an opportunity for governments and communities to reaffirm their commitment to the more vulnerable segments of their populations, and in doing so, emerge from the pandemic as stronger, more inclusive societies.
- Allow me to share a little about Singapore’s experience with COVID-19.
 - Singapore is a city-state with close to 6 million people; an estimated 3% of the population have disabilities.
 - The first cases of local transmission of COVID-19 in Singapore emerged at the end of January 2020.
 - From 7 April to 1 June, the country went into ‘circuit breaker’ mode. Safe distancing measures were implemented, which meant most social services were either suspended or delivered online, with the exception of essential services like residential homes and hostels of persons with disabilities.
 - Since early June, the government has gradually re-opened economic activities. And with it, social services as well.

Disability services

- Since the start of COVID-19 in Singapore, the government has put in place a slew of national-level support, including for persons with disabilities. The focus is that no one, and no person with disability, is left behind in the course of the COVID-19 response and recovery.
- Within the community too, disability and healthcare organisations, businesses and the man-in-the-street came together and collaborated to support vulnerable populations.
 - We call this collaborative spirit the “Singapore Together” movement.
- Our key focus was to ensure that persons with disabilities continued to have access to key amenities and services. For the disability sector:
 - Service providers innovated as quickly as they could to support clients remotely, with government assistance such as grants to buy hardware and software.
 - Provisions were made for those who could not be cared for at home, or who needed services that could not be delivered – or delivered adequately - by remote methods. For example, some disability centres remained open, and face-to-face mental health interventions were provided to high-risk individuals.
 - For some, new solutions had to be created:

- For example, community agencies proactively identified more vulnerable persons with disabilities, such as those whose caregivers are elderly, so that they could be given targeted support like regular check-ins, meal delivery, home-based caregiver respite services and cash relief, which were made possible by government and community efforts.
 - In the works now are plans to systemically identify more vulnerable persons with disabilities, so that moving forward, they may be better supported.

Access to information

- The pandemic highlighted the need to provide more in-depth and accessible information to the disability community.
 - Singapore adopted a multi-platform, multi-lingual and multi-format approach to disseminate COVID-related information to cater to the communication needs of different segments of society, including those with disabilities.
 - This includes, as far as possible, the use of captions or live sign language interpretation on national announcements carried on free-to-air TV.
 - On the ground, public healthcare institutions, community groups and volunteers mobilized to create educational and informational content for persons with disabilities.
 - With a wealth of information available, albeit in fragmented form, SG Enable's Enabling Guide website provided an accessible, 1-stop platform for signposting users to relevant content, which helped to put important information into the hands of persons with disabilities.

Moving forward

- As the government looks at national recovery efforts, action is being taken to ensure that persons with disabilities are included in the country's socio-economic responses.
 - For example, the newly-formed National Jobs Council, which is tasked to develop job and training opportunities for Singaporeans, will have a workstream for persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

- In closing, by working collectively, governments with their resources and policies and community groups who are close to the ground, can ensure that COVID-19 responses are sensitive to persons with disabilities, and ultimately build back for an inclusive society.
- Thank you for your attention.