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Section Name:	BUDGET
Title:	HEAD I - MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS
MPs Speaking:	Assoc. Prof. Kalyani K Mehta (Nominated Member); Dr Fatimah Lateef (Marine Parade); Dr Lam Pin Min (Ang Mo Kio); Dr Lily Neo (Jalan Besar); Dr Teo Ho Pin (Bukit Panjang); Mdm Cynthia Phua (Aljunied); Mdm Halimah Yacob (Jurong); Miss Penny Low (Pasir Ris-Punggol); Mr Baey Yam Keng (Tanjong Pagar); Mr Chan Soo Sen (Joo Chiat); Mr Matthias Yao Chih; Mr Michael Palmer (Pasir Ris-Punggol); Mr Sam Tan Chin Siong (Tanjong Pagar); Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade); Mr Sin Boon Ann; Mr Sin Boon Ann (Tampines); Mr Zainudin Nordin (Bishan-Toa Payoh); Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Hong Kah); Mrs Jessie Phua (Nominated Member); Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar); Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo (East Coast); Ms Sylvia Lim (Non-Constituency Member); The Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (Dr Vivian Balakrishnan); The Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs (Assoc. Prof. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim); The Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports (Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon); The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (Mr Teo Ser Luck); The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for National Development (Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman); The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Manpower (Mr Hawazi Daipi)

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ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR

1ST APRIL, 2007 TO 31ST MARCH, 2007

(Paper Cmd. 2 of 2007)

Order read for consideration in Committee of Supply [7th Allotted Day].

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[Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Matthias Yao Chih) in the Chair]

Head I - Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (cont.)

Resumption of Debate on Question [8th March, 2007],

"That the total sum to be allocated for Head I of the Estimates be reduced by \$100." - [Mr Sin Boon Ann].

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Question again proposed.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (Mr Teo Ser Luck): I think I am going to have more than 30 seconds, so I can speak slower.

Sir, MCYS' vision is to nurture inspired and committed youth who will make a positive difference to the country. I am glad Mr Sin Boon Ann asked how we can connect with the youth and ensure a deep-rooted sense of their identity as Singaporeans. We have done a lot of work, set up many programmes. We want to give the youth a say in issues that matter to them, a stake and ownership in the long-term well-being of the community, and support to achieve their hopes and dreams and whatever they want to undertake, especially for our at-risk youth.

My Ministry has spent the last year consolidating and expanding our youth programmes. These youth programmes can be broadly categorised into three different areas:

(1) Youth expression;

(2) Youth spaces; and

(3) Encouraging youth volunteerism.

This is in keeping with the spirit of our approach, and all of these programmes

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are youth-led and youth-driven. We do not believe in a top-down prescriptive approach. It is best to let the youth do the things that they are passionate about.

For youth expression, one of the key initiatives is our SHINE Youth Festival in July, which is a platform for all our young people to organise events showcasing their talents and their contributions to the community. I am glad to say that SHINE surpassed its previous year's performance to reach a total of 180,000 youth over 117 events. We are also present in the new and mainstream media. For the new media, we have created platforms for youth expressions that include Youth.SG, an Internet portal, which is run by youth for youth. The *Straits Times' YouthInk* pages, run every Monday, has featured more than 200 youth writers to date.

Not only that. Besides platforms for them to have their views expressed on paper or the Internet, they can also talk to our leaders directly. We have feedback and consultation platforms, such as the Community Outreach Group Dialogues, spearheaded by some of the younger Members of the House and also the Prime Minister's Dialogue which provides opportunities for youth to air their views on national issues and share their aspirations.

These programmes complement National Education, and I am glad that MOS Lui Tuck Yew mentioned that there would be increasing emphasis on National Education in schools. This will help our youth to develop what Mr Sin Boon Ann refers to as a strong sense of national identity, and re-affirm their commitment to Singapore. It is not easy but we must try. We must give them a sense of ownership and a chance to participate in school through National Education and outside of school through the programmes set up by MCYS, so that we give them the experience that they will remember

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and reach deep down in their hearts, they can get that sense of identity that they are Singaporeans and they are for Singapore. Globalisation may take them all over the world, whether for work or studies, but we know that, if they have that influential experience and they remember that experience deep down in their hearts, ultimately, they would come back home.



So MCYS wants to develop more spaces to cater to our young people. They provide a common space for them to congregate, share experiences and engage in constructive activities. I would like to highlight our *scape project which is well publicised. It is a national youth community space under development in Orchard Road today. This project is conceived by our youth and they set the specifications for this space. They also voted for their favourite design, and there were about 5,000 youth who cast their votes for 39 designs. The winning design was among the top three favourites chosen by them.

We are very heartened by Mr Zaqy Mohamad's praise of *scape as an interesting city youth venue and note his call for similar developments in the heartlands. I think it is worth consideration, and I believe many of us would remember the days that we played at the void decks. I honed my soccer and table tennis skills at the void deck. Those were our spaces in the past. So we will be prepared to consider developing more facilities like *scape elsewhere but, first, we need to develop this *scape at Orchard Road and pick up the relevant lessons from that experience before we do an effective job at the community level. However, we are also developing an international standard Skatepark at East Coast Park. The concept design, which was developed with our local extreme sports gurus and enthusiasts, is now

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ready. Members of the House who do inline skating, this will be the place for you. I know that Prof. Jayakumar is a great inline skater. I have told him and he is all excited, so I cannot wait to see him skate there.

12.15 pm

Dr Muhammad Faishal enquired about the trend of youth volunteerism and, in particular, about how the youth from 25 to 35 years have been engaged.

Based on the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre's (NVPC) biennial survey on volunteerism, the volunteerism rate for youth aged 15 to 24 years old has risen from 17% in 2002 to 28% in 2006. The volunteerism rate for older youth, however, does not show a clear trend, and this is the age group of 25 to 34 years old. It fluctuates within a range of 11% to 15% between 2002 and 2006.

But for the working youth in this group, NVPC still promotes volunteerism through corporate employee volunteering programmes, such as the new ComCare Connection initiative. This initiative matches corporations with suitable VWOs that help needy Singaporeans.

We must bear in mind that their priorities lie with starting a family, raising their children and building their careers. But I assure you that my Ministry will look into engaging these young adults, because they are the heart of our nation, and we want to tailor the volunteering opportunities that would take into account their needs and priorities.

In the meantime, we continue to engage volunteerism through our Youth Expedition Project, or YEP, or our Young ChangeMakers (YCM) programme. YEP is open to youth aged 15 to 35 years old and provides funding and advisory support for youth to volunteer overseas. About more than 11,000 youth have already

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participated in YEP and the older youth volunteer in the programme in the capacity of team leaders, leading the younger youth in these overseas expeditions.

YEP also helps our young people to better appreciate what they have in Singapore when they are exposed to the harsher realities of life faced by the people they help overseas. This also contributes towards a stronger national identity, as mentioned by Mr Sin Boon Ann, as our youth now better understand the values that have contributed to our success as a country.

In order to have a more effective outreach and better programmes, it is necessary to have a 3P approach between the private, public and people sectors. Dr Maliki would be pleased to note that we will continue to build on these programmes based on these principles. We are working with private sector organisations to enhance our youth initiatives.



One example is the Young ChangeMakers scheme, which gives out seed funding to youth to run local community projects, and it can be any projects; they come forward, we will support and fund them. I am pleased to announce that Nike Singapore has partnered with Young ChangeMakers to set up a grant to support sports-related youth community projects. So, any young person within the organisation or your area who would like to organise, say, a soccer game for the handicapped or the underprivileged children, or set up a clinic to teach a new sports, this programme will help fund it and help support them. More importantly, this taps on the strengths of the different sectors, creating a win-win partnership and a long-term engagement.

Dr Maliki and Ms Ellen Lee also asked about our plans to reach out to at-risk

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youth and out-of-school youth. We recognise that the work with at-risk youth and out-of-school youth cannot be undertaken by any one Ministry. It has to be inter-agency, inter-Ministry. The National Committee on Youth Guidance and Rehabilitation, or NYGR in short, coordinates these multi-agency efforts in this area. Working with the NYGR, MCYS adopts a three-fold approach. First, prevention and guidance. Second, detection and enforcement. Third, rehabilitation and restoration.

For students who are still in school, STEP-UP is a programme that funds VWOs to provide school social work services to students. It focuses on students at risk of dropping out or becoming potential delinquents. MCYS has increased the funding provided to STEP-UP and as of January 2007, the number of schools on STEP-UP has increased to 152, nearly 40% more than the 109 participating schools in 2006.

For out-of-school youth or OSY, Youth Link is a new scheme that provides support and outreach to them. MCYS works with the VWOs to provide guidance to these youth, and to ensure that they find meaningful engagement in employment, alternative education or skills training. For the first time, staff from the VWOs would be invited to sit in the exit interviews before students formally leave the school, so as to facilitate proper follow-through for these students.

Besides Youth Link, MCYS also funds the Learning Centre Programme which supports OSY by providing alternative education centres for out-of-school youth. For example, one such beneficiary is Farid. His difficult family circumstances caused him to lose interest in school, and he dropped out of school and ran into trouble with the law. He was finally placed in this Max Out Programme offered

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by Yayasan MENDAKI. It is an OSY programme co-funded by MCYS. He started to ace his subjects and he passed his N-levels with good results and he is now sitting for his O-levels. These are inspiring stories that tell us that we must give these young people a second chance, so that they have a chance to succeed in their lives.

For youth who are completing their rehabilitation programme in the children's home or juvenile institutions, re-entering the community can be very daunting. Hence, Podz Youth Mentoring programme was started last November with four social service agencies. These agencies run a mentorship programme that begins during the youth's stay in the institutions and continues after that for up to six months after they have been discharged. By the end of this year, MCYS aims to have 300 youth attached to this programme and to the mentors.

Our system may be comprehensive in coverage but it is definitely not perfect. We will continue to work hard and work with the people and private sector to take in feedback from the practitioners on the ground. This will help us refine our programmes and help these at-risk youth to build a positive self-image and build a better future for themselves.

Let me now touch on sports. It is something close to my heart. Following the recommendations of the Committee on Sporting Singapore in 2001, chaired by Mr Speaker when he was the Minister, it led to a major infusion of resources into the local sports scene. So far, we have set up the Sports School, launched the Sports Hub project and there is enhancement to the support for athletes and NSAs. We have also developed a calendar of marquee events, investing in programmes to promote mass participation. According to our latest figures,

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one in two Singaporeans participate in sports or exercise at least once a week.



At the elite and international sports performance level, national athletes have done us proud. They won a record of 139 medals at the SEA Games (42 of those are golds), 18 medals at the Commonwealth Games (five of them are golds), and, of course, you will know, 27 medals at the Asian Games (8 of them are gold medals).

But we must continue to build on that and we will build on the foundation that has brought us both success in sports excellence, sports for all and glory for the nation. I would like to assure Mr Michael Palmer that our efforts will also extend to the disabled athletes and the disabled.

My Ministry and the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) currently provide support and funding to the Singapore Disability Sports Council, or SDSC in short, as the national agency that champions sports for all forms of disability, at both elite and recreational levels. He would be glad to note that the funding has increased for them. Disabled athletes can also tap on the current schemes in the Singapore Sports Council, such as Athletes Career and Training programme, or ACT in short, and the Programme for Elite Athletes Career (PEAC). Take, for example, our swimmer, Theresa Goh. She has been a beneficiary of ACT since 2004 and is now on PEAC where she is based at Standard Chartered Bank. She works and trains at the same time. And with a detailed plan that was mapped out by SDSC, with her coach, Mr Ang Peng Siong, Theresa, while she is working, is now training for the Beijing Paralympics in 2008.

