Abused child deaths: Social workers support plan for independent reviews

It is a step towards greater accountability, transparency and collective learning, they say

Theresa Tan
Senior Social Affairs Correspondent

The plan to conduct independent reviews for the deaths of all abused children known to social services in the future is a step towards greater accountability, transparency and collective learning, said social workers.

The move will help the social service sector better identify gaps, strengthen safeguards and learn from past lapses and missteps, they added. This is also a significant shift from the previous approach of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) carrying out bilateral reviews of incidents with individual social service agencies.

On Nov 5, Mr Desmond Lee, Minister-in-charge of Social Services Integration, announced in Parliament various measures – including a new social services coordination centre – to improve safeguards in the child protection system in the wake of Megan Khung's death.

The four-year-old girl died in 2020 after suffering over a year of horrific abuse by her mother and her former boyfriend.

An independent review panel, which released its findings on Megan's case on Oct 23, found a series of breaches by government agencies handling the case, including a Child Protective Service (CPS) officer failing to log calls by Megan's pre-school seeking help and police officers not following procedures.

The Child Protective Service, which is now known as Protective Service, comes under the MSF and has the statutory power to remove children from their abusive parents.

Mr Lee said the MSF will consult the social service sector on how best to implement the independent reviews.

Mr Daniel Lopez, a social worker by profession and an executive committee member of the Society Against Family Violence Singapore, said an independent review would provide greater objectivity and bring about more confidence and trust in the process.

Ms Lin Xiaoling, director of research and advocacy at the Singapore Children's Society, called the move encouraging and much-needed.

"Having independent reviews for all child deaths will allow us to spot significant patterns that are telltale signs of how well our system is working, and what needs to be enhanced."

While social workers await more details of the new centre, they noted the inherent complexity of managing child abuse cases, which often involves working with multiple agencies and ministries, and family members grappling with varied problems and needs.

The centre aims to better detect, make sense of and connect the dots for cases from different agencies, such as social services, education and other sectors. It will also provide tighter links to police operations.

Effective coordination is key to ensuring no critical issues or needs are overlooked, said Mr Martin Chok, Care Corner Singapore's deputy director of family and community services.

Singapore Children's Society's Ms Lin hopes the new centre will do more than to triage and escalate child abuse cases that require more intensive intervention. Triaging refers to assessing inquiries to determine the urgency of and appropriate response to safeguarding a child's safety.

She said: "We hope the coordination centre will play a key role in supporting relevant agencies to make sense of the information they already hold. Otherwise, each of these touchpoints may only see part of the picture and critical risks may go unnoticed."

Mr Lee also said the MSF will continue to manage staff workload and ensure that social workers are adequately resourced.

He said: "The risk of burnout is real and it is difficult to attract and retain people in child protection work."

To this end, the MSF will set up a Protection Practitioners Care Fund to implement capability building and well-being initiatives for protection professionals, he said. More details of the fund will be announced in 2026.

The average caseload in the social service sector has stayed at around 18 to 21 cases per worker, said Mr Lee, though this can vary between 12 and 30 cases per worker, depending on the centre.

For child protection officers, the average caseload has fallen to about 35 cases per officer now, as the number of such officers has doubled in recent years.

Mr Lee said the MSF will work with the social service sector to gradually implement, by end-2026, the recommendations put forth by the panel that looked at Megan's case.

These include setting up an appeals mechanism to address differing views on cases, and ensuring that agencies handling child protection have adequate resourcing.

Ms Han Yah Yee, chief executive of Montfort Care, said the new Care Fund signals stronger support for front-line workers' well-being and capability building.

She said social workers face emotional strain when they are constantly exposed to the traumatic experiences of abused children and have to deal with aggressive and uncooperative parents.

These pressures, on top of a heavy workload, can lead to burnout, she said.

Mr Chok hopes the new Care Fund will support staff training and development programmes and paid sabbatical leave, so that staff return to work after being recharged.

Ms Soh Siew Fong, director of clinical services at Pave Integrated Services, said that what matters is not just the number of cases each staff member handles at a time, but also the intensity and complexity of cases.

She stressed the importance of providing sufficient support and supervision, so staff feel safe to raise concerns.

She said: "If the front-liners' well-being is better supported, this may spur more people to join the field and improve retention rates."

theresat@sph.com.sg



On Nov 5, Mr Desmond Lee, Minister-in-charge of Social Services Integration, announced in Parliament various measures – including a new social services coordination centre – to improve safeguards in the child protection system in the wake of the death of Megan Khung (left). PHOTO: INSTAGRAM/SIMONBOYYYYYYY

IMPROVING RETENTION

If the front-liners' well-being is better supported, this may spur more people to join the field and improve retention rates.

MS SOH SIEW FONG, director of clinical services at Pave Integrated Services, on the importance of providing sufficient support and supervision for front-line staff.

INSIGHT