

Budget announcements on mental health a good step, but more needs to be done: Advocates



Setting up a permanent mental health office can help increase coordination among ministries, say advocates. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: THADDEUS ANG

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SINGAPORE - Veteran mental health advocates welcome the recent Budget announcements on the issue, in particular that the Government [will consider setting up a permanent mental health office](#).

But they told The Straits Times that more still needs to be done in several areas, including funding, support for youth and a national mental health competency framework.

During the debate on March 9, Senior Minister of State for Health, Dr Janil Puthuchery, said the Government will consider setting up a national mental well-being office.

Nominated MP Shahira Abdullah, who asked about this in Parliament, told ST she was excited to hear his response.

"Mental health issues permeate all ministries. I feel it is very important that for every decision and policy we come up with, we think of mental health as something that is important, not just an

aside. To get that going, you need to have an office so everything can be coordinated properly," she noted.

Adding that such offices have already been set up for issues such as climate change and digitalisation, she said she hopes to see concrete steps taken on setting up this office in the future.

Dr Shahira added: "A task force is transient - you have it for that period of time. But mental health is not something that is transient, it is not temporary. It is something you need to invest in now."

Mental health advocates said currently, the issues are handled by different ministries.

Ms Porsche Poh, executive director of Silver Ribbon (Singapore), shared her previous experience of being bounced from ministry to ministry while trying to work with the authorities on mental health initiatives.

"If you have an office, it'll help focus - people won't be confused which ministry mental health falls under," she said, adding that other countries have a minister for mental health, which Singapore could learn from.

Mr Asher Low, executive director of Limitless, said the mental health office can help increase coordination among ministries, as well as create a common pool of funds, which will allow social service agencies (SSAs) to apply for renewed funding more easily.

He hopes that if the office is set up, it will engage SSAs and find out what their needs are, as most are overwhelmed by high case numbers and lack funding.

For instance, he added, one therapist should ideally handle about 40 clients. But last year, Limitless' seven therapists had 937 youth reach out to them - more than thrice the number.

Ms Anthea Ong, founding member and spokesman for SG Mental Health Matters, said that compared with a task force, a permanent

office with dedicated resources will be better positioned to look at long-term solutions and focus on upstream preventive measures.

A permanent office sited under the Prime Minister's Office rather than a single ministry will also have the authority to better facilitate cross-ministry collaboration, said the former nominated MP.

On the other announcements, Mr Low, Ms Poh and Mr Cho Ming Xiu, founder and executive director of Campus PSY (Singapore), praise the move to expand mental health services to several public hospitals as it will increase accessibility for those who may not wish to travel to the Institute of Mental Health in Buangkok.

Having services in the community may also help destigmatise help-seeking behaviour, said Mr Cho.

The advocates said, on the whole, the mental health landscape has improved drastically over the past few years, and that the Government has taken many steps in the right direction, including in the latest Budget debate.

But there is still more to be done.

Ms Ong pointed out that the Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-being had last year taken on the responsibility of addressing three recommendations by its predecessor, but there had been scant updates.

The three are developing a national mental health and well-being strategy, building a one-stop online portal for resources and creating a competency training framework.

Noting that the task force had just announced four new focus areas before providing details on its strategy and training framework, she asked: "If you don't have a national strategy, how do you coordinate anything? What will the task force base what it is doing on? If you don't have that framework, how do you know how to provide quality mental healthcare?"

She added: "We raise awareness for everyone to go and seek help, but if the quality of care is not there, it could create a new problem."

Ms Poh said there needs to be more awareness that most mental health cases should be handled by professionals, rather than the police, whose officers should be involved only when someone's life is in danger.

Mr Low called for increased mental health literacy among parents, strengthening of resources in the community and ensuring psychologists and psychiatrists are not burnt out.

Mr Cho said the authorities could look into how to promote the resources that already exist.

"Now the awareness is there already. Moving forward, having such information readily available to citizens will be a good step, so that apart from knowing what depression and anxiety are, they know they can go to one place or another for help and services," he added.

"It will help to promote early help-seeking behaviour among Singaporeans, and clear doubts over affordability and accessibility issues."