# Recommended pay for jobs in social service sector higher by 8% on average

## Guidelines updated every April to factor in average wage growth in overall job market

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The recommended salaries under guidelines for jobs in the social service sector are higher by about 8 per cent on average in the latest pay benchmarks released by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) on April 1.

For example, the starting pay of a social worker is $3,820 in the 2024 financial year (FY) guidelines, a 0.8 per cent increase from $3,790 in the FY2023 guidelines. FY2024 starts from April 2024 and ends in March 2025.

The starting pay for a staff nurse is $3,030 in the latest guidelines – a 10 per cent increase from $2,750 in the FY2023 guidelines. The information is gleaned from the FY2023 and FY2024 Social Service Sector Skills and Salary Guidelines posted on the NCSS website.

The FY2024 guidelines for the head of a social service agency (SSA) managing an operational budget of less than or equal to $3 million a year is $12,290 at the reference point – a 15 per cent jump from $10,690 in FY2023.

The reference point refers to salaries for staff who are competent at their jobs, but their wages are not at the maximum point yet.

A spokesperson for the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) told The Straits Times that the average increase of about 8 per cent in the FY2024 guidelines across job grades depends on the extent of the gap between the role's current salary and the revised market benchmarks.

Hence, job roles that are already at or over market benchmarks saw smaller increases, while those with a larger gap to the market benchmarks saw a larger increase.

The issue of salaries in the social service sector arose during the debate on the MSF's budget on March 6 when Social and Family Development Minister Masagos Zulkifli said the sector requires an additional 2,000 professionals over the next five years to meet the growing needs of Singapore society.

There are over 20,000 employees in the sector now.

Mr Masagos said MSF reviewed the sector's salary guidelines in 2023 to ensure wages are competitive with comparable roles in competing markets. Thus, the recommended pay rose by between 4 per cent and 15 per cent from April 2023, compared with the year before.

Mr Masagos said: "MSF and NCSS also adjusted funding to ensure professionals supporting our funded programmes can be paid within the guidelines."

He said that about 80 per cent of staff in the social service sector were paid according to the guidelines, based on the latest manpower and salary data in March 2022.

He added that over the next three years, the MSF and NCSS will work closely with MSF-funded SSAs to have their staff salaries adhere to the guidelines and provide targeted consultancy support for agencies that need more help to meet the guidelines.

The MSF spokesperson said: "SSAs that do not adhere to the guidelines or pay competitively risk losing quality manpower to competing organisations and markets, making it more challenging to effectively deliver their services.

"The MSF and NCSS will continue to monitor the salary adherence rate and assess if there is a need to introduce additional measures to accelerate SSAs' progress in paying competitive salaries in the sector."

While the pay guidelines are updated in April every year to factor in the average wage growth in the overall job market, more comprehensive reviews are conducted periodically, such as in 2023, to ensure that the guidelines remain relevant to changes in the job landscape in the social service sector, the spokesperson said.

The spokesperson said pay guidelines in the social service sector also take into consideration wages of comparable job roles in competing labour markets, such as healthcare and the general labour market. "In addition to ongoing strategies to improve career pathways and uplift the skills and competencies of social service professionals, ensuring competitive remuneration is also important to attract and retain talent in the social service sector."

The latest salary guidelines include benchmarks for counsellors, after the new counsellor track in the Skills Framework for Social Service was launched in November 2023.

For example, the starting salary for a counsellor is $3,820, and $6,600 for a senior counsellor.

While SSAs interviewed said it is not mandatory to follow the pay guidelines, they lose out in terms of staff recruitment and retention if they fail to do so.

Montfort Care's chief strategy officer Aileen Ng said salaries in the social service sector have increased significantly in the past decade, and they are now competitive compared with related jobs in other sectors.

For example, the starting pay for a social worker according to the 2012 guidelines was $2,760, compared with $3,820 in the latest guidelines. This is a 38 per cent jump.

At Montfort Care, close to 40 per cent of staff cited pay as a key factor behind their resignation in their exit interviews some three to five years ago.

Ms Ng said: "We no longer lose staff due to salaries. This is a strong testimony that salaries are now competitive."

In 2022, Montfort Care made significant salary adjustments for staff – hence reducing its attrition rate from 29 per cent then to 22 per cent today. Montfort Care, which has 380 staff, also follows the salary guidelines for the sector.

Smaller SSAs said the ability to raise enough income, such as through donations, remains a perennial challenge when it comes to matching the pay guidelines.

For one thing, many SSAs run programmes that are both funded and not funded by the MSF.

While the SSAs are given funding based on the pay guidelines for salaries of staff running MSF-funded programmes, the agencies also have to raise funds – or have sufficient money in the bank – to match any increase in the pay guidelines for staff not running MSF-funded programmes, said those interviewed.

It is neither tenable nor equitable to have two different pay scales for staff in similar roles – depending on whether the programme is funded by the MSF, those interviewed said.

Halogen Foundation Singapore chief executive Ivy Tse said the charity, which has about 30 employees, has been working hard to ensure it pays its staff based on the guidelines.

She said: "All our staff meet the salary guidelines, at least for their starting pay. And we are trying to work our way to growing our staff's pay to a higher percentile within each salary band, so it all goes back to growing our income.

"Our challenge is that we are dependent on donations, and many people still have the notion that their donations should go to the beneficiaries, instead of paying salaries. But we are a service sector, and salaries are a big part of our overhead cost."

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## Salary guidelines

| | With effect from April 2023 | | With effect from April 2024 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Starting salary ($) | Reference point* ($) | Starting salary ($) | Reference point* ($) |
| Social worker | 3,790 | 5,340 | **3,820** | **5,390** |
| Senior social worker | 6,530 | 8,160 | **6,600** | **8,250** |
| Psychologist | 4,580 | 5,730 | **4,620** | **5,790** |
| Senior psychologist | 6,260 | 7,820 | **6,880** | **8,600** |
| Therapist | 3,480 | 5,120 | **3,510** | **5,170** |
| Senior therapist | 5,820 | 7,070 | **5,880** | **7,140** |
| Enrolled nurse | 2,090 | 2,960 | **2,220** | **3,140** |
| Staff nurse | 2,750 | 4,000 | **3,030** | **4,400** |
| Senior staff nurse | 3,690 | 4,610 | **4,130** | **5,160** |
| Early intervention educator | 3,560 | 5,230 | **3,670** | **5,390** |
| Senior early intervention educator | 5,050 | 6,850 | **5,150** | **6,990** |
| Executive | 2,590 | 4,240 | **2,610** | **4,280** |
| Manager/senior manager | 5,780 | 6,820 | **6,120** | **7,220** |
| Centre manager | 7,170 | 8,470 | **7,890** | **9,320** |
| Head of agency managing operation budget of less than or equal to $3 million | 9,220 | 10,690 | **10,600** | **12,290** |
| Head of agency managing operation budget of over $10 million | 14,180 | 17,230 | **15,600** | **18,960** |

NOTE: *Reference point denotes the salaries of those who are competent on the job but have not reached their maximum salary points yet.

Source: NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS