

SOCIAL dimension

A PUBLICATION OF SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS



*Different Faces of
Social Work*

SOCIAL DIMENSION



A publication of Singapore Association of Social Workers

CONTENTS

VOL 2025/2: DIFFERENT FACES OF SOCIAL WORK

03 EDITOR'S NOTE

04 DIFFERENT FACES OF SOCIAL WORK *courage lim*

08 BEING AN INTRAPRENEURIAL SOCIAL WORKER WITH THE GOOD GANG *ho kah yoke & nicodemus ching*

13 PARTICIPATORY THEATRE FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN SINGAPORE *david puvan*

16 QUIET PERSISTENCE: THE FIGHT FOR HIV ADVOCACY IN SINGAPORE *chronos kwok*

19 SOCIAL WORK IS NOT THE COST CENTRE *charmaine chua*

22 PERSPECTIVES ON KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE SOCIAL WORKERS: A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION *troy jack thevathasan, william soh, rafidah ayob, alvin tan, roger tan*

25 THROWBACK ARTICLE *poon weng cheong, kong lai yee and geraldine Wong*

30 IS IT ONLY OPTION A OR OPTION B?: MY JOURNEY TO STAY RELEVANT FOR UNCOMMON ROLES IN SOCIAL WORK *tok kheng leng*

32 INTERVIEW WITH NANYANG POLYTECHNIC AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE IN INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME WINNER, MS YEO KA MI SERAPHINA *dr. nicodemus lim*

36 LICENSING IN SOCIAL WORK: REFLECTIONS FROM SWD 2025 PANEL DISCUSSION *hoo wen qian*

39 BEYOND AWARDS: A NEW CHAPTER IN SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL WORK STORY *rafidah mohamed ayob*



BEYOND AWARDS: A NEW CHAPTER IN SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL WORK STORY



PARTICIPATORY THEATRE FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN SINGAPORE

The views published do not necessarily represent the views of Social Dimension or SASW.

EDITOR'S NOTE

by **Sophie Cheng**
SASW Publications Committee Chair



SOCIAL DIMENSION is the biannual flagship publication of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW).

We are always on the look out for new Social Worker-Writers!

We welcome diverse viewpoints, commentaries, memes, stories, artwork, comics, new initiatives, etc. relating to Social Work in Singapore.

Also, reach out to us if you are a Social Work pioneer and would like to contribute to future issues via interviews or sharing past issues of Social Dimension.

✉ publications@sasw.org.sg

SASW Publications Standing Committee

chair / editor: Sophie Cheng

members / associate editors:

Amalia Ariffin, Eugene Tan,
Nicodemus Ching, Dr Nicodemus
Lim, Nicole Wong, Tok Kheng Leng

I am excited to present to you this issue of Social Dimension on the varied faces of Social Workers, showing us i) the varied paths that led us to Social Work as some share their journey before Social Work, as volunteers or as other professionals (e.g. lawyer); ii) the varied paths Social Work can take as some share how they have carved out different paths in Social Work profession (e.g. as a freelance practitioner) and even iii) creating novel paths of Social Work (e.g. using drama, writing one own's job description). All these point to the transformative nature of Social Work, a profession transformed by us; through us, impacting others; and with us, transforming us. The articles also remind me of the unique value Social Work can bring to our world.

This issue is really a culmination of the efforts of many, not just the team of writers and publications committee, executive committee and staff at the Singapore Association of Social Workers. This publication really is the outcome of our collective, including readers who have given feedback on what they like to read (thank you!), Social Workers who take part in the research Social Workers undertake (thank you!) and others. A huge hearty thank you to all who continue to journey with the fraternity.

While transformation is not new to us as seen in the throwback article, how we transform would need our continued dedication. There are words waiting to be written by Social Workers (not just our outstanding case notes but also future job descriptions, articles, etc), so let's pick up our pens and open our laptops for our future.

Sophie Cheng is a Social Work instructor at the National University of Singapore and Chair of the SASW Publications Standing Committee.



Different Faces of Social Work

by Courage Lim

About three years ago, I made the bold decision to leave my full-time role as a Senior Social Worker after 10 years in the profession. It wasn't an easy choice, but I felt a strong desire to explore what lay beyond Social Work. At the time, I was curious about how others lived, especially my clients who juggled multiple responsibilities and often couldn't make it for their sessions. So, like many of them, I became a platform delivery rider, cycling from place to place to deliver orders. It was truly exhausting!

That period on the road was eye-opening. Besides discovering hidden food gems, the physical demands, time pressure, and unpredictability of each day gave me a deeper appreciation for the tenacity and resilience of the clients I once worked with. I began to understand why some struggled to attend sessions. They weren't disengaged; they were simply surviving.