At the recreational level, the SDSC has also started a Learn-To-Play programme which will help to promote inclusiveness, tap on sports, even as a form of rehabilitation. Taking into account the recommendations in the Enabling

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Masterplan, we will look into ways to strengthen SDSC's outreach and capabilities to spearhead disability sports. Mr Palmer will also be pleased to note the developments over at the Singapore Sports School. If he has read the papers, it was featured that swimmer Kristine Quek enrolled to be its first disabled student in the Sports School. So the disabled and disabled athletes should get a chance to participate in sports and excel in them if they could. That will be our objective.

The Sports School is also an ideal "hothousing" environment for integration of our foreign-born athletes, an issue raised by Mr Seah Kian Peng. When Tao Li, our Asian Games gold medalist, first joined the Sports School, she found it hard to communicate with her schoolmates, whether in Mandarin or English. After training, studying and living with her local peers for over a year - I personally spoke to her - whether for good or for bad, she learns Singlish. For that, I think she is totally entrenched into our local culture, and you cannot tell her apart from her peers now.

We adopt three principles in foreign-born athletes policy - openness to global talent, fairness in treatment between local and foreign-born athletes, and integration into our way of life. The NSAs have a role to play to ensure that the integration plans are in place. That would include home-stays with locals, visits to cultural and historical sites, language classes and even learning how to sing our National Anthem. More importantly, some NSAs have gone beyond to equip them with the life-skills, so as to prepare them for a career after sports. That could be coaching or administrative skills. I am sure Mrs Jessie Phua will agree with me on the logic behind providing this support to foreign-born athletes. Going forward, I will ask the Singapore Sports Council to play a more active role to help NSAs to manage this integration process.

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I will now address Mr Ang Mong Seng's questions in Mandarin since he has asked them in Mandarin.

*(In Mandarin): [For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) *.]* Mr Ang Mong Seng has earlier asked MCYS to consider whether or not it will allow more sports teams to train at the Sports School. The Sports School welcomes all National Sports Associations to attend training at the Sports School so that they can make full use of the wide range of facilities, including training venues, hostels and residential facilities, canteens and even supportive services such as sports science and sports medicine, etc.

As pointed out by Mr Ang, this is a lot more cost-effective and, at the same time, students at the Sports School can compete against national athletes, and thus competency standards can be raised. On a national level, this is a win-win situation for both the National Sports Associations and the Singapore Sports School. Moving forward, the Singapore Sports School will cooperate with more foreign sports associations and encourage them to come for training at our Sports School. In this regard, I hope that advisers and leaders from various sports associations can work hand in hand with the Sports School.



Having said that, I am relieved to hear that Mr Ang is looking forward to see our athletes achieve better results, and move up the ranks, just like pop songs moving up the music chart. However, this is not a pop song. Of course, I also hope that our sports performance will move up in rank, just like Stephanie Sun's songs slowly moving to the top of the chart. However, this may require years in training and managing but, nonetheless, we will work hard towards this goal.

(*In English*): Sir, to help promote sports' mindshare amongst the wider

*Cols. 3635-3636.

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population, we are developing our own marquee sports events. A good example is the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon. Since it began in 2002, it has grown in scale and appeal, with participation climbing steadily from 6,225 runners in 2002 - and I was one of them - to over 31,000 runners last year, and I was one of them. By 2010, we will grow the Marathon to accommodate 50,000 runners. Is it not great to see the whole road flooded with runners early on a Sunday morning?

12.30 pm

As for resources for NSAs, last week, Mrs Jessie Phua commented that sports appeared to have been sidelined from this year's Budget package. I would like to reassure her that my Ministry and SSC will continue to fully support the sports sector, particularly the NSAs. In fact, direct grants for NSAs have gone up from \$31.1 million for FY2006 to \$31.9 million for FY2007.

I like Mrs Phua's idea of introducing a Sports Marketing group because you build on the Sports Business network. I believe SSC can facilitate this process where NSAs would have a chance to work on a strategy with the private sector to secure more sponsorship dollars. This is one way in which we can strengthen our value add to the NSAs and help them develop some level of self-sustainability. With all working hand in hand, there would be better opportunity, so that it would not be just a banker giving out grants but a facilitator - someone who goes out there to help the community to come together. And that should address some of Ms Jessica Tan's concerns about the lack of funds and sponsorship.

Mrs Jessie Phua has also expressed some concern about whether sports can enjoy tax incentives. Currently, any group

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or association that is not operating for profit and is engaged in the promotion of sports can apply for the Institution of a Public Character (IPC) status. This would include the NSAs. This incentivises the public and corporations to donate to sports causes, as the donors can obtain double tax deductions for their donations. To date, a total of 27 NSAs and 10 other sports groups have been accorded IPC status.

For institutions to register as charities, they must be set up to benefit the community. As Mrs Phua rightly pointed out, these would include Sports for All activities. My Ministry acknowledges her point that all three pillars - Sports for All, Sports Excellence and Sports Industry - are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. We are in discussions with other relevant agencies on whether we can collectively recognise these other sporting limbs for charitable purposes.

Mrs Jessie Phua also talked about the financial strain on NSAs having to pay for their land leases. The Singapore Land Authority currently leases land directly to SSC at sports and recreation rates, which are generally lower than commercial rates. SSC, in turn, leases the land to NSAs at subsidised rates as part of its overall outcome-based approach to support NSAs. Mrs Phua has used the analogy, "left pocket, right pocket" to describe this arrangement. The principle behind this is to instil discipline on land usage. Regarding her suggestion on providing incentives to encourage the private sector to provide sports facilities, we will study it with other relevant agencies, and we will see how this can be done in a manner without distorting the market.

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MCYS recently set up a Sporting Culture Committee involving members from the people, private and public sectors. I thank Ms Jessica Tan for her passion about sports, as she moved her

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cut yesterday. She will be pleased to note that the Committee will look at sports from the "culture" angle, ie, injecting a strong sporting identity into our people so that we can all live and breathe sports.

The Committee has met several times and consulted the sporting fraternity. Many key ideas and recommendations came up. One key idea is to provide more opportunities for each child to learn a few sporting skills in school life and make sports a life-long pursuit. Currently, through MOE's Physical Education (PE) Curriculum, and a good example that was brought up of Sengkang Primary having PE everyday, all students acquire the knowledge and skills to play a variety of games from primary to pre-university levels. We will continue to build on this by working with MOE to roll out the Sports Education Programme (SEP) to the schools, whereby students would have opportunities to try out more sports, even at the non-competitive level. So even if they cannot represent their school at competition level, we must allow them the chance to play any sports in school and continue with that passion.

The Committee has also highlighted the need to remove physical barriers or obstacles that may discourage participation. To address this point, we will be ramping up our efforts to improve the accessibility to sports facilities. Currently, there are 50 school fields opened up for booking by members of the public. By the end of this year, we will open up another 70 fields making a total of 120 schools open for the public. I urge all advisors here to talk to the schools in their area to also open up the fields for their community and enrol in this programme.

Many good recommendations came up, eg, to have regional integrated sports hubs all around Singapore, and not just at Kallang. I think the details would need to be worked out.

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The Committee will also look to provide enhanced support for top-tier athletes. One area of focus is Sports Medicine and Sports Science (SMSS). SSC recently announced its collaboration with the Changi General Hospital, to integrate their SMSS services. This is just a first step towards a more ambitious effort to develop a national network of strategic partners between the tertiary institutions, foreign universities, research outfits and private providers. The aim is to position Singapore as the SMSS hub for the region, catering to elite athletes or even weekend warriors like many of us. It is important to note that this sector would help bring sports performance to the next level. Because, as Members can see, many athletes of Asian countries are also not restricted by their physique and win at international and Olympic levels, and sports science is the way to go.

The work of the Committee is still ongoing and we are working towards completing the final report by the middle of the year. Just this week, I met several guests from Finland. In Finland, they have a population of 5.3 million, but they have 7,800 sports clubs. We have a population of 4 million, but we have nearly 1,000 sports clubs. I hope the work of the Committee will bring us closer to the vibrant sports scene like in Finland.

In parallel with our sports participation and excellence thrusts, we are now developing our sports industry. As part of our manpower development plans, we have rolled out a new Undergraduate Sports Scholarship Programme. We target to award two overseas and two local undergraduate scholarships each year. Tenable for studies in sports-related and other disciplines, these scholarships will raise the profile of sports-related careers or sportsmen who can be effective and can be leaders in any field, and also help to attract top-tier talent into management and leadership careers within the Ministries or agencies. I hope to see major

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companies - sports or non-sports related - to come forward and co-sponsor the scholarships with SSC.

Sir, we have ambitious aspirations for our youth and for sports in Singapore. We want to enable our youth to be self-reliant and that, in tough times, they would be resilient, independent and have the strength to face the challenges. They must have a sense of belonging and identity to contribute to Singapore. For sports, we need to have a sporting culture that would build a healthy and active society, create a chance for the talented to achieve the highest sporting glory and bond the nation together. This is borne not just from a desire to have our young

people and a strong sporting culture bring life and dynamism to Singapore. This is also anchored in the belief that, as Singaporeans, we can achieve something beyond the familiar. We can overcome the challenges, we dare to take risks and we would never give up and always be the best that we can be. My Ministry and all our partners will continue to work alongside our people for a brighter and more exciting future that is built on the full potential of all Singaporeans.

Counselling for Gamblers

Mr Chan Soo Sen (Joo Chiat): Sir, all of us look forward to the good economic benefits that the Integrated Resorts can bring about. So do I. Imagine the investments, the construction activities, the many job opportunities as well as the tax income. However, I am sure many Members share my concern over the gambling activities that the casino within the IR would bring about.

Gambling is a vice. It is highly addictive. It destroys personal character. It destroys family and it destroys community. It can lead to many undesirable activities, including criminal activities. I would like to ask the Ministry whether we

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have developed a strategy to prevent and deal with all these ill effects, and whether the House may be updated on the programmes that have been initiated or to be initiated to deal with this.

Sir, I am particularly concerned about the more vulnerable people who may be targeted by the operators. My heart especially goes to those people who currently have no income, eg, older persons who have just withdrawn their CPF, housewives or unemployed persons who have just received their retrenchment benefits. If they were to get too carried away, they risk losing everything plus their family and the community who are supporting them. What steps have been or will be taken to educate our people on the ill effects of gambling, and to ensure that they do not start in this road of no return?

I would also like to know whether programmes and schemes will be initiated to develop our capabilities in counselling the gamblers as well as their family members, together with the kind of support that we could offer to them in order to kick this bad habit.

Sir, I understand, for example, that drug is a kind of vice. And we know that there are private armies that help to protect drug activities. But I am also told that in some of these more disciplined private armies, any of the members found to be consuming drugs may be shot. They know very clearly that these are the things for them to make money, but these are also the kinds of thing that can consume them. As a nation, it is vital that our people be educated that, while these IRs will bring us much economic benefits, we must arm and protect ourselves against all its ill effects.

Community Engagement Programme

Mr Zainudin Nordin (Bishan-Toa Payoh): Sir, our country has gone through more

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than 40 years of nation building. Since the early days of our independence till today, we have been promoting racial harmony, building community bonds and strengthening social cohesion through many efforts at grassroots level and national platforms. Every year, Singaporeans celebrate the Racial Harmony Day on 21st July. Our students attend National Education programmes at schools. Our young men serve National Service where they share common experiences and develop lifelong friendships and bonds.

Singaporeans have enjoyed long and uninterrupted peace and stability in this country for quite some time now. But this does not come about by chance. We have implemented policies and work hard on programmes that are crucial in helping us to maintain racial and religious harmony. Some of these policies are difficult. We do it because we know that if we leave it to chance and take a casual attitude towards one of the key pillars of our success, the price to pay may be too high.



12.45 pm

Nevertheless, Sir, just as we are careful and as we give lots of attention to these issues, we are not totally shielded from the outside world and there will always be elements in our midst that are mischievous and are willing to test the boundaries. Unfortunately, there also exist people with sinister minds that wish to exploit our vulnerability, to divide us and, worse, wreak havoc and chaos in our society.

With respect to all these programmes and policies, may I ask the Minister if these efforts are effective in achieving their objectives? How do we measure, if ever is possible, the level and the quality of race relations in our country? Last year, our Prime Minister launched the Community Engagement Programme (CEP). How does this programme differ from the

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past efforts in objective and substance? What are the new resources that will be made available for these efforts? What are the new strategies and methods that are being deployed for CEP?

Race Relations

Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Hong Kah) (*In Malay*): [*For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) **.] Mr Chairman, MCYS' efforts in running the IRCC and CEP is a good first step in creating a closer network among the various faiths and races. More should be done to enhance the understanding particularly among youths who are exposed to radicalism due to our status as a people, trade and information hub.

The step in involving community and religious leaders in the IRCC is welcomed but the first assumption we make is that the message to be made known and racial understanding that we want to promote will flow down to the ground. The second assumption is that the openness and respect that happen at the leadership level reflect the same attitudes on the ground. Both these assumptions are not always true.

I would like to pose a number of questions to MCYS. In the Ministry's point of view, what are the effects on the social fabric of Singapore brought by the trends of fundamentalism and radicalism from the Middle East? Are these trends affecting the general society's view of the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore? For example, the issue on choice of employees. Secondly, what is the effect of increased religiosity among youths on the approach taken by the Ministry to enhance racial integration through IRCC and CEP? And what are the Ministry's efforts to reach out to these youths more effectively?

In order to inculcate tolerance and respect in our multi-racial and multi-

*Cols. 3637-3638.

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religious society, MCYS also should step up its efforts in several areas. For example, I hope that MCYS can also provide the community with platforms that they can refer to in order to seek clarification and understanding while having meaningful debates and comparing various ideologies with various religious and racial organisations in Singapore. In doing so, we can create a more open and tolerant environment, and not one that totally relies on approaches such as censorship or avoidance from facing these issues.

The Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (Dr Vivian Balakrishnan): Sir, I thank Mr Chan Soo Sen for his most eloquent warning about the dangers of problem gambling. As the person who was responsible for leading the MTI team that evaluated the economic benefits of having IRs and then also being in MCYS at that time when we made the final decision, I can assure him that no one was more painfully aware than I was of the trade-offs and the dilemmas that confronted us in this decision.

Problem gambling is an ever present threat. It is a threat today even before the IRs have arrived. We formed the National Council on Problem Gambling and over the last two years of its existence, it has actually engaged on an aggressive public education campaign to warn people about the dangers of gambling. I fully agree with him and, also, the comments that were made by Mr Christopher de Souza during the Budget debate that we need both prevention and treatment. We need to warn and treat people. So we will go about this in the following way.

Firstly, at the community level. On the ground, we must make sure that our social service professionals are able to recognise people at risk, recognise the

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warning signs and refer them. In order for our social workers to be able to make this preliminary diagnosis, they need training. MCYS has embarked on a training programme together with the Institute of Mental Health which runs programmes call the Community Addictions Management Programme. And this will give our social service workers on the frontline the ability to diagnose and recognise early danger signs and then make appropriate referral.

Secondly, we also want to have treatment facilities in the community. So, in September last year, we appointed two VWOs - the Thye Hwa Kwan Moral Society and the Care Corner Counselling Centre - to run specialised intervention centres. These will have professionals who are specially trained in the management of addiction and it will handle cases which are referred by other family service centres as well as cases which are referred back to the community by the Institute of Mental Health, ie, cases which are now more stabilised but still require ongoing supervision.

The third level, of course, is at the Institute of Mental Health under the Community Addictions Management Programme and this will be specialist care for people with real problems and who are unable to control their gambling addiction.

Let me move on to the points made by Mr Zaqy Mohamad and Mr Zainudin Nordin and, I think, Mdm Cynthia Phua also spoke about it during the Budget debate, and that is the state of our race relations.

Our success in maintaining a harmonious and cohesive society speaks for itself. Let us celebrate the fact that despite local incidents, for instance, the arrest of local JI operatives, and despite overseas incidents, such as September 11, Bali bombing, London bombing, the Danish cartoons, we have been able to

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maintain cohesion and unity in our society. We have not let these events serve to divide and break us apart. That is something worth celebrating but not taken for granted.

We conducted a survey last year on the social attitudes of Singaporeans and I am glad to report to this House that about nine in 10 Singaporeans reported that they were satisfied with the current state of race and religious relationships in Singapore and were optimistic about the future. Again, as I said, positive but do not take it for granted.

We must continue to build on the strong foundation. And we have moved on with what we call the Community Engagement Programme, and Members asked me what is different. In the past, we were focused more on persuading people and raising awareness of the need for racial harmony and understanding. We have now moved on to the second phase to actually put in place a crisis response framework, which means we want the religious and community leaders to know what to do or what to say the morning thereafter. This involves a greater level of interaction of training and development of trust and confidence. That is why we have also asked that the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) be reconstituted so that at the local level, every religious or community leader that matters is represented in the IRCC. It is not meant to be just another collection of the grassroots leaders who are already overworked, to begin with.

MCYS will also be providing a grant of \$10,000 to each IRCC and also secretariat assistance so that IRCC can get on with its business of building trust and interaction without being bogged down by administration or a lack of funds. It is also crucial, as Mr Zaqy has pointed out, that our young people understand the importance of racial and religious harmony, and I agree with him that

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schools, but more important families, have a crucial role to play in this. You know there are in the lives of our young people "teachable moments", and parents and teachers have to look for these teachable moments when the young are most receptive to the messages that reinforce racial harmony and religious understanding.

My Ministry will also work with our community partners to promote greater interaction amongst youth and one platform we have come up recently is the Singapore Inter-Faith Youth Forum. And this came about because some young people who were taking part in the National Youth Forum decided that it was important that the young - these are young religious leaders - have their own forum which they could share experiences and seek greater understanding. So the fact that these platforms are rising from the young is, I think, a very positive sign.

Let me end by sharing some views on this issue of advertisements - job advertisements and sometimes even housing advertisements - which overtly mention race. Let me speak in my dual capacity as Minister for MCYS and Second Minister for MICA. I know that all of us have personal private biases, sometimes even prejudice. I also know that we cannot eliminate all vestiges of racial prejudice and discrimination overnight. But having said that, we must not allow prejudice to become publicly and socially acceptable. We must not have young people standing up and saying, "I am a racist and I am proud about it.". We must not have such a situation and that is why we must ask the mass media and advertising industry to root out and eliminate such advertisements. We must actively resist overt displays of racial stereotyping and prejudice because if we do not do so, we will destroy the social fabric and social unity on which peace, harmony and progress of our nation depends on.

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Muslim Affairs

Mdm Halimah Yacob (Jurong) (*In Malay*): [*For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) *.*] Mr Chairman, we have heard from MOF and MOM that our economic progress will further improve and 450,000 jobs will be made available within this five-year period. Our society will have to be prepared to face a globalised future which is more competitive and makes use of the opportunities provided by the Government.

Our society has made substantial progress in education and employment, but I am worried that there is still a section in our society who finds it hard to adapt themselves to the changes that we are experiencing and they will be left far behind.

They also face social problems like divorce, drug abuse and dropouts from school. Many also do not have the skill to perform high-value jobs which pay better to provide for their families and, more often, they experience unemployment. The WIS scheme will help and motivate this group. At the same time, we have to give more focused and special attention in improving their standard of living. If not, I am afraid that there will be a group of underclass in the Malay-Muslim community who feel that they are being isolated and this will bring about other problems.

Last year, MUIS announced that it will use the *zakat* monies to help these needy families to upgrade themselves. Can the Minister provide more information on what has been done in this effort? A special group which also requires a lot of attention is the single mother. Can the Minister also provide an explanation on the efforts that have been carried out to help them? How can we ensure that the vision of an inclusive society that has been drawn up for Singapore can be felt

*Cols. 3639-3640;3641-3642;3643-3644.

Column: 3494

and will involve each and everyone in the society?

Divorce Rate

Dr Fatimah Lateef (Marine Parade) (*In Malay*): [*For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) *.*] A 24-year old Malay lady who is a single mother has six children whose age ranges from six months to seven years old. Two of them are her step children from her second husband and she is only 24 years old. When I was 24 years old, I had just completed my studies and was not ready to get married and had not started working. But for this lady, she has six children. 

The divorce rate within the Malay community is higher as compared to other communities in Singapore. There are various contributing factors, for example, financial problems, the couple being too young and not mature and ready to settle down to married life, and other external factors.

Are the strategies that we have now adequate to tackle these problems? Is the Ministry considering to carry out other efforts to reduce the divorce rate? And how about the marriage preparation courses that have been conducted? Are they effective and do they produce the desired result? I also would like to recommend that, with regard to the Malay community, we consider increasing the minimum legal age for getting married.

*Cols. 3641-3642.

Religious Leadership

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Manpower (Mr Hawazi Daipi) (*In Malay*): [*For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) **] Mr Chairman, religious development and religious leadership is important for the well-being of the community, including the Muslim community. Education in Islamic values in this changing world is

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especially important because it will be the anchor that will strengthen the character and living values of the individual and the society. The religious development, including development in education and religious leadership, is also necessary to inculcate good values, in terms of political notion that could lead the community away because the actions advocated may be against the religious teachings but are hidden as being on religious ground. In other words, we want religious education to be enhanced and improved to ensure that we can face the challenges of terrorism.

Therefore, the *asatizahs'* recognition scheme is important as a basis to recognise the qualification of our religious teachers. In many other careers or fields, recognition is an important element. In schools, our teachers are recognised by the NIE qualification and, today, the Ministry of Education has set a higher level of qualification, five 'O' levels for teachers who wish to teach at pre-schools. Hence, we need a better level of qualification and recognition for our religious teachers or *asatizahs*.

In short, my question is: who will qualify to be recognised as *asatizahs* or religious teachers? I would like to ask the Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs to inform us of the number of religious teachers who have been recognised and how MUIS supervises the non-formal religious teachers, such as the Koran teachers who teach at home. How does MUIS provide opportunities to *asatizahs* to improve their qualifications through training courses? And what about opportunities for them to further their education to the Diploma level, which MUIS collaborated with Al-Azhar University?

*Cols. 3643-3644.

Madrasahs

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for National Development (Dr

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Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman) (*In Malay*): [*For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) **] Mr Chairman, we know that compulsory education has been enforced a few years ago. *Madrasah* students are also not excluded from the compulsory education system. Starting from 2008, they would have to sit for the Primary Six Leaving Examination (PSLE). They have to obtain a minimum aggregate which has been set in subjects such as Mathematics, Science and English.

Sir, this is the right direction to ensure that they will be able to adapt themselves to the new economy, be it a career in religious or secular field. Their future will be more assured because of their abilities and the availability of options should they wish to change to the secular stream, thereby exposing them to unlimited job opportunities in this era of globalisation that we will be going through.



Sir, I would like to ask the Minister to provide us an update on the preparation and the ability of *madrasah* students to sit and pass the PSLE examination. What will happen should they fail? Are the preparations carried out by the students and *madrasahs* themselves sufficient?

In ensuring that the competency of the *madrasah* students in the three main subjects is improved, we must also ensure that the students in our secular system receive adequate religious education as a foundation for their moral and character development. MUIS has revamped its part-time religious education system a few years ago. So far, what is the response by the community to part-time religious education? How many percent of our students from the secular stream are now enrolled in part-time religious classes? Does MUIS have an optimum objective of the enrolment rate of students in these part-time religious classes? We also understand that many of our youths are not attending such courses. I would like

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to know if the "Teens Alive" programme is effective in attracting youths to attend these religious classes.

Community Engagement Programme of Malay/Muslim Community

Mr Zainudin Nordin (*In Malay*): [*For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) *.*] Mr Chairman, in the past years, a number of incidents have occurred which have raised tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, such as the Danish cartoons, the Pope's speech, etc. Singapore is a young, multi-racial and multi-religious society and these stresses will have an impact on us. It is better that we be prepared before an undesirable incident happens in Singapore. It is critical that Singaporeans develop a strong understanding of each other's faith so that we can build bonds and this will enable us to withstand the stress during the crisis.

