

Panel on ageing reports progress

Its achievements include barrier-free estates, Medisave top-ups for needy elderly

BY JEREMY AU YONG

BARRIER-FREE estates, wheelchair-friendly buses and Medisave top-ups for the needy elderly count among the Ministerial Committee on Ageing's achievements last year.

Led by Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Boon Heng, it released its report card yesterday. And by all accounts, it is a glowing one, with experts describing 2007 as the year Singapore sat up and paid serious attention to ageing issues.

The 28-page report is filled with steps taken to deal with ageing. Among them, the committee detailed progress made on 39 recommendations by its predecessor, the Committee on Ageing Issues.

Of the 39 proposals, the report showed that most have been implemented, with the rest well on the way to being put into action.

For example, work on the recommendation to make all HDB precincts barrier-free is on schedule. As of last November, 122 precincts were already barrier-free, with the rest to be completed by 2011.

Another suggestion – that the Government top up the Medisave accounts of the needy when there are budgetary surpluses – was also implemented. Last year, it topped up the accounts of Singaporeans aged above 50 with amounts ranging between \$67 and \$333. These top-ups will be distributed over four years.

Apart from such recommendations, the report also pointed to achievements like the higher employment rate among older residents, the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) scheme for older low-wage workers, and last week's Silver Industry Conference and Exhibition as signs of the strides Singapore has made to deal with the issue of an ageing population.

As of June last year, 56.2 per cent of those aged between 55 and 64 were working, a 2.5 percentage point increase from the year before.

One of the reasons for the boost is the WIS scheme for older low-wage workers announced in last year's Budget. The scheme, which supplements the income of older workers who have lower CPF contribution rates, is part of a larger plan to get Singaporeans to work longer.

The report also mentioned the conference and exhibition, where international experts spoke on ageing.

Add to that the changes to the CPF scheme, the establishment of the Council for Third Age to champion active ageing, and the announcement of an HDB reverse mortgage scheme, and it marked a busy year for the ministerial committee that was set up only in March.

Looking back on the developments, Singapore Action Group of Elders chief executive Phua Kok Tee said the appointment of Mr Lim to head the committee was a sign of how seriously the Government took the ageing issue. "A lot of effort had been put into this matter last year and I look forward to more concrete steps taken this year."

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