*Experiencing life as
a delivery rider*

After that chapter of exploration, I transitioned into private practice. It was both liberating and unsettling. Without the structure of a formal workplace, I found myself in an identity crisis. Was I a Social Worker, a counsellor, a therapist, or a coach? As I watched peers from my cohort advance confidently in their careers, some becoming principal Social Workers or assistant directors, I struggled with self-doubt and a lingering sense of FOMO (fear of missing out).

To find clarity in my professional journey, I reached out to others who had ventured into private practice. My conversations with them reminded me that Social Work doesn't always have to be practised in conventional settings. Its values and skills are relevant across many contexts. My direct practice experience allowed me to make training and academic content more relevant and grounded in real-life scenarios, offering students both practical and localised insights.

Private practice also gave me space to be creative and develop useful resources. Two outcomes of this creative freedom were the SMILE Framework and the GAME IT! card game. Drawing from years of family and youth work, I recognised how pivotal the parent-child relationship is. Grounded in Social Work theories and a client-centred approach, these resources were designed to support professionals, parents, and anyone keen on building stronger connections with young people. They reflect my commitment to making Social Work knowledge and skills accessible and engaging for both professionals and the public.

With these creations, I've had the privilege of presenting both locally and overseas. These experiences affirmed the value of alternative ways of practising Social Work. Beyond sharing my work, they opened up dialogues with others who are also keen on developing the profession further.

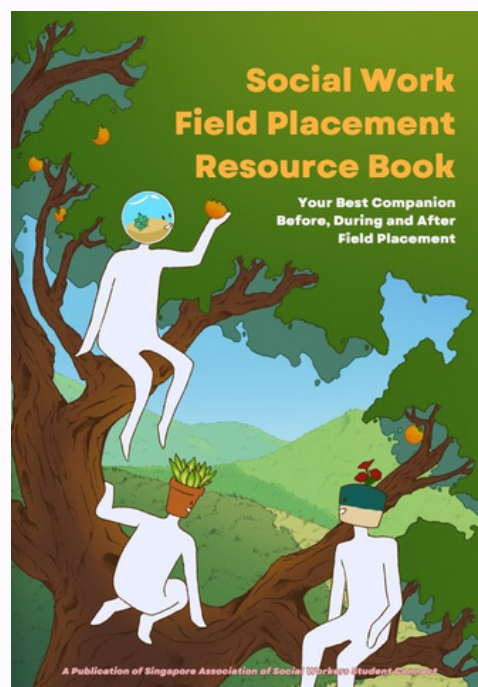


(Above) Presented the SMILE framework at the 1st International Conference on Responsible Gambling and Gaming Addiction held in Manila, Philippines 2024



(Right) Presented the GAME IT! card game at the 2nd International Conference on Responsible Gambling and Gaming Addiction in 2025, together with co-creator Regan Sie

Being part of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) gave me a sense of belonging and helped me stay connected. I'm especially grateful to the SASW School Social Work Chapter for recognising my experience in youth work and inviting me to be part of their projects, such as T-CARE. SASW's support also extended to an initiative I proposed through the SASW Student Connect Network to publish the Social Work Field Placement Resource Book for field placement students. The student leaders from NUS and SUSS — Cameron, Sarah, Noa and Terene behind this effort showed incredible dedication in creating resources for their peers, which deeply touched me. I'm also grateful to the practising Social Workers, who contributed to the resource book by responding to questions gathered from students. This collaboration between professionals and students shows how mutual sharing and learning can strengthen our professional identity and relationships.



*Social Work Field
Placement Resource Book*



The team behind the Field Placement Resource Book (Not pictured: Noa, the talented illustrator behind all the artwork)

Apart from teaching and training, I support professionals by offering external supervision, especially to newer Social Workers. I also serve as a field placement instructor for both the NUS and SUSS Social Work programmes. While it may seem like I am providing guidance to newer workers and students, I've never claimed to be an expert in everything I do. I believe learning is a two-way process. I gain just as much insight and inspiration from them as I hope to offer.

Private practice comes with its share of uncertainty, anxiety and the occasional bout of FOMO. But it also brings deep fulfillment and growth. I'm grateful to those who have trusted me, collaborated with me, and given me the opportunity to explore these different faces of Social Work.



Training a group of recovering persons to be peer supporters at halfway house

You are not alone in this profession. Social Work gives us a shared identity, one that brings like-minded people together, united by a commitment to make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of others. While the complexity of our work and the systems we navigate can at times be daunting, it is precisely in those moments that we must hold on to a strong sense of professional identity.



Sharing about youth vaping to professionals from the legal, education, youth work, and Social Work sectors

Courage Lim is a natural daydreamer who believes daydreaming is a key part of self-care and, importantly, where new ideas spark. Using Social Work theories and approaches, he turns those daydreams into resources anyone can use. Follow him on his Instagram: @mrcouragelim to daydream along or turn ideas into reality together!