Sir, the CEP programme launched by the Prime Minister last year aims to achieve these objectives. We understand that it is the responsibility of every community to promote racial harmony and inter-faith understanding. What is the effort by the Malay/Muslim community in this respect?

*Cols. 3647-3648.

The Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs (Assoc. Prof. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim): Mr Chairman, this year's Budget has focused on the segments of Singapore society which requires more help strongly underpins the Government's commitment that no one will be left behind as the country progresses in an era of globalisation.

Mdm Halimah requested for an update on the use of *zakat* funds. Sir, financial stability is the key priority as it is the

*Cols. 3645-3646.

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basis from which we build strong and stable families. Rather than giving direct handouts, MUIS has been working with community organisations and other service providers to empower and build self-reliance among the recipients. This is similar to the philosophy behind the Workfare Income Supplement.

MUIS' Empowerment Partnership Scheme, or EPS, started in 2004 complements national schemes available to all needy Singaporeans and helps ensure that the needs of families are holistically addressed. Allow me to give an example. 40-year old Mdm Suzana and husband - with three children and an elderly mother to care for - first got into the EPS when they ran into financial difficulties. She picked up business skills from the self-employment assistance programme offered by the CDC. By putting together her cooking talent and the new business skills, she managed to grow her \$700 monthly household income three-fold. I commend Mdm Suzana's self-reliance, determination and success in uplifting her family.



Moving forward, to better support such families, MUIS will be investing up to \$1.2 million over the next two years on selected programmes run by community organisations with a good track record. MUIS, Sir, will also be developing a blueprint to see how *zakat* can be used to complement the national help schemes, and to better help the low-income families within the community.

Sir, under the Employability Network of the Community Leaders Forum, there are a number of other economic empowerment programmes that have provided employment opportunities. In fact, Mdm Halimah herself had already announced three such initiatives - *Suri Stitch*, *Suri Salon*, and *Suri Spa* - which are all social enterprise projects funded by the ComCare Enterprise Fund. These projects will help more of our womenfolk

Column: 3499

to be economically active, including single mothers. I urge more in our community to take advantage of the many programmes available to upgrade themselves and to enhance their family's financial well-being.

Sir, let me now address Dr Fatimah's concern on high Muslim divorces and the measures taken to strengthen Malay families. To address the issues upstream, the issues of teenage sexuality and marriages, involving minors, the NURteensLine and the NUR Drop-In Centres, projects funded by the ComCare Social Support Projects Fund, were introduced in December 2005. Since then, the NURteensLine has received more than 1,000 calls and SMSes. A third of the calls received centred on sexuality issues and parent-teen relationship. Sir, I am happy to announce that two new Drop-In Centres have been set up this year, one in Bukit Batok and the other one in Yishun, bringing the total number of NUR Centres to five for the Malay/Muslim community.

Sir, over the last two years, MCYS and MediaCorp's *Suria* have worked together to promote awareness within the community on teenage issues. *SEKSA* - a series which coaches parents on how to bond and broach sensitive topics with their children - follows on the runaway success of another programme, *Hanyut*, which through the various efforts, reached out to 600,000 people. I am told that *SEKSA* is currently the top info-ed programme on *Suria*.

Other community initiatives have similarly attracted wide attention and support. The month-long *Lebih Sexy Katakan "Tidak!"* (or in English, It is Sexier to say No!) initiative has since reached out to more than 400,000 people from all walks of life. *Keluarga AKRAB* - a movement of Family Excellence Circles, or FEC, introduced in 2005 to strengthen families - has now grown to involve more than 300 parents. More FECs have

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been formed with more partners coming on board.

Sir, we are also focused on helping those who intend to or have just started out on marriage life. A premarital counselling programme piloted for minor couples is showing heartening results. 17% of 333 couples who underwent counselling decided not to proceed with marriage for the time being. I am sure this is good news for Dr Fatimah. For those who decide to proceed, PPIS-Jurong FSC and AMP will be managing two centres dedicated to support them through their marriage. We want to make sure that the marriage lasts. These centres will be operational in the second quarter of this year.

Sir, such efforts are starting to deliver some results. Preliminary figures from the Registry of Muslim Marriages show that there has been a 25% drop in the number of minor Muslim brides and grooms over the past two years. Between 2004 and 2006, the number of minor brides dropped from 564 to 506 to 422, while the number of grooms dropped from 159 to 140 to 118. Our community and leaders have come together to make this happen. However, marriages involving minors are twice as likely to end up in divorce when compared to other marriages. Thus, while we should continue extending our support to the married minors in our community, we need to have a long-term approach to prevent such issues from getting acute and entrenched. One measure, which Dr Fatimah has raised, that we are studying is raising the minimum age of marriage under the Administration of Muslim Law Act, or AMLA. This is currently set at 16 for the bride and groom, lower than the minimum age under the Women's Charter which is 18. We will be studying this further with the community.

Sir, let me now move on to the issue of religious development raised aptly by

Column: 3501



Mr Hawazi, which is central to the well-being of the community. MUIS, together with its partners and stakeholders, has helped to ensure the practice of Islam in Singapore remains progressive, confident and compatible with our multi-racial and multi-religious context.

Our *asatizah*, or religious clerics, play a key role. And here, I thank our senior *asatizah* for their selfless contributions to the work of the Religious Rehabilitation Group, or RRG, and going further to organise public forums and dialogues to dispel misconceptions, thereby strengthening Islam further.

The *Asatizah* Recognition Scheme, as raised by Mr Hawazi, introduced last year through the efforts of MUIS working hand-in-hand with Pergas, has received positive feedback and acceptance from the *asatizah* and the community. To date, about 700 have registered through the scheme. The religious teachers' directory has become a trustworthy reference that also safeguards against any fake preacher pushing self-serving beliefs. Recognising the important role of *asatizah*, I am pleased to announce that a full-time structured leadership development programme will be made available for our *asatizah* to enhance their leadership capabilities. Such courses can provide *asatizah* with deeper insight into the principles that govern Singapore and enhance the ability to make a greater contribution to society. *Ustaz* Murat Aris, a MUIS officer, recently attended a month long Governance and Leadership Course organised by the Institute of Policy Development. I am hopeful that more of our *asatizah* will be able to participate in such programmes.

Mr Hawazi also raised the question of informal teachers. Sir, MUIS will endeavour to bring them into the scheme as quickly as possible and, where necessary,

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will advise them on how their skills can be upgraded so they can become part of the scheme.

Sir, let me now turn to the issue of *madrasahs*, raised by Dr Maliki, and the question that Mdm Halimah wanted to ask. Our *madrasahs* are expected to meet the PSLE requirement in 2008. The *madrasahs* and MUIS have been working closely to ensure that *madrasah* students are prepared for PSLE. They have concentrated their resources and efforts in three key areas: teacher development, curriculum review and student development. To date, MUIS has spent \$7.6 million to strengthen the capacity of *madrasahs* in these three areas.

1.15 pm

Sir, a structured training programme has been put in place to ensure that all *madrasah* teachers are formally certified. MUIS will commit a total of \$1.3 million to ensure that all *madrasah* teachers obtain at least a Diploma in Education. I am heartened to note that our *madrasah* teachers are committed towards continuous training, taking up courses offered by both local and foreign institutions. I commend our *madrasahs*, both the management and the teachers, for their dedication and efforts to keep abreast of the latest pedagogical skills and technology.

Sir, our *madrasahs* have significantly increased the contact time for English, Mathematics and Science (EMS) to match the exposure time that these subjects get in Government schools. MUIS has spent \$5.9 million to revise the curriculum for Islamic studies and Arabic language for Primary 1 to Secondary 4. With the revised curriculum, our *madrasah* students can continue to get a strong foundation in their religious curriculum, while receiving the increased exposure to English, Mathematics and Science.

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Student development is another important area which the *madrasahs* and MUIS have been focusing on. To better support their students, the *madrasahs* have worked with private operators and Mendaki to provide good learning support programmes. To date, 369 pupils from five *madrasahs* have benefited from the M-Power (Mathematics) Programme organised by Mendaki. MUIS is also working to allow each *madrasah* student to receive a student grant that can be used to pay for enrichment programmes that would expose him or her to a wider range of opportunities.



Dr Maliki has asked whether the *madrasahs* are ready for the PSLE. We are confident that with the support that we have given, our *madrasahs* will be able to face the challenges of the PSLE. Notwithstanding that, as agreed during the debate on the compulsory education, the 400 students who are exempted from the *madrasahs* will remain and for those *madrasahs* that cannot meet the PSLE standards, MUIS will continue to provide assistance to ensure that their secondary and post-secondary curriculum continue to be updated and improved.

Sir, *madrasahs* are important institutions for developing our religious elite. We want to see our *madrasah* students succeed in both their religious and academic studies so that they have as many options available as possible for further studies and their future careers. So we must make it a target for us in our community that all of the students pass the PSLE benchmark. As such, considerable resources have been channelled by MUIS and the community to the *madrasahs*.

Dr Maliki has also asked about the revamp of part-time religious education. The needs of the vast majority of the Muslim students who attend or have attended national schools are indeed a priority. MUIS has expanded the range of

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the age-specific part-time religious education programmes to include the youths as well as tweens; those just before becoming teenagers. The response to the part-time religious education programme has been positive. So far, about 26,000 students are attending the part-time religious education classes in our mosques, and this figure does not include those who are following other part-time religious education classes offered by other organisations.

Let me just cite one example on the effectiveness of the programme. Siti Hairani Aznor, a young working adult who had signed up for the two-month YouthAlive primer course said that she now has a better appreciation of the contributions of Muslims in various fields over the centuries. I am happy to report that there will now be more of such learning opportunities for more youths as the part-time religious education syllabus is expected to be rolled out in all our mosque religious classes or part-time *madrasahs* by 2010. MUIS has also started a new annual programme called the Shared Perspectives Seminar, which is targeted at youths, and will prompt discussion on issues relevant to our faith and the role and place it occupies in the current times. This is a point that was raised by Mr Zaqy Mohd. The first seminar will be held next week.

Sir, finally, on the issue of community engagement raised by Mr Zainudin Nordin who wants to know about our efforts. Singapore, as we all know, is a multi-racial and multi-religious country. Muslims must remain open, appreciate the faiths of fellow Singaporeans and also help them to understand Islam. This will help Singapore stay strong, vibrant, united and resilient.

At the local level, Muslims have participated in many inter-faith and inter-ethnic initiatives. MUIS and the mosques have been actively involved in the

Column: 3505

National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony chaired by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, and the newly-repositioned Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs). The Harmony Centre, launched by our Prime Minister just five months ago, has already received more than 2,300 visitors and many warm reviews from people of all faiths. To better promote its message of peace and inter-faith understanding, the Harmony Centre will be launching its own website in the second half of this year.

At the international level, MUIS Academy recently inked an agreement with Hartford Seminary, a premier institution from Connecticut that is well-known for its research into Muslim-Christian links. Through this link-up, MUIS will be organising inter-faith seminars and courses for people of all religions. MUIS also launched the Distinguished Visitors Programme last May and welcomed His Eminence Dr Sayyed Muhammad Tantawi of Al-Azhar as our first distinguished visitor. MUIS will continue to invite more eminent speakers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to share their insights.

Sir, our Muslim community is confident and forward looking. We have steadily been putting in place a solid base - empowering individuals, connecting with our youths, strengthening families, and enhancing the progressive practice of Islam. Our model has been studied, recognised and commended by many international authorities and observers. Our *haj* and *halal* certification services are sought after by many other countries, and we have even shared our *madrasah* curriculum with them. A UK group of Muslim parliamentarians and community leaders visited us last July and were impressed by how Muslims here integrated and contributed to the wider society. Indeed, the Executive Director of the Islamic Society of North America, Dr



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Louay Safi, felt that Singapore can be a model for places where Muslims are a minority. So while we recognise the issues that concern us, we should be proud of what we have achieved. Let us work even harder to achieve our vision of being a community of excellence.

Allow me now, Sir, to sum up in Malay.

*(In Malay): [For vernacular speech, please refer to [Appendix A](#) *.]* The Malay-Muslim community in Singapore has shown strong determination and has achieved very encouraging results. We are on the right track in determining our future direction and in tackling social issues and the challenges of a globalised world. Our religious life is dynamic and progressive. Our objective is to achieve a better standard of living for our community in line with our vision of being a community of excellence and a community that is active in bringing well-being and prosperity to our country.

I would like to take the opportunity to express my thanks to community leaders, *asatizahs* and Malay-Muslim organisations for their active participation in efforts to move the community forward. As the proverb says, "*berat sama dipikul, ringan sama dijinjing*" we work together no matter what the challenges are. With the sense of unity in purpose and a common goal, I am sure we can overcome the challenges that we are facing now and will face in the future. Although sometimes we do not achieve consensus in some matters, it is important that we should not allow this to affect our main objective of bringing progress to our community together. For this purpose, it is important that we put aside whatever personal or group interests that we may have in the interest of the community.

The Community Leaders' Forum has now been a platform for discussions and this is in line with our culture and religion.

*Cols. 3649-3650.

Column: 3507

This will continue to be our thrust of practice and achieving consensus. We must practise the principle of consensus among our community.

The Chairman: We have some time for clarifications. Can I request that we take the clarifications for Minister Yaacob first before we move on to the rest? There will be time for every one else. Mdm Halimah.

Mdm Halimah Yacob *(In Malay)*: Sir, I would like to ask the Minister two questions. Firstly, is the sum of \$1.2 million sufficient to assist the less fortunate families? Secondly, how many such families have been assisted under the MUIS fund?

Assoc. Prof. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim: Sir, the \$1.2 million is over and above what has already been spent. As mentioned in my speech, the money will be spent on new projects to be run by Malay/Muslim organisations that have shown some track record. Over the last two years, about 1,302 families received *zakat* monthly every year. But about 400 families have participated in this programme and 104 families have since successfully graduated from the EPS. What we do is that we mined the data from our *zakat* recipients, identified their families, and we put them onto these programmes so that we could then empower them and get them off the *zakat* altogether.

Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman: Sir, clarification and supplementary question with regard to the Minister's response to the issue of part-time religious education for the young. It is also in relation to Dr Fatimah's point about some of the problems of divorce rates and teenage pregnancies.

Sir, there has been some observation that Malay parents tend to be lax with regard to religious education amongst the teens. I would like to ask the Minister if

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MUIS also recognises that trend that the young tend to be not attending part-time religious education and the community feels that religious education is one of the keys to solving some of these problems. Could the Minister comment on what MUIS plans to do to try to further increase the registration rates, especially for the teens, to take part in these part-time religious education classes?

Assoc. Prof. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim: Sir, we agree wholeheartedly with Dr Maliki that we have to reach out to the young and that is why the part-time religious education approach was in fact reviewed and changed to fit what we call age-specific requirements. So, in YouthAlive, and now we have TweensAlive, we have changed the approach in terms of the pedagogy, moving away from chalk and talk, and now using overheads, experiential learning and story telling. Based on the initial feedback, the response has been positive. But I do agree with Dr Maliki that we need to step up. That is why this programme is not only run by our mosques but also with private service providers who have decided to adopt the curriculum and run this programme on our behalf. The approach is that we will try as many avenues as possible to reach out to the youth sector. But, more importantly, I think it is important for us to help get our parents to also recognise that entrenching our kids in religious education at a very young age would build the resilience in them to face future challenges.

Mr Zainudin Nordin: Sir, I just would like to ask the Minister if we have the capability and capacity to handle the youth sector. Do we have enough social workers and youth workers? What efforts are being put to increase the numbers?

Assoc. Prof. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim: Sir, it is one of the gaps that we have identified earlier in the Malay/Muslim community - the lack of youth workers trained to deal

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with out of school youths and youths at risk. We have stepped up our training programme. Last year, we spent some money through Mendaki to train about 20 youth workers. I am happy to announce that, this year, we will step up the youth training programme even further to invite experts from overseas, such as Australia, to train a lot more youth workers within the Malay/Muslim community. The challenge is really to be able to equip our youth workers with the relevant social skills to deal with kids who not only bring their own personal problems but, because they come from families which may be dysfunctional, there are other inter-related problems that our youth workers will have to handle.

Mdm Cynthia Phua (Aljunied): Sir, regarding the number of young couples in the Malay community, I would like to ask the Minister to work with MCYS in terms of extending help to these young families under the HOPE scheme. Under the HOPE scheme, the qualification is very high. It is at GCE "O" level. So the Minister might want to work with MCYS to see how we could help these young families and bring down that qualification level to help them with some of the financial schemes.

Assoc. Prof. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim: Sir, I think the HOPE scheme is designed to really catch a large group of young people with very low education. As mentioned by Mrs Yu-Foo yesterday, the self-help groups, including Mendaki, have been roped in to help to get more potential HOPE beneficiaries onto the programme. For the Malay community, it is a sensitive programme but I am glad to note that more Malay



couples are now joining the programme. I would also like to thank MCYS for their assistance, because the programmes that we have been conducting within the Malay/Muslim community have received a lot of support from MCYS. The approach that we have

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taken in the Malay/Muslim community is mainstreaming. As and when there are programmes within MCYS or other agencies, we will mainstream the Malay/Muslim community. Where there are specific gaps, then we will step in. So, as mentioned in my reply, we are going to start two centres to deal with minor couples. This phenomenon is largely happening in the Malay community. They want to get married, they are still very young,

but we need to guide them because they are likely to add to our divorce rate. These are efforts which are targeted at young couples who have decided to get married but whom we know are vulnerable to divorces.

1.30 pm

Mr Zainudin Nordin: Sir, with regard to the point raised by Dr Fatimah, is there any possibility of changing the age limitation for Muslim marriages?

Assoc. Prof. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim: Sir, as I mentioned in my reply, we are studying this. I hope Mr Zainudin Nordin will support us.

The Chairman: Any other clarifications for Dr Yaacob? No? *Terima kasih.* Mr Sin Boon Ann.

Mr Sin Boon Ann (Tampines): Sir, the Minister, in his reply to my queries, responded by saying that one way of dealing with globalisation is to try and minimise the gap between the rich and the poor, and part of the strategy lies in topping up the income of the poor through Workfare.

My question to the Minister is whether he thinks Workfare alone is sufficient. Workfare extends about a couple of hundred dollars a month to these families. Given the widening income gap, is Workfare alone sufficient to minimise the difference and to build up a sizable pool of the middle-class?

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Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: Workfare, in the long term, will not be sufficient. The long-term solution is education, training, increased productivity, increased competitiveness and that leading to increased wages. But Workfare, however, buys us time so that we can enable our people to seek the training and the time to upgrade themselves. And, more importantly, as Singapore seeks to ride this express bullet train of globalisation, we need to give people, who feel most vulnerable, some assurance that seat-belts are on and they would not fall off this train, even when we go down some roller-coasters. For all these reasons, we felt that we need to have Workfare in place - to buy time and to assure our people. But do not get distracted from the fact that a long-term solution is still education and upgrading our competitive capacity and to get better jobs and, ultimately, better salaries.

Dr Lily Neo (Jalan Besar): Mr Chairman, the Minister yesterday announced that PA allowance would be increased by \$30 a month, from \$260 to \$290. The Minister did not answer my two questions on whether PA allowance commensurates with inflation and whether there has been a study done to ascertain whether PA allowance serves the needs of the recipients.

Sir, my single constituents told me that they needed to skip one meal a day to live on the \$260 per month. And now, MCYS is going to give them \$1 more a day. But, Sir, \$1 a day will not be able to buy them one meal a day in any hawker centre.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: When we did this review of the Public Assistance rates, we took into account both the impact of inflation since the last review as well as the impact of the GST increase. There will always be arguments about whether a sum that we have decided is enough or not. As I said yesterday, frankly, one limiting factor must be that the sum that

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we give through Public Assistance cannot be so generous as to erode the work ethic. As I said again yesterday, if you take a family with three children, the amount they can receive from Public Assistance - I do not have the exact figure now - I think exceeds \$900. At that level, you are getting dangerously close to the earnings of a low-wage worker.

Having said that, I think there will always be unique circumstances when some families find that that sum is not enough. And that is where the community and grassroots organisations have to come in and look for those mitigating or exceptional circumstances and more help is necessary. So the key point is that as far as the entitlement portion is concerned, I will admit that that is set low. But have flexibility, have organisations and individuals who are able to assess special needs of special families and then respond accordingly. That is the system which we have.

The alternative is to set the entitlement at a very high level. But once you do that, I think you would not have only 3,000 families on Public Assistance, you will see many multiples of families.

Dr Lily Neo: Sir, the Minister said that the increment was done in such a way so as not to take away the work ethic. Surely, this argument cannot be applied to PA allowance recipients because this is a group of people that can never work either due to poor health, old age or disability. Therefore, this work ethic concept does not work. The other point is that the Minister said that this group of people can depend on grassroots organisations and others. Am I to understand that MCYS cannot provide adequately for the most vulnerable group of our society and that PA recipients must go and seek help from others? He said yesterday that in this globalisation, he would ensure that increasing number of

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Singaporeans would not feel left out and that he would provide more assistance to the poor to cope with the higher cost of living. May I ask him: should providing three meals a day not be a priority of his promise?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: I take the Member's point that for Public Assistance, we have fairly strict criteria. But having said that, I am still not willing to go to the other extreme and say that since we have got strict criteria, we can afford to be generous. This is the same point that Mr Seah Kian Peng raised yesterday. I have sympathy for that point, but I would still appeal to Members of this House to exercise caution.

Her second question was: why must they go and seek help? Why must they ask for it? I would like to remind her again of my speech yesterday when I said that if it is going to be low on entitlement and high on flexibility, then we do want some effort to be exerted on the part of the recipients. Yes, we do want them to go and ask for help. But I also said yesterday that, let us not get too carried away and reach a stage



where if someone does not know or does not want to ask for help, we ignore that person. I have also asked the community organisations, neighbours, voluntary welfare organisations and the rest of us, if we see someone who needs more help, enquire about that person and organise the help.

Let us talk about meals since the Member has phrased her question specifically about three square meals. You and I, in fact, all of us, know that there are programmes for meals at home. There are organisations which specifically bring bread and rations, many of which are bought from FairPrice, gratitude to Mr Seah as well. But there are schemes like this. That allows me to say with a clear conscience to both the PAP and the

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Opposition MPs that nobody in Singapore needs to starve, nobody needs to be deprived of healthcare, and nobody needs to be deprived of a roof over his or her head. If someone indeed is so destitute and is starving, we have other means and other safety nets for them. We can bring them to the Pelangi Home, and I would invite all of you to come to Pelangi Home and see the standard of care, the facilities, the food and the way we look after them.

So, please do not run away with the misconception that Singapore is a cold, heartless place where, because we are so strict on criteria and entitlements, people are starving, freezing and denied the dignities of life. All I am asking Members is just to bear these principles in mind. Entitlements will always be low, ie, the person has to ask you for help and not bang on your table for help. We will always need the many-helping-hands model, not because the Government is broke. We can always do more and we can always raise GST further. But that is not the tone of the society that we are trying to create. We are saying that, yes, there will always be problems in society and it cannot be only the Government to do it because, if you want the Government to do it all, it means higher taxes and a large bureaucracy. As we can see in many other countries who have created elaborate welfare-states based on the best of intentions and the softest of hearts, such systems ultimately failed, they are not efficient and they are going to run out of money. We will see that happen in our lifetime, but we will make sure that that does not happen in Singapore.

As the Minister for MCYS, those are the dilemmas and the trade-offs that I have to make.

Mr Sin Boon Ann : This relates to the same point too. I am assured by the Minister's reply that no one in Singapore

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needs to go hungry. But the fact remains that we come across people who are indeed hungry, people who are left out and who basically fall through the cracks. I suppose this must be something to do with our communication process, our ability to reach out to these people and to tell them where help can be delivered. Surely, the Minister would also, in his deliberations, consider whether or not the communication channel or the outreach channel is adequate and could the Ministry be doing more in this regard to reach out to these needy Singaporeans.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: Absolutely. I shared the story of Tan Sai Siong yesterday to make the point that it just needs sometimes one email or one phone call. Singapore is a very small place. It is not difficult for Members to contact the Prime Minister or myself directly. I am not saying that that should be the *modus operandi* here and everything should be solved that way. But what I am saying is that, if you do detect families in such distress, do something about it. Do not just complain but ask yourself first what you should do about it and who else can help. As far as the Government is concerned, what systems, structures, institutions and policies are needed. I want to get these things clear in our minds that there is a role for the individual to help himself or to seek help. There is a role for families. There is a role for community organisations. There is a role for interested and compassionate individuals and Tan Sai Siong was an example. And there is a role for Government. But let us keep all these respective roles organised in such a way that each one does what he or she is best at.

That is why I am appealing for understanding that our entitlement system will be low. That also means, as the Member has quite rightly said, we need to communicate, we need to keep all channels of communication open and we

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need to keep our eyes open. We cannot, like what I said yesterday, whenever you see someone whom you think needs help, just shrug our shoulders and say, "See, that is the Government's job." Ask yourself what you yourself have done about that individual and about that family. Singapore has got to where it is now, not just because of hard work but also because there have been family obligations and community compassion. And we have been almost schizophrenic in the sense that I believe that we have done better than communist and socialist countries in looking after the poor.

Yet, we have also been one of the most free-market capitalist economies. It is this ability to pick and use the best aspects of both capitalism and socialism - the head and the heart - which is the secret to our success. So we must disagree, we must have tensions and we must debate this, but let us not lose that sense of balance. I am sure there will be implementational and operational problems. And when these come up, Members must tell me and I must do my best to fix them. But when it comes to policy and entitlements, I will tell Members quite frankly that I start from a rather stringent and tight perspective.

1.45 pm

That is why, yesterday, I said that I was not here to argue for a bigger budget for MCYS, although I also showed Members yesterday that the budget was increasing at a very significant rate. But I am more focused on the policies, the rules, the systems and organisational roles than on absolute sums. It is very easy for me to stand here and say, "I can double public assistance", and try to persuade my Cabinet colleagues to agree to that. But, in my heart of hearts, I will know that it is wrong and that, ultimately, it will short change the very poor that we are trying to help and the entire group of people called Singaporeans.

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The Chairman: Let us give other Members a chance. The list here is very long already. Ms Jessica Tan.

Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo (East Coast): Sir, I am heartened to hear about the work that is being done by the agencies on the charity status for NSAs. My question for the Parliamentary Secretary is whether there is a timeline to achieve this.

Mr Teo Ser Luck: Sir, it is important for the NSAs to achieve a certain charity status, because we want to see them to be self-reliant on fund raising efforts, so that there is no over reliance on Government funding. And we have to talk about accepting the other pillars of sports, which is Sports Excellence, Sports Industry along with Sports for All activities.

Today, we are working with the different agencies, including the Ministry of Finance, and we hope to be able to come up with some developments in the next three months. Perhaps the Member would want to ask me again about the status in the next three months.

Mr Michael Palmer (Pasir Ris-Punggol): Sir, I am very heartened to hear the Parliamentary Secretary and the Government's commitment to disabled athletes of Singapore. I have just two points of clarification. First, will the SDSC oversee intellectually disabled sports as well?

My second point is on Project 0812. Does it include disabled athletes? If not, why not? If not, is there an equivalent programme for disabled athletes?



Mr Teo Ser Luck: Sir, Mr Palmer's first question is whether SDSC will take care of the intellectually disabled athletes. SDSC spearheads all disabled athletes of different levels of disabilities, whether it is intellectual or physical. Within the

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intellectual disabilities, the Olympics for them is called Special Olympics, to include all disabilities and to encourage participation.

For the elite level disabled athletes, they are called the Paralympics, and that would also be included if we are going to focus on Olympic glory.

We have already started Project 0812, and the ball is rolling. We have been in discussion with different stakeholders on how we could include the disabled athletes.

We have set up the Sporting Culture Committee, as Members know. One of the sub-groups is called Glory for the Nation. Glory for the Nation helps athletes to achieve higher sporting glory, and that includes the Olympics. Project 0812, for the long term, will be roped into Glory for the Nation taskforce or committee. And we intend to include the disabled athletes under this banner, which is Glory for the Nation.

A point to note is that if we talk to disabled athletes, they want to achieve the highest sporting glory, and they want to be able to be rewarded. But if we ask them, "What is your first priority?" they would tell you, "Accessibility and to be able to participate in sports as a life-long pursuit", and also to balance that with their daily lives. So, if you ask me, where should the investment be put in, I would rather that the investment be put into the infrastructure for these disabled athletes.

Mrs Jessie Phua (Nominated Member): Sir, there are three points I would like to raise. First, the Parliamentary Secretary assured this House that there is fairness between local and foreign talent athletes. Unfortunately, I have reasons to believe otherwise. From personal experience, when we apply for support for full-time training for our local athletes, we were reminded, time and again, that we should

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not be looking at welfare. Our local athletes were told to work towards balancing training and school or work. Against this backdrop, it would seem that support for full training for our foreign import athletes is a given.

Second, central counselling resource centre. Sir, yesterday's newspaper reported that yet another of our foreign import athlete, table tennis player Zhang Xue Ling is leaving for Shanghai. This is the latest addition to the count of three basketball, six hockey, one football and one badminton foreign athletes who have since left their sports. The reasons for their departure may vary.

The Chairman: Mrs Phua, please make your clarification rather than a speech.

Mrs Jessie Phua: It is clear that there is a need for the Singapore Sports Council to set up a central counselling resource centre if it is sincere in its efforts to be athlete-centric. Besides helping foreign sporting talents to adjust and adapt to life in Singapore, they have a moral obligation to ensure that these new citizens are provided with adequate schooling.



The Chairman: Mrs Phua, please do not make a speech.

Mrs Jessie Phua: I also want to raise a point on the central secretariat. Yesterday, Ms Denise Phua brought up the point of the high cost of governance by VWOs. Unfortunately, the same fate befalls NSAs too, especially the smaller NSAs. I think MCYS should work with the SSC towards setting up such a central secretariat to serve a pool of the smaller NSAs. The benefit is self-evident.

Mr Teo Ser Luck: Sir, first, the point about fairness to local and foreign athletes. We believe that in the policies and the implementation today, there is fairness across the board. Of course, if

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there are specific cases, I will encourage Mrs Jessie Phua to highlight them to me, so that I can look into them.

What is important about local and foreign athletes is that when foreign athletes come in, yes, most of the time they live with the little income that probably the NSAs disburse to them through the funding. They train full-time. Local athletes can do the same but sometimes they face family pressure as they have to balance their studies as well. They do not want to give up what they already have. But we already see that, through the Olympic project, there are some who have already put aside their studies or even their work to do full-time training. So, if there are specific cases, I would rather look into them and review them with the Member, and see what are the things that we can do. But we want to make sure that at the implementation and working level, there is fairness across the board for all local and foreign athletes, and they compete on a level playing field with no disadvantage.

The Member mentioned about Zhang Xue Ling leaving. I read the report and I was also very saddened by that news, because she is one of our top players. But I have come to understand that she left for a good reason. She wants to spend more time with her family. Her husband left for Shanghai and she wants to be close to the family. So she left Singapore for Shanghai. What is more heartening is that she mentioned that if we needed her, she would be back. She will still play for Singapore because she is a Singaporean, and she came from this system here. I think that sense of identity and belonging is still there. But at this point in time, she probably believes that she can put her sporting career aside and make sure she spends time with her family, which MCYS is promoting as well. So I cannot say that that is not a good decision. But we welcome her back and we really would

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like her to represent Singapore again for the right competition and to play internationally.

Sir, on the central counselling resource centre, I like the idea and we should explore it further, so as to help NSAs. I also believe that some smaller NSAs promoting very good sports may or may not have the type of support that they need. Maybe for volley ball, they could grow commercially - beach volley ball or gymnastics. There are a couple of good gymnasts and they can grow them. Maybe they need some support at the different pillars of the sport - Sports Excellence, High Sports Participation and Sports Industry. Yes, this is something to consider. We should take this back and maybe in time to come, we could set up a task force and include the people, private sector and all of us, and I hope Mrs Jessie Phua will also volunteer her efforts in this.

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade): Sir, just a point of clarification for the Parliamentary Secretary regarding the foreign sports talent scheme. I just want to ask what are some of the deliberate integration processes that are organised. Or is it all left to the respective NSAs to deal with it?

Mr Teo Ser Luck: Sir, may I ask the Member to repeat his question?

Mr Seah Kian Peng: What are some of the deliberate integration processes that are organised for the foreign athletes? Or is it all left to the respective NSAs to deal with it?

Mr Teo Ser Luck: Sir, I have mentioned in my answer that there are many courses - language, singing the National Anthem, even equipping them with life-long skills. It was originally left to the NSAs to execute the integration plan. But I agree that some small and big NSAs need more

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help. They are going to have more foreign talents to raise the competition level for our local athletes. So the SSC will have to play a more active role for those that are not school-based, whether in the Sports School or foreign athletes, and we have to plan more structured programmes for the NSAs along with SSC and MCYS to integrate these athletes, and we have to add value to that process.

Dr Lam Pin Min (Ang Mo Kio): Sir, I would like to thank the Minister for his response yesterday. I am indeed disappointed that the Ministry will not consider providing caregiver's allowance. I believe that many low-income and lower middle-income families who belong to the typical family that I have alluded to during my cut yesterday will be disappointed as well.

I also beg to disagree with the Minister that the caregiver's allowance is necessarily what we call deadweight funding, and that it will dilute the amount of assistance that we can provide to the beneficiaries. The caregiver's allowance, just like the WIS, can be devised such that families who need more help will get more help and vice versa. In addition, the many available initiatives that the Minister had alluded to, such as tax relief, the maid levy concessions, etc, do not really benefit families from the lower middle-income families. Many of these families actually fall into the group where they either do not qualify for financial assistance or Workfare scheme available currently. Therefore, I urge the Ministry not to dismiss this totally but to consider studying how other countries are doing this, so that we can modify the scheme to best suit our needs and to reach out to those who actually need them most.

2.00 pm

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: Sir, Dr Lam will know that in medicine, we never say never. Similarly, in public policy, we have to constantly review the situation. But at

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any point in time, a decision has to be made and a position taken and the rationale given. I have said that at this point in time, we are not in favour of having a caregiver's allowance. I believe he quite rightly identified the challenge

when he said that some families need more help, and I can accept that as a starting point. If you agree that some families need more help, then the key is to identify the characteristics of these families that need more help and to identify who and where these families are. Then the next thing is to decide what are the additional resources or money which they need. If you work through that logic, caregiver's allowance is just one of many options which can be considered to devote more resources to these families in need. And I said yesterday that I was not in favour of it because it was a complicated thing. You are trying to put value first on family and filial responsibility but, more important than that, it still requires significant resources and, at the end of the day, my job is to take whatever resources that I have available from MOF, but ultimately from the taxpayers of Singapore, and channel those resources to those in greatest need. It is just that at this point in time, I would rather focus my mind on identifying who are these families that he has spoken about who have exceptional needs, who need more help, rather than giving everybody who declares that he or she is a caregiver an allowance, and that is what I meant by "deadweight funding". I am not convinced that this is the most targeted, focused way of channelling more resources to those in need. Having said that, if he can devise such a scheme, I will be most happy to consider it.

Mr Sam Tan Chin Siong (Tanjong Pagar): My clarifications for the Minister are on the HOPE scheme. In his reply to my question yesterday, the Minister said that the criteria for the HOPE scheme were reviewed, revised and relaxed last year. So I thank the Minister for that.

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I would like to request the Minister to re-examine two of the criteria at an opportune time. One is the age of the mother. The current criterion for the age of the mother is 35 and below, but I know that for mothers who are 36, maybe up to 40, they still have young children. So, if they are kept out of this scheme, the educational prospect of their children will be dented. The second criterion that I hope the Minister will review is the condition that the husband must be working in order to qualify for the HOPE scheme. I know there are some cases where the husbands are not able to work because they are retrenched or because of some medical conditions. If they are kept out of the scheme again, this actually will be like a double whammy for the family. So I hope that the Minister can review these two criteria at the right time. In the meanwhile, I hope that the Ministry can exercise some flexibility.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: That is precisely the reason why I set up a committee headed by Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon so that when there are exceptional circumstances which require flexibility, this committee can do so. But, again, I just want to remind everyone that we still need to have criteria, and there still needs to be a cut-off point. We can argue, age 35, 34 or 36, but wherever you set it, there will be boundary issues. On the issue of work, again, Members know, I start from the starting point that we want to encourage people to work and we do not want to have a situation where the person's chances of getting a hundred thousand dollars is enhanced simply by saying that, "I'm unemployed." But if there are genuine and real reasons for his status, then we will exercise flexibility, and I would encourage Members to send their appeals to Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon.

Assoc. Prof. Kalyani K Mehta (Nominated Member): Mr Chairman, I am really heartened by the proactive approach

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taken by MCYS for our future plans. Can the Minister clarify to the House the difference between the centre for seniors that I believe is being launched very soon and the centre for third age which was mentioned by Mr Lim yesterday? I think it would be good for all of us to know the difference between the two. The second point is on training for youth workers in general. Earlier, this was discussed in relation to the Malay community. Can I request some clarification on the current training for youth workers at MCYS?

The Minister, Prime Minister's Office (Mr Lim Boon Heng): The centre for seniors is a VWO set up by NTUC Eldercare with five other partners and its focus would be on providing general counselling, a helpline, as well as counselling for work, ie, helping senior Singaporeans who want to find employment. Also, we will be looking at working with some partners on how to provide some programmes to keep the seniors actively engaged. There is obviously some duplication with the Centre for Third Age because the Centre for Third Age would be



overseen by a Council that would actively work with different organisations to provide more activities for seniors. So you would regard the Centre for Third Age (C3A), which I announced yesterday, as the organisation that would be working with the different organisations that we have on how to do various things for seniors whereas the centre for seniors has got very limited and definite areas of interest.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: I will answer the question on training of youth workers. Actually, it is part of a larger question of social workers and other professionals in social services. When we started off, I think we were grateful that anyone would just say that he or she is a youth worker or a social worker. There were no minimum standards and no certification. Even today, I am not sure that we have a

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formal register of social workers which allows someone to say that this person is a qualified or licensed social worker or not. But in the Ministry, and we have been discussing this with NCSS as well as the VWOs, we believe the time has come in Singapore to establish such a professional register to define the qualifications, training and experience, but this is not something which I want to impose. I want to work with the sector too because if you believe in social work and social services as a profession, then one hallmark of the profession is self-regulation. So my Ministry will work with the profession on this.

The next thing then is that we also realise there is a need for professional upgrading, to stay in touch, and that is why I announced yesterday that we set aside funds which can be used to attend courses, take sabbaticals, and to make sure that with time, people get to refresh and sharpen their professional skills. The other issue we looked at was the capacity, ie, do we have training places in the universities and institutes of higher learning, even in the private centres? And also within NCSS, they have established what we call the SSTI (Social Services Training Institute). So, we are looking at a combination of measures - self-regulation, professional definition, professional upgrading and capacity for training. All in all, what we hope to achieve is that we will have enough social workers and youth workers. All these workers will be properly qualified, properly trained, and we will be able to have a self-sustaining sector well capable of upgrading itself.

Dr Fatimah Lateef: Two points, Sir. More and more Singapore NGOs are participating in humanitarian activities, both locally as well as overseas. We have heard MINDEF's response a couple of days ago about coordinating the efforts of local NGOs. I have seen smaller NGOs which are not so well coordinated on the

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ground overseas. They seem to be lost and rather uncoordinated. I would like to seek the Minister's advice or plans as to whether this is a possibility of MCYS being the umbrella body to coordinate some of these NGOs under a Singapore-incorporated effort in responding to such disasters.

The second point is pertaining to hotlines and improving communication channels. I would like to cite an example. I actually tried to call the destitute hotline over one-and-a-half days over a Friday and a Saturday with no response. This was pertaining to an elderly man, 70 years of age, and his companion, a 40-year old woman, who were living in the void deck. I tried to secure them a shelter and I actually had to personally call several nursing homes, even SAGE as well as several VWOs and family service centres, to actually locate shelter for them over the weekend. Actually, if the hotline works over the Friday and Saturday, it would be a lot better and easier for all of us.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: I apologise if the hotline service was not functioning. Next time, just call one of us directly. I think there is no excuse for these operational services to be unavailable.

I come back to the Member's first question on NGOs, particularly as they perform work overseas. I had a first-hand experience of this when the tsunami occurred. That was in December 2004. The first lesson I learnt was that there is a role for Government and there is also a separate and complementary role for NGOs. Yes, in terms of assets, the ability to mobilise resources - move, transport project, people and assets - nothing beats the military, and the military belongs to the Government. But in terms of volunteers, getting people to exercise compassion and donate money out of their own free will, that is surely the domain of NGOs.



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Then the next issue that came up was coordination and there were calls at that time for MCYS to coordinate, to take the lead. I decided that MCYS would act as the secretariat. That means we would not lead but we would facilitate. We would help, we would connect and we would network. So, yes, we did call meetings but at all these meetings, I took great pains to ensure that leadership and ownership belonged to the non-government organisations, and I said that we were there to help them overcome obstacles, hurdles, and to connect them with the right people.

In the case of the tsunami, it was obviously getting people, the donations and the assets that they had collected and to be able to project them and their assets into the areas of operations. And, I think, at the end of that experience, it worked out quite nicely. There was not this sense that Government was taking over and running the NGOs because if we did that, they would no longer be NGOs. But another interesting thing happened. I think some NGOs - and I think the Member participated in at least a couple of those missions - after a while, decided that they would call themselves Team Singapore. I never imposed that on them but they called themselves Team Singapore and they happily and proudly put on the Singapore flag, and I want to encourage that kind of spontaneous self-organisation. Yes, Government will stand by, Government will support and facilitate, but let us keep the leadership and that sense of commitment, passion and ownership entirely with the people sector. So, I think, I can say with a fair amount of confidence that the level of trust and communication of our NGOs, Government and MCYS is probably at a reasonably happy and functioning level, and I think she can probably attest to that herself.

Miss Penny Low (Pasir Ris-Punggol): Mr Chairman, a few points of clarification.

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The Minister mentioned that the Ministry will play a facilitating role and work with the NGOs and also maintain the integrity of the NGOs. I think that is something that is laudable. But I think that some of the NGOs require some form of support, not only funding, which is primarily what it is at the moment, but also a source of income stream. So my question is whether the Minister can also consider hiving off some parts of the MCYS' functions, for example, the call centre itself, to an NGO which could be a social enterprise that could then also have an income stream as a demand floor to serve the members of the public. Then, of course, in the midst of that, it creates more viable income stream for the social enterprise.

I have other points of clarifications, Sir.

2.15 pm

The Chairman: Let the Minister answer first.

Miss Penny Low: Okay.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: I was smiling at Ms Denise Phua when she said that, because she usually scolds me for outsourcing. Let me put it this way. If there are jobs which can be best performed by the private sector or people sector, we would happily outsource it. Because my attitude is that it is not important exactly who does it, but make sure the job is done well and that resources are spent in a cost-effective and 

fair way. Yes, I will be most happy to look for those opportunities, but I am also mindful, before Ms Denise Phua stands up, that I accept her principle that there are some things which perhaps the Government should do because Government does best. So let us keep an open mind, and realise that the situation is changed. We have to be flexible and to adapt accordingly.

Column: 3530

Miss Penny Low: I thank the Minister for his answer and I do agree that there are functions that should be still within MCYS, but those on the periphery should certainly be examined. But in view of the increasing income gap, the ageing society, I think the need for social programmes will always be on the increase. And the Minister mentioned very clearly in his speech yesterday, and even today, that the key is in building a self-reliant society. One very powerful solution is obviously the social enterprises and the socially responsible enterprises, and there is, in fact, a SE documentary, an eight-part TV documentary ---

The Chairman: Please make the clarification.

Miss Penny Low: I am contextualising it. It is being shown today. It shows how the change makers could keep themselves afloat and, at the same time, benefit those marginalised part of the society. Hence, would the Minister agree that, first, social enterprise is an important pillar to a self-reliant society and, if he agrees with it, then would he consider the current funding of \$3 million compared to \$140 million of social programmes way too conservative?

The Chairman: Thank you, Miss Low.

Miss Penny Low: One last point, Sir, with your indulgence.

The Chairman: Okay, in one sentence.

Miss Penny Low: Yes, thank you. The Minister also mentioned that the needy should turn to the grassroots organisations for financial and other help. Grassroots are volunteers. They also need to raise funds. Would MCYS consider supporting grassroots-based social enterprise so that they can, through their action leadership, also set the ethos for a self-reliant society? That would also be an excellent way to attract young volunteers.

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Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: A short answer to her long sentence is that in Dr Teo Ho Pin's constituency, you would see an example of a grassroots social enterprise and a very successful community kitchen which he runs out of his CC.



Let me come back to her first question which is on social enterprises, whether we consider it important and whether we are putting enough resources to it. To be honest with her, I think the field of social enterprises is still evolving. While there are some very good successes, there are mixed results elsewhere. I do not like taking an ideological position. I do not want to take an ideological position that social enterprises are the panacea to all our social problems and, therefore, instead of spending \$140 million on social assistance, I channel \$140 million to social enterprises and I only have \$3 million for public assistance, and then I will have problems with Dr Lily Neo.

My attitude is that this is a field that is evolving. Let us get our feet wet and let us see where it goes. One caveat which I want to emphasise, however, is that the business aspect of social enterprise must be viable. If it is not viable, and it needs a subsidy, then it is not a business. So even if you say you need more money, and I can accept the fact that there will probably be a need for more money, just bear in mind that this money should be seed funding. It is not an ongoing subsidy. Even if you take that example of microcredit for which Mohammad Yunus won a Nobel Prize, he did not receive a huge level of subsidies from the Government or the World Bank or any other developmental agency. What he had was an idea that made business sense, that was practical and then took off, because it was fundamentally right. Could the idea, however, have been facilitated if seed funding was available? The answer is, yes. But if the idea was fundamentally flawed and required long-term subsidies, it is not right anyway.

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So all I am saying is, yes, social enterprises is something which we do want to explore for which we are willing to put seed funding. But let us not be too ideological about it.

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar): Sir, I seek the Minister's response to the other recommendations in the Ageing Masterplan. Amongst them, better funding of the early intervention programme; building quality, not just increasing capacity; and to stop setting up early intervention centres unless there is proper preparation of the teachers and proper scaleable intervention models so that the children are helped and not hurt.

My second clarification, Sir, is to ask the Minister to consider the decision to matchmake the IDA IT funding with only one VWO, ie, the Society for Physically Disabled (SPD), and ask that part of this funding be diverted to the other major disability groups which have a lot more experience in training children and students of other disabilities, and that there probably could be more value-add in diverting some of this funding to the other centres.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: First question, more money for early intervention programmes, the answer is, yes, we have committed to that. In fact, when we introduced the very unpopular move of means testing, I had also committed that we would put more money into this sector. In fact, with means testing, some parents would pay a little bit more, plus our additional funding, overall, the pie for early intervention will increase as far as dollars and cents are concerned.

But what is more important is her second point, that is, not quantity and it is not just absolute dollars, but the quality of these early intervention programmes. In this regard, I will have to stand advised by

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the professionals, the people and the stakeholders with the most in the sector, and, therefore, you are aware that we are working very closely with MOE and, where relevant, we are also working with the VWOs because they are still the primary stakeholders in this sector.

The issue of quality will always be somewhat controversial. Because if you take 10 VWOs and you ask them to assess each other's quality, it gets difficult. So what we can do then is start working on teachers, making sure that teachers in these programmes have training, appropriate qualifications, opportunities to upgrade themselves, and access to the latest research, latest methods in pedagogy, and so on and so forth. Equally important is the education of parents. As a healthcare professional, nothing hurts me more than to see parents clutching at straws in getting all kinds of treatments, or so-called treatments, because they hope it will make a difference to their children.



Very often, they are just wasting time and money and, as she has said, sometimes, actually hurting the children. So what we need is a good public education programme. I feel that we need to assemble a group of people, and she knows once I said that, that means another group of concerned stakeholders out there. I am not talking about setting up another civil service committee. A group of experts out there, it needs people to sit down, review the literature and see what works, what does not work, what is useful, what is not useful, what is harmful, and then we need to make sure that parents and other stakeholders have access to this information and then rational choices will be made. Because, otherwise, now, you have a situation where people are reacting to hearsay or, worse, reacting to stuff they read on the Internet with no verification, and they are making all kinds of demands for all kinds of services which may or

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may not do any good, and, as she herself has said, sometimes, it does more harm than good.

Her final point is on the IDA funding. In fact, MCYS also funds assistive technology. I will take the approach that I will make this available, not necessarily to just one agency, but to all VWOs that show they are capable of making these detailed evaluations as to what appliance or software programme is most applicable in these conditions. I have to strike a balance. If I take the money and distribute it equally to everyone, what is likely to happen is that each of the VWOs will never develop the depth of experience and expertise needed to make these detailed evaluations. On the other hand, if I give it to one person, then I have nine other VWOs who are very unhappy why I have given to that one monopoly. So my attitude is that I am not aiming for monopoly, but what I am aiming for is to have at least one and, preferably, more agencies that are capable of doing these detailed evaluations and matching IT appliances and IT programmes to the needs of the disabled. If she has organisations that are willing to put their hand out, I am sure my staff will be happy to consider.

The Chairman: I will allow clarifications up to 2.30 pm. Mr Baey Yam Keng.

Mr Baey Yam Keng (Tanjong Pagar): Sir, this is a question for the Parliamentary Secretary. In the promotion of sporting culture and high participation in sports, accessibility to sports facilities should be important and key. In providing funding for NSAs and in setting their KPIs, how does the Ministry differentiate between those which have easy access to almost free facilities, for example, athletes can always jog any time anywhere, basketball courts which are available in many neighbourhoods built by town councils, versus those which have to pay much to

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rent or hire facilities to practise, for example, volleyball. For this, I have to declare my interest as the President of the Volleyball Association of Singapore.

Mr Teo Ser Luck: The funding allocation is based on three pillars and we have repeated that many times, and I will repeat that again - sports excellence, high participation and sports industry. When a fund is disbursed, we need to look at the long-term plan of what the NSA is trying to achieve for its athletes. So whatever you are trying to achieve in training, and achievements, it must be supported, of course, by the facilities and all that you need to build the infrastructure for that achievement or training. So the fund is disbursed according to your needs and, of course, as he knows, there is a limitation of resources. So most of the time, we are unable to give 100% of what you ask for. But that is exactly why in my speech, I emphasised the fact that the Sports Council and the Ministry will, together with NSAs, as a consolidated effort, look at additional funding from the private sector, and we can have the private sector involved as well. So it is a 3P partnership.

Let us say, in the case of volley ball, if you are looking for additional facilities for beach volley ball, then, of course, the beach is there but you probably need to demarcate it for competition. What do you need in order to do that? What exactly are you trying to achieve from there? Are you organising an international event? And if you are organising an international event, say, for beach volley ball, and you need to upgrade the sand regardless of whether there is a sand ban or not, that will be by project and the funding can be considered to be given out on a project basis. So it could be a long-term plan, it could be a short-term plan, based on the needs of the sports and the association.

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2.30 pm



Dr Lily Neo: Sir, I want to check with the Minister again on the strict criteria on the entitlement for PA recipients. May I ask him what is his definition of "subsistence living"? Am I correct to say that, out of \$260 per month for PA recipients, \$100 goes to rental, power supply and S&C, and leaving them with only \$5 a day to live on? Am I correct to say that any basic

meal in any hawker centre is already \$2.50 to \$3.00 per meal? Therefore, is it too much to ask for just three meals a day as an entitlement for the PA recipients?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: How much do you want? Do you want three meals in a hawker centre, food court or restaurant?

Dr Lily Neo: It is cheaper to cook for one person.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: It is cheaper to cook for one person.

The point I was trying to make is that every family will have different needs and preferences. I am not by any stretch of the imagination claiming that what we are offering as public assistance is a generous package. I am not saying that. But what I am saying is that it is enough, by and large, for most families to get by and, for those who have needs over and beyond that, there are other means to do so. If every one was starving on this amount that we are giving and is totally devoid of any other sources of help, Pelangi Home would be overcrowded, and I would be building many, many more Pelangi Homes. So, in the end, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Yes, any one of us, if we search hard enough, may be able to find a family or people who need additional help. But I would also say that any one of us, if we really put our minds to it, is capable of finding those additional sources of help. What I am designing is a system in which

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public assistance can and should be complemented by other sources of help. I think we can continue arguing this and we can continue finetuning the exact amount that is needed. But let us just bear in mind the fact that the system is set up with a certain amount of tension, and it is a healthy tension.

In fact, I cannot resist saying that I am very disappointed that in the whole debate on MCYS, the Opposition MPs have not participated in this, and I have actually faced real probing questions more from the PAP MPs and the Nominated MPs. Perhaps, they totally agree with my policies, philosophy and programmes.

The Chairman: Ms Sylvia Lim, that is an invitation!

Ms Sylvia Lim (Non-Constituency Member): Sir, I just would like to repeat my response to the Minister in the lift actually, that there are still four years to go. 

Mdm Halimah Yacob: In our effort to promote resilience and independence on the part of underprivileged families and individuals, I would like to ask the Minister whether the Minister can work with the NEA and other agencies to allow such families, if they want to put up booths and sell some products in public places, some flexibility. Right now, it is extremely difficult for them to try and eke out a living in order to be self-sufficient. I have a resident who was fined \$200 for selling something in a public place. But then he came to me and said, "But that is the way. I need the money for my family. I am a low-income worker." So I think we need some flexibility. We are concerned about certain things, eg, hygiene and messiness, but I think we should be able to live with some of these. So I hope the Minister will work with other agencies to

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help these individuals become more resilient and self-sufficient.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: I agree entirely with the Member. Part of our problem is that we have become so well-organised and squeaky clean a society that there are very little, in ecological terms, niches where people can sustain themselves. I agree with the Member that we need to be flexible. But I think that we also need to understand - the Minister for the Environment is not here - that NEA also has to manage its own set of trade-offs. Hygiene, food poisoning, public health, waste disposal are always an issue. The solution - again, to use Dr Teo Ho Pin as an example - is, if at the local level, you can organise it such that people can make some money, generate some living, and it is safe, hygienic and does not break any rules, or, if need be, come to the Ministries and change those rules so that they are more flexible and people do not get fined.

We want, ultimately, to create a society in which people like that are encouraged. They have some skills which they can translate into an honest day's living, let us enable them to do so. Let us change rules, exercise flexibility, facilitate, help them, set up social enterprises, have an army of concerned individuals out there calling hotlines, emailing us, badgering us in the House, outside the House, in the lift, etc. To me, this is healthy. It shows a society in which the work ethic is still there, opportunities are still present, people still care and we have a system of government that is responsive and flexible to enable us to take care of the most vulnerable members of our society in a way which keeps their self-respect and allows all of us to live and do well with a clear conscience. That, ultimately, is what my Ministry's work is all about.

Mr Sin Boon Ann: Sir, may I have the opportunity of one more question?

The Chairman:

Column: 3539

Yes, please go ahead. Make it short.

Mr Sin Boon Ann: Yes. I just want to take up from where MOS mentioned yesterday concerning the length of time it takes for CDC to respond to financial assistance applications. She said, if I could recall, that it takes at least six weeks, or within six weeks, the applications should be processed. Can I just ask the MOS to perhaps explain to me what she means by processing within six weeks?

The Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports (Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon): I thought, this year, after so many explanations, and only two cuts on ComCare, the Advisors are all very clear about how the PA, ComCare, CCCs, the Mayors, and the CDCs have done a very wonderful job. Actually, among the Mayors, I should say that we still need to streamline the standards. Some take the six weeks from the receipt of the case. Others take the six weeks from the date they communicate with the applicants. So I think there is still a



need to standardise that. But, on average, I should say they have done a wonderful job. If you compare with 2001, ie, before we set up ComCare or CDC, MCYS took about three months on average. When the CDCs took over, they reduced it to about eight weeks. Now they are working hard to reduce it to within six weeks.

But even in some cases, if we think six weeks are too long to help them, then we should use the CCC ComCare Fund. Yesterday, some MPs mentioned that we need to ask for more funds. Of course, I am sure Members know that the Minister has also announced that the CCC ComCare Fund will have an additional \$5 million for the next five years. But on going through the accounts, I do agree that some wards, eg, Dr Lily Neo's, would have more destitutes or aged people and need more funds. But I should say that

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some of the wards still have quite big sums of balance. So, maybe the Mayors can also help us to adjust and coordinate the funds a little, to redistribute the funds to those wards that need more. And I hope that the Advisors and the Chairmen of the CCC ComCare Fund can apply the flexibility to really see that cases that need immediate help would be given help from this fund, to help them for the time being.

As the Minister also said, besides the ComCare Fund, at this moment, we have a lot of help at the ground level, especially the free meals. A needy person can have a meal without having to pay any cent. For example, Moral Home has a *halal* kitchen that provides free meals to a few thousand ---

The Chairman: Mrs Yu-Foo, I think that was not asked.

Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon: Yes, I am just trying to show that there are actually many helping hands out there.

The Chairman: Dr Teo, what is the point? Just a very quick one, please.

Dr Teo Ho Pin (Bukit Panjang): Just to clarify. I think when the case is registered on the SC net, meaning that when the case information is given, the CDC staff will key it in, and that is when the clock starts. And it is closed either when we reject it or when it is processed and help is given. So we close the case when it is endorsed. Actually, that is the time we measure. So, today, more than 90% of cases actually have been processed within six weeks, with the bulk of them within four weeks.

Mr Sin Boon Ann: Sir, I would like to thank the Ministers, the Minister of State and the Parliamentary Secretary for a very comprehensive reply and I would also like to thank them for the update on the good work that the Ministry has done since last

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year's sitting of the Committee of Supply. The work of the Ministry certainly underscores the fact that we are a young nation and we are still some way towards strengthening our social cohesion, our sense of inclusiveness and national identity. More importantly, I think the message that we are sending out to all Singaporeans is that we are a fair and inclusive society. By an inclusive society, we also want to send a signal to all Singaporeans, including the elderly, the young and the not-so-well-to-do, that they are just as much a part of the Singapore society as all of us are. I have no doubt that Singaporeans will remain committed to this vision of making our Singapore Dream a reality.

On that note, I beg leave to withdraw my amendment.



Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$1,046,783,860 for Head I ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$230,809,800 for Head I ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.