$15m care fund for protection workers to be launched on Feb 1 after Megan Khung case

Those handling domestic violence cases can access mental health support, wellness leave

Christine Tan

Social workers, care staff and other practitioners who handle domestic violence cases will benefit from mental health support and other well-being initiatives, including wellness leave, through a new $15 million care fund.

The Protection Practitioners Care Fund will be launched on Feb 1 and is expected to benefit more than 1,000 such professionals, said the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS).

Minister of State for Social and Family Development Goh Pei Ming gave this update at the Strong Families, Safe Homes: Casa Raudha Domestic Violence Awareness Roadshow, held at Our Tampines Hub on Jan 24.

"We recognise that protection work is emotionally demanding, and protection practitioners are regularly exposed to trauma, such as when their clients share with them their domestic violence experiences," he said.

Noting that the practitioners face pressure from dealing with urgent and high-risk cases on a daily basis, he added: "When we speak to the social service agencies (SSAs), they too share this sentiment and (agree) that we need to take action in this space."

Mr Goh said the SSAs have shared various ideas on how to provide better care for their protection practitioners.

"I'm glad that many of the SSAs that we've spoken to have shared that they are looking forward to using this care fund to provide their practitioners with counselling, with mentorship, and with various other forms of well-being support," he said.

The fund was first mentioned by Minister-in-charge of Social Services Integration Desmond Lee in Parliament in November, among other measures to improve safeguards in the child protection system after the fatal abuse of Megan Khung.

The four-year-old girl was physically and emotionally abused for more than a year by her mother and the latter's boyfriend before she died in 2020, in a case that sparked outrage and numerous questions in Parliament.

One of the seven recommendations by an independent review panel on Megan's case, which released its findings in October, called for a stronger culture of support for those involved in child protection work.

To qualify for the care fund, the protection practitioners must be working in SSAs funded by MSF, which provide services that support individuals and families impacted by family violence.

This includes social workers, case workers, social work associates, care staff and their supervisors in agencies such as protection specialist centres, crisis shelters and family service centres.

The fund can be used to make alternative manpower arrangements, allowing agencies to offer up to two weeks of wellness leave to protection practitioners, on a discretionary basis, in addition to annual leave.

Practitioners must have at least two years of protection-related experience in the same social service agency to be eligible for the wellness leave, MSF said.

Agencies can also utilise the fund to implement well-being initiatives, such as mental health support, coaching and mentorship and retreat programmes.

SSAs can apply for the care fund on the NCSS website.

Madam Zaharah Ariff, executive director of Casa Raudha, a shelter for survivors of domestic violence, said social workers put a lot of emotional investment in their work.

She added that she personally gets emotional when thinking about interactions with survivors who recounted abuse they endured.

"When you hear stories like this, you feel something... Somehow it will have that kind of impact, but you do not know when it will surface, you do not know when it will hit you," she said.

"Having this kind of support from the organisation means a lot. It shows that we care for you as much as we care for the clients."

Ms Beatrice Lee, a clinical psychologist and manager of the anti-violence team at Montfort Care, said about 50 protection practitioners in the organisation are expected to benefit from the care fund.

The stress of engaging families with complex needs, including having to work swiftly to put in place safety plans, can build up over time for staff, she added.

Noting that the wellness leave is a structured opportunity for rest and recharging, she said: "By allowing practitioners to return refreshed, it supports the sustainability of child protection work and strengthens the quality of services provided for children and their families."

She added that Montfort Care also hopes to use the fund for coaching and mentorship, bonding activities and retreats with reflective practices for their staff.

At the roadshow, members of the public participated in interactive exhibits and family-friendly activities aimed at empowering them to take action against domestic violence.

The roadshow also included game stations and an immersive, choice-based dating game called "Break Free", which raises awareness of intimate partner violence.

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