Being an *Intrapreneurial* Social Worker with *The Good Gang*

by Ho Kah Yoke & Nicodemus Ching



The neighbourhood where TTKC resides and its entrance mural



It is a balmy dusk on a Friday, and the community children in a Boon Lay neighbourhood ride around on their scooters, blaring digital horns as they zip around. Many of them gather toward a cozy tricoloured space called Tak Takut Kids Club (TTKC). Social Dimension spent a few days in June 2025 with Assistant Director and Social Worker Ho Kah Yoke.

What started out as an arts-based outreach to community children in 2019 by 3Pumpkins founder Lin Shiyun has become a community movement for children, by children. Envisioned as a happy and safe community where children connect, grow and thrive, TTKC has earned its nickname as the “good gang in the neighbourhood”. As their initial arts programmes on identity and self-expression evolved, the children revealed needs that were undetected and required deeper, complex responses. Kah Yoke, with her background in nonprofit management and child protection, joined 3Pumpkins in 2024 to develop and deepen TTKC’s case work team, anchoring it in a practice that centres children’s voices and complex needs. While the broader TTKC team holds joy and creativity at its core, the case work team simultaneously anchors child safeguarding efforts across the neighbourhood, centering children’s voices in both practice and policy.

Communal Rhythms



Fridays are when the children prepare, then perform for their weekly “getai” – an open microphone performance space where they perform their weekly craft. They write their names, the topic and chosen medium, excitedly discussing their ideas with facilitators and volunteers. Some older children prepare costumes and makeup; others cook the communal dinner a few units away, to be shared at the adjacent playground. The audience, fellow TTKC children, provide encouragement and cheer watching the performances. These weekly rhythms, says Kah Yoke, build individual and collective growth exponentially over time.



A sense of community “popsicles” up as children connect to their sense of agency in shaping their environment and culture.

Centering the Children’s Voice

The clubhouse opens from Wednesdays to Saturdays. Children are active contributors to the space through regular showcases of their artworks and festive murals. Annually, children town halls are conducted where evaluation surveys ensure children’s suggestions are embedded in programming and case work. The children’s thoughts and views are front and centre at TTKC.

What anchors TTKC’s conviction to centre their voice? The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child — particularly Articles 3, 12, 13, and 31 — affirms children’s right to participate in the arts, to express their views freely, and to have those views given due weight. (UNICEF, 1990).



Operationally, this principle is embedded into every form, assessment, and workflow. “Operationalising values is key,” says Kah Yoke. “It’s a return, in some ways, to old-school kampung Social Work, where **relationships, not referrals, shape responses**”. Introducing the term “intrapreneurs”, Kah Yoke’s journey taught her that Social Workers are excellent intrapreneurs, building and innovating in their own settings, while fiercely “values-engined” by core convictions.



Excursions signups on the festive mural wall. The children chose to honour previous iterations of the murals by retaining portions of it and incorporating that into the new murals (names obscured for confidentiality).

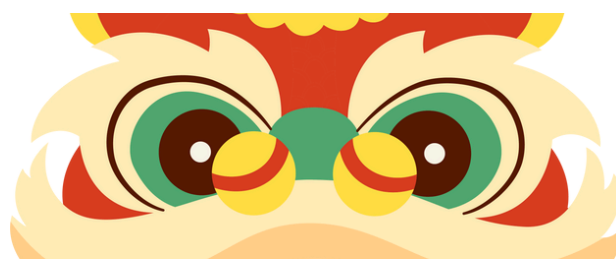


TTKC's lion troupe with President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Ms Jane Ittogi.

Planting Seeds for the Long-Term

Witnessing a young leader calmly facilitating coaching questions to a child, this interviewer asks how long she has worked here. Kah Yoke shares — she is not staff, but a youth volunteer, and once a TTKC child herself. Beside the youth volunteer, was an 18-year-old boy who grew up attending TTKC and recently completed a 9-month Community Work Internship there. He also takes up the role of Lion Dance Troupe Leader, after earning the respect and trust of the Lion Dance Club boys since the group's inception 2 years ago.

These 2 youth leaders are both shaped by the space, and are now stewarding a new generation. These moments remind Kah Yoke that change is not always immediate, but layered, slow and deeply relational.



This insight has also taken shape in Kah Yoke's social work practice, shifting her mindset from looking for short-term success in months to embracing a longer arc of growth in years. This long-term lens recognises that children are potential changemakers in their families and communities, and honours their agency to shape the culture around them. The work also plants the seeds for children to adapt, lead and thrive, even when shaped by traumas they may have grown up in.



As the interview wraps up, Kah Yoke reflects on what keeps her going. She acknowledges that social work can be emotionally demanding and it is easy to lose sight of why we started. “What helps,” she says, “is to stay close to that starting hope, take pride in the change we can make from within, and still remember to find joy in the process.”

Kah Yoke at work crafting guidelines on safe touch – laying the first steps to TTKC safeguarding policies.

Ho Kah Yoke leads the case work team at TTKC as assistant director. She was a Social Worker in various child protection settings and formerly executive director of Kampung Kakis.



Nicodemus Ching is a member of the SASW Publications Standing Committee.

References

UNICEF. (1990, September 2). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved June 2025, from Convention on the Rights of the Child Text: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>

CNA Insider. (2025, March 15). *YouTube*. Retrieved from My Free Kids Club: A Safe Space For Youths From Challenging Backgrounds | Extraordinary People: <https://youtu.be/G7dqzy5LKG0?si=puXDzazNmiKTfkaY&t=619>

Participatory Theatre for Social Work Practice in Singapore

by David Puvan

Participatory Theatre is an embodied, expressive, and relational form of engagement with communities that move beyond traditional talk-based methods. Participatory theatre encompasses a range of methods that foreground the co-participation of individuals (youth and adults alike) in the creative process. One method I have often used is Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), developed by Augusto Boal, which has emerged as a transformative approach within participant-centred empowerment-oriented Social Work. Here are some notable tools:

Dialogue

I believe that dialogue is the heartbeat of applied theatre. Rooted in Paulo Freire's pedagogy (which deeply influenced Boal), dialogue in participatory theatre is not just conversation but a critical reflection of realities, and experiences of structural marginalisation. Dialogue should entail applied theatre techniques (that I've listed below) and these creative non-threatening formats offer a mediated space to explore sensitive topics. It is also important for Social Workers to be critical conscious when facilitating dialogues – this means, you need to also be aware of your own social positioning, privileges and biases that shape the space. This means being attuned to the dynamics of power and safety within the groups. Reflexivity is key!

Games

Who doesn't love games? Boal has a book "Games for Actors and Non-Actors" which details out games and drama exercises that are designed to build trust and embody reflection. One activity I always use is Columbian Hypnosis where participants lead each other around the room using only the motion of their hands, revealing power dynamics and trust.

Image Theatre

A key technique in TO, participants use their bodies to sculpt silent images representing feelings, relationships, issues, or systems of power. These static or “living sculptures” become a reflective entry point into storytelling and unspoken truths. It also welcomes multiple and contested realities through the various interpretations of images. Boal’s book “The Rainbow of Desire” offers a detailed exploration of how images can be used to surface inner conflicts through theatrical means.

Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre (also under the umbrella of TO) is an interactive performance where community participants (or proxy actors) act out scenarios of marginalisation/ dilemmas. The audience is invited to intervene, dialogue with and even replace actors, and rehearse alternative strategies. This allows for collective problem-solving and rehearsal of change in a safe, speculative space. I wouldn’t recommend starting with this one, just because there are a lot of logistics and skills required in facilitating this. You’ll need to create (1) a safe space to conduct this, (2) a trained critically conscious facilitator, and (3) the ‘right’ audience (they should only replace characters they can mostly identify with). In Singapore, Drama Box and The Community Theatre (Beyond SS) are leading examples of how Forum Theatre can be used effectively and responsibly.

Playback Theatre

One of the most therapeutic in my opinion, Playback (developed by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas) is a form of improvisational theatre where community members share real-life stories and a team of actors and musicians “play back” these narratives on the spot. This method fosters empathy and communal witnessing and provides a space for individuals to feel heard and validated. Michael Cheng from Tapestry Playback Theatre in Singapore is fantastic in practising this work with sensitivity and relevance.



(A Forum Theatre performance I facilitated when I was a Social Worker at TRANS SAFE Centre. This performance tackled issues of elder abuse in the community and encouraged bystander intervention.)

Ethical and Contextual Considerations in Singapore

While participatory theatre holds potential, there are key considerations in applying it ethically within Singapore's unique socio-political context. These include:

1 Emotional Safety:

Many of the techniques listed above draw on personal or collective experiences of harm. Practitioners must approach this work with a trauma-informed lens – this includes establishing clear group agreements, ongoing emotional check-ins, and ensuring time for debriefing and reflection. One good thing about lagging behind other sectors is the prolific amount of resources already put out on this topic. Read some of the citations below, or start with this 25-minute introductory playlist of videos published by GovTech (see QR code below).



(This was an image created by Social Workers at MWS Tampines depicting power)

2 Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to the belief that one can participate without fear of judgement or punishment. Psychological safety is not a given, especially when tackling topics related to sexual/gender minority identity, migrant rights or race. Thus, holding these conversations in a private closed-door setting rather than open or unpredictable environments can provide participants with a sense of confidentiality and safety throughout the process.

3 Facilitating Dialogue:

Social Workers (facilitators of dialogue) play a crucial role in shaping the safety and transformative potential of applied theatre. It is not enough to know the techniques; facilitators must also understand trauma-informed practices, group facilitation and power dynamics. A key component is developing one's own critical consciousness (the ability to recognise one's social positioning, biases and systemic structures that shape people's lives). Facilitators must remain reflexive about how factors such as race, class, gender, and language shape interactions. Without this, well-intentioned facilitators may unintentionally replicate the very forms of marginalisation they aim to challenge.

David Puvan (he/him) is a Social Work PhD student at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. He completed his Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work (by Research) at the National University of Singapore. His research explores the use of theatre-based interventions, particularly participatory theatre, with marginalised communities, including those experiencing discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, and migration status.





Quiet Persistence:

THE FIGHT FOR HIV ADVOCACY IN SINGAPORE

by Chronos Kwok

In a field as diverse as Social Work, advocacy takes many forms. For Chronos, his journey has not been defined by loud protests or dramatic action, but by quiet persistence, compassionate service, and strategic collaboration. For periods spanning two decades, he has been a steady presence in Singapore's HIV advocacy

landscape—working to dismantle stigma, shape policy, and ensure that those most marginalised are seen, heard, and supported. His story offers a powerful reflection on one of the many faces of Social Work: the advocate who walks patiently and resiliently with the marginalised.

A Personal Catalyst

Chronos's advocacy journey began with personal loss. After graduating from university, he was just settling into the workforce when a close friend died by suicide. It was rumoured that the friend had recently discovered he was HIV-positive. The silence surrounding his death—and the shame that seemed to accompany it—left a profound mark on Chronos.

"As a gay man, it struck me deeply," he recalls. "I realised this wasn't just his story. It could happen to me. It could happen to people around me." Motivated to protect and empower his community, he began volunteering with Action for AIDS (AfA), the only community organisation focused on HIV education and prevention then. He trained as a volunteer counsellor and began working at anonymous testing sites, providing sexual health information and emotional support.

Facing Stigma at the Frontlines

The work was meaningful and eye-opening—yet, often heart-wrenching. Chronos frequently found himself delivering HIV-positive results to clients, a task made even more difficult by the prevailing fear and stigma of the time. "Back then, treatment was expensive and complicated. Being HIV-positive really felt like a death sentence," he said. "It took a toll. I remember going for duty after duty and constantly having to break bad news."

Eventually, the emotional strain led him to step away from front-line counselling, though not from the cause. He continued supporting AfA through editorial, fundraising, and outreach roles. In each, his commitment to reducing stigma and increasing access to information never wavered. "Nobody teaches you how to have safe sex as a gay person. Most of us just learn through trial and error. That gap in education—it's a systemic issue," he explained.



Advocacy as a Marathon, Not a Sprint

Chronos's return to AfA in 2019 marked a new chapter—this time, as a programme lead focusing on developing HIV prevention programmes reaching out to gay and bisexual individuals. In 2024, he was given the opportunity to lead the organisation as its Executive Director. Because of his experience, his approach to advocacy is a nuanced one. "There's a difference between activism and advocacy," he reflected. "Activism is often loud. Advocacy, to me, is about building trust and working with the system."

Over the years, AfA has played a key role in shaping Singapore's HIV response. As the only NGO represented on the National HIV Policy Committee, AfA has maintained consistent engagement with government ministries, hospitals, and medical experts. This platform has enabled AfA to advocate for significant policy reforms, including ending the 24 hour burial requirement for HIV-related deaths, securing long-term passes for HIV-positive spouses, pushing for subsidised HIV treatment (introduced in 2020), and challenging provisions in the Infectious Diseases Act that unfairly impact people living with HIV.

"These things don't happen overnight," he stressed. "Sometimes, you have to say something ten times to ten different people, and only then, years later, the change comes. But that's the work. That's advocacy."

A Voice Rooted in Service

What grounds Chronos's advocacy is his unwavering connection to the community. He believes that effective advocacy must be rooted in service—that policy change must be informed by real, lived experiences. This is also one of the most vital key tenets in the Social Work practice.

"If you're not from the community you're advocating for, you need to be willing to immerse yourself in it," he advised. "And you need to provide services, day in, day out. That consistency builds trust. It keeps you accountable. And it's from that place that meaningful advocacy can emerge."

AfA's enduring reputation—bolstered by respected figures and a network of health professionals—has helped it become a conduit between the affected community and those in power. It's not just about speaking loudly; it's about speaking with credibility and being heard by the right people at the right time.

Conclusion

Chronos's story reminds us that Social Work is not always dramatic. Sometimes, it is slow, quiet, and deeply personal. It is about building relationships, creating platforms for others to speak, and showing up again and again—even when the change feels distant. In walking alongside the HIV community in Singapore, Chronos has helped pave the way for a more inclusive and dignified response to one of the most stigmatised health issues in our society.

His is a face of Social Work grounded in humility, perseverance, and hope.

Chronos Kwok first started as a volunteer with AfA way back in 2005. He was a counsellor at the Anonymous Testing Service and also conducted talks at schools as well as military bases to increase awareness for HIV prevention. He was also actively involved in several fundraising gala events.

Prior to becoming to Executive Director, he spent 5 years running the MSM outreach programme and Anonymous Testing Service. During this time, he worked closely with the community to implement effective outreach, testing and research programmes that contribute towards reducing the rate of new infections and advocate against HIV-related stigma.

