

Panel on ageing plans more initiatives this year

By **LYNETTE KHOO**

[SINGAPORE] Singapore has made significant progress in preparing for an ageing population and more initiatives will be pursued this year, the Ministerial Committee on Ageing (MCA) said yesterday.

In its review of 2007, the MCA cited major achievements, including

measures to enhance the employability and financial security of seniors; providing affordable healthcare; enabling ageing-in-place through enhancing a barrier-free and accessible environment; and promoting active ageing.

The MCA, chaired by Minister Lim Boon Heng, coordinates efforts across ministries to address the

challenges and opportunities of Singapore's ageing population. A total of 39 recommendations by the Committee on Ageing Issues (CAI), an inter-agency forum set up in December 2004, have been or are being implemented.

Last year, the government announced measures aimed at helping Singaporeans work longer, improve returns on Central Provident Fund savings, and making savings last for the lifetime of CPF members.

The employment rate of older residents aged 55 to 64 rose by 2.5 percentage points over the year to 56.2 per cent in June 2007.

"More will be done to positively shape the mindsets of employers and employees towards employing older workers and to facilitate the redesign of jobs to make them more suited for older workers," the MCA said.

The government also implemented the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) scheme for older low-wage workers last year, in addition to lowering their CPF contribution rates to enhance their employability and increase their take-home pay.

Proposed changes to CPF interest rates to improve returns on CPF savings took effect at the beginning of this month. The minimum sum drawdown age is also being progressively raised from the current 62 to 65 by 2018 to make savings last longer. An HDB lease buyback scheme that gives the elderly an option to monetise their flats was also announced last year.

The government is now considering a longevity insurance scheme which will give CPF members a basic income for as long as they live. A committee chaired

by Professor Lim Pin is studying the design of a scheme that can provide basic, affordable and flexible plans to ensure lifelong income for CPF members.

The ElderShield Scheme was also enhanced, with new basic ElderShield paying \$400 per month for up to six years, raised from \$300 per month for five years previously.

The MCA said the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and the Ministry of Health (MOH) are now conducting a review of elder-care services to better enable ageing-in-place. "There is potential for the private sector to expand its role in an ageing population to meet different needs of different population segments.

"In the nursing home market, MOH will look to facilitate the entry of providers which can add value to

this sector and introduce measures to encourage market competition," it added.

To enhance ageing-in-place, HDB is working closely with the Town Councils to ensure that the Barrier-Free Accessibility (BFA) Masterplan developed since 2006 will be achieved in all HDB estates by 2011. Meanwhile, its ongoing Lift Upgrading Programme is on track to achieving full lift access for all eligible HDB blocks by 2014, the MCA said.

Most MRT stations are now barrier-free and by 2010, 40 per cent of the public bus fleet will be wheelchair-accessible.

The government also launched a pilot Wellness Programme last year to help the elderly lead healthy lifestyles. And the Council for the Third Age was set up to promote active ageing here.