Chronos strongly believes that more can be done to support marginalized groups in Singapore, to build a more inclusive and compassionate society. Before to joining AfA, Chronos worked many years in the civil service and with a Foundation dedicated to eldercare. He obtained his Master of Social Work from the Singapore University of Social Sciences in 2021.



Social Work is **NOT** the Cost Centre

by Charmaine Chua

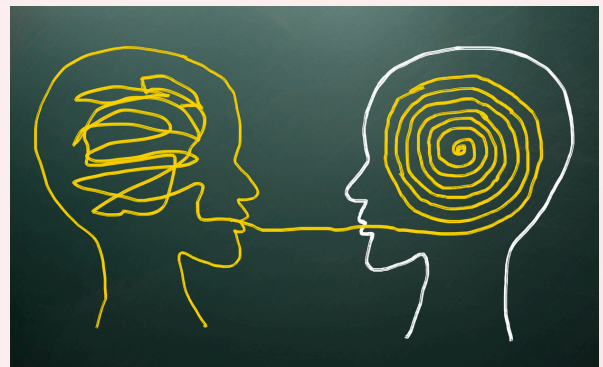
I didn't start off my career thinking I'd do something beyond law. Why, then, did I choose to study Social Work? Other than the privileges that empowered me, Social Work called because it can dissect everything in society based on how it practically affects people, particularly the most negatively affected. I felt that the Social Work lens could equip me to be better able to make positive societal change. And I've learnt so many valuable things from the field of Social Work I'm not sure I'd have otherwise learned so concisely.

The value of self-determination to every soul, particularly when our society can be enmeshed and collectivist, overlooking the sacrifices of the isolated few for the many. I learnt about gentleness and respect for every journey. The intricacies of diversity, including what types of diversity could exist. How diversity is not cut-and-dry, how our knowledge evolves, how identities can intersect



with innumerable permutations and combinations. Understanding how each person's diverse perspectives, inclinations, skills can be strengths, bringing value in this broad, infinitely changing world. How we need each other to fill the gaps, because we have limited resources to grow up.

The dynamics of power. Learning to even ask who was in the room, and who was not. Understanding how power can make one insensitive, to those who might otherwise be painted as "overly sensitive". Learning to see power. Asking about neutrally framed solutions, who stood to gain and stood to lose.





“Social Work belongs everywhere, because every person and system can affect human well-being.”

I would love to see Social Workers everywhere, in everyone. Social Work cannot stay in the “social service” sector. It must go beyond. Because Social Work is just so useful. It is an established lens to understand what helps the most structurally and culturally left out by society. When this is kept to typical Social Workers, we limit our hands and legs. We must do more to equip the rest of society to see and do what would help. Otherwise, we must fight against tides to rectify what the rest of society may have overlooked, who they had not planned to serve, what they thought “someone, somewhere should deal with the problem this new initiative creates”.

Social Work belongs everywhere, because every person and system can affect human well-being. Let's not just work with typical clients. Let's work beyond. People need this. Remind people that the values, lenses, perspectives of Social Work can help in

pursuing the essence and meaning of life: To co-exist and love every human being in society like ourselves. Remind corporations that it's not enough to seek mere technical profit, particularly based more on value extraction than value creation. Remind people that amassing wealth, possessions, status and experiences aren't laudable in themselves; that with each step, we must work to preserve precious things like workers' well-being, the environment, customers' health. Remind and equip people that living a meaningful life includes continual and holistic growth, in what makes a good person, spouse, parent, child, friend, community member, investor, consumer, world citizen. Ask our people, practices, systems to hold us accountable. To know others, love others, and ourselves - each limited, vulnerable, human being, just as much.





This transformative Social Work journey has changed me. Today, I care whether I get a heat pump dryer or a regular one. I sometimes support small businesses, sometimes share good deals for the customer, sometimes ask how Singaporeans can value-add to the world. I consider the systemic factors affecting my life outcomes. I ask if our investment systems are fair. I want to know what others, and the person on the street, and research says. I advocate for myself, and others. I listen, affirm, challenge, rebuke. I see where my paid work limits my mission, and consider what I must do beyond my externally-defined mission. I struggle with the cognitive dissonance of learning what good looks like, yet my limited ability. I learn to rest. I shout into the void, and sometimes, I hope, the void shouts back.

Come into the community, those who have yet to be Social Workers. Come and learn helpful things to see the world more fully, how to pursue a good world more holistically. Don't leave the social services to carry the brokenness of society. Social Work is not the cost centre; it is love, the beginning of life itself.

Let's flip the script on what a Social Worker looks like.

Charmaine Chua started her career as a lawyer, before pivoting to pursue more systemic social change. She has a Master of Social Work and Master of Public Policy from the University of Michigan.



PERSPECTIVES ON KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCIES OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE SOCIAL WORKERS: A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The Aftercare Competency Framework version 1.1 (Care Network, 2020) was published in December 2020 and was designed for caseworkers, which includes Social Workers, in the aftercare sector. Despite a national level effort and an overarching framework having been developed for the aftercare sector, the question remains on whether these could provide sufficient guidance for Social Workers working in the wider spectrum of the criminal justice (CJ) sector, a specialised Social Work practice (Patterson, 2012). A focus group made up of 15 participants recruited via convenience sampling, led by trained facilitators and the data generated were analysed via thematic analysis by the workgroup.

Based on the findings, participants have identified core knowledge and skills that are similar to that of Social Workers in other contexts. However, there are certain knowledge and skills identified by the participants that are crucial and unique to the CJ setting that CJ Social Workers would require to function effectively. For instance, key knowledge areas include “theories on deviance and criminality”, “desistance theories”, “Good Lives Model”, “Risk, needs, responsivity model” and also the knowledge of “street lingo”, while skills include “Ethical decision making”, “working with mandated clients” and “motivational interviewing”.

Moving forward, rather than re-inventing the wheel or duplicating resources, the CJSW Chapter will review the available training in the field and explore how to address the gap areas. A possible first tier action plan is to develop a CJSW Onboarding session where Social Workers entering the CJ field can learn from experienced staff in the CJ service spectrum. The Onboarding session may provide networking opportunities that could enable them to better navigate the CJ sector that benefits their clients. Kindly refer to sasw.org.sg/download/cjsw-perspectives or scan the QR code for the full article.





ABOUT THE CSJW CHAPTER KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS WORKGROUP MEMBERS

Troy Jack Thevathasan has been with the CJSW chapter since it began in 2019, and currently serves as the chair. He has been working in correctional rehabilitation for over 2 decades and has a keen interest in developing new Social Workers and other rehabilitation practitioners in the sector. He is currently Deputy Director (Community Interventions & Capability Building) in the Singapore Prison Service.



Troy Jack
Thevathasan



William Soh

William Soh is the Head Programme (Organisational Development and Training) at Singapore After-Care Association (SACA). Before his secondment to SACA in Feb 2021, he has embarked on various correctional rehabilitation work in Singapore Prison Service since early 2000s. He is a registered Social Worker with a Master of Applied Psychology (Counselling). Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

Rafidah Ayob has been part of the Criminal Justice Social Worker Chapter since its initiation in 2019. She is also a practitioner for more than 10 years in the correctional rehabilitation field. Rafidah was a recipient of the Promising Social Worker Award in 2021. She is a Senior Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist in the Singapore Prison Service.



Rafidah Ayob

Alvin Tan began working with young offenders as a Probation Officer, followed by working with drug offenders at the Green Haven Halfway House. After graduating with a Master of Social Work from The University of Hong Kong and a stint in the disability sector, Alvin is currently the Superintendent of Meranti Home at Pelangi Village. Alvin Tan also sits on the Executive Committee (EXCO) of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) since 2019. He was the Chair for membership in 2019, Honorary Treasure in 2021 and currently the Chair for Finance.



Alvin Tan



Roger Tan

Roger Tan is serving as the vice chair for the Criminal Justice Social Work Chapter and has been with the Chapter since its inception. He holds a Master of Social Work and is an associate instructor at the Singapore University of Social Sciences. He is currently a Principal Medical Social Worker at the Institute of Mental Health and has been in the mental health field for the past 20 years.



THROWBACK ARTICLE

The Role of Medical Social Workers in Psychiatric Community Outreach

by Poon Weng Cheong, Kong Lai Yee and Geraldine Wong

Written on 18/07/2011, it has been 14 years since. Back then in 2010, the inaugural Singapore Mental Health Study (SMHS) was first conducted with the aim of understanding the prevalence of mental health conditions in Singapore. The notion of mental health and wellness then was not widely regarded, as the roles of Medical Social Workers (MSWs) were more prevalent in working with patients and their next-of-kin with physical illness.

How then has the roles of MSWs in Psychiatric Community Outreach changed with the passing of time?

Well, for a start, the Response Early intervention and Assessment in Community Mental Health (REACH), Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) and The Aged Psychiatry Community Assessment & Treatment Service (APCATS) are still in operation. With the growing awareness about mental health, especially since 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic, this throwback article aims to hack back to the evolving roles of MSWs in Psychiatric Community Outreach.

What has remained consistent since across the decades, as concluded by the three writers then, is the relevance and unique roles of MSWs in mental health field. The future roles of MSWs in Psychiatric Community Outreach may potentially undergo a metamorphic change over the next decade, especially with more awareness, development and collaborations happening in the mental health setting.

18 JULY 2011

The Role of Medical Social Workers in Psychiatric Community Outreach



Medical Social Work in IMH started in the sixties at Woodbridge Hospital when the first social worker came from the United Kingdom to set up services for the poor in Singapore. Services then were naturally more inclined towards financial and welfare areas in view of the economic circumstances.

Over the decades, this role has evolved alongside the country's progress economically. The MSW's role in IMH has followed suit in its transformation. In the mental health setting, the MSW pays special attention to the social context of the person with mental illness (PMI), which entails the need to address social consequences arising as a result of the mental illness. The social context refers to the social environment of the individual and how it shapes the experiences of the mental illness. The social consequence refers to the impact of the mental illness on the person, family, and community (Bland 2001:147)

The social worker is an important member of the multi-disciplinary team (MDT) in mental health services, providing bio-psycho-social perspective and intervention to support patients and their families.

In general, the core functions of a Medical Social Worker are:

- 1 Psychosocial Assessment, to assess strength and resilience of the patient, family, social support systems to help the individual functions within the community,
- 2 Family Education and Mediation, to educate the family on the physical and psychosocial needs of its members and how they can access to internal and external resources; to mediate on the conflicts so as to strengthen their family relationship and aid in problem solving,
- 3 Counselling for individual, couple and family, to provide counseling to clients presented with poor mental health issues (such as depression and anxiety) due to relationship problems and financial stress; clients facing adjustment difficulty due to illness and disability and clients with caregiving issues,
- 4 Risk assessment, to assess and manage risk due to self-harm and harm to others,
- 5 Financial assessment, to administer Medifund Assistance, identify and refer cases of financial hardship, administer other financial assistance,
- 6 Discharge planning, to work with the MDT in formulating discharge plan and
- 7 Information and referral services, to link patients and caregivers to necessary community resources.

In the mental health field, the social worker not only has to perform the core functions but often has to incorporate other roles to adequately meet the needs of someone affected by mental illness. The social worker needs to manage the psychiatric condition of the person by assessing the mental stability of the illness, monitoring the medication regime, providing psychosocial rehabilitation and working on improving PMI functioning in the community.

In the National Mental Health Blueprint, there are three community outreach teams. Each team deals with the unique needs of targeted client across the human lifespan of Singaporeans. Firstly, the Response Early Intervention and Assessment in Community Mental Health (REACH) focuses on the needs of school going children. The Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) provides psychosocial rehabilitation of adult population with mental disorder. The Aged Psychiatry Community Assessment & Treatment Service (APCATS) is a community-oriented psychogeriatric outreach service.

Role of Medical Social Workers in REACH

The GP-school network was proposed by the Institute of Mental Health (Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) where mobile multi-disciplinary clinical teams (i.e. REACH) were set up to provide mental health support for children and adolescents in the community involving schools, general practitioners (i.e. family doctors and community paediatricians) and voluntary welfare organisations. The REACH team comprises of Medical Social Workers, Doctors, Psychologists and Nurses.

The key objectives of this project are to:

- 1 Improve the mental health of children and adolescents in schools

- 2 Provide early interventions, support and training to school counsellors on mental health disorders

- 3 Develop a mental health network for children and adolescents in the community involving

The role of the Medical Social Worker in the REACH team is to provide support and training to the school counselors, general practitioners and staff from the voluntary welfare organisations on ways to identify and assess children with mental health problems

This is done through providing:

- 1 A helpline to consult and seek advice on strategies to help children with emotional, behavioural and/or developmental disorders,

- 2 Assessment, intervention and psychiatric treatment for children with mental health disorders when needed,

- 3 Case conferences, talks or workshops,

- 4 Individual and family therapy,

- 5 Group therapy,

- 6 Formulation and development of care management plans for referred students in collaboration with school counselors and the other community partners,

- 7 Appropriate referral and liaison with other healthcare professional and agencies and

- 8 A network of resources and information for dissemination to the referred student/ caregiver and FTSC.

Role of Medical Social Workers in CMHT

The Community Mental Health Team provides home-based psychosocial rehabilitation services and crisis interventions for persons with serious mental illness. The psychosocial rehabilitation services are based on the renowned Assertive Community Treatment Programme. The crisis interventions consist of helpline and mobile crisis team (Wei et al, 2005).

The major component of CMHT is clinical work. The second component is integration of care with the community through networking. The last component is providing training and support to the networking partners.

There are currently three Medical Social Workers in the team. Each Medical Social Worker provides social work services in respective zones namely, Eastern, Western and Central. He/she works with a multidisciplinary team consisting of doctors, psychologists, occupational therapists, nurses and social workers.

The six main roles of a Medical Social Worker in CMHT are:

-  To provide social work and psychosocial rehabilitation assessment and interventions to support the main case managers,
-  To provide care coordination by taking on the role of a case manager,
-  To provide clinical opinion in multidisciplinary team,
-  To spearhead networking efforts of CMHT,



To provide training to community partners and



To provide crisis interventions in mobile crisis team

Role of Medical Social Workers in APCATS

Aged Psychiatry Community Assessment & Treatment Service (APCATS) is a community – oriented psychogeriatric outreach service. APCATS started in January 2006 as a pilot project to provide psychogeriatric assessment and treatment for elderly in their own home if they are unable to access standard clinic-based mental health services due to frailty. APCATS aims to prevent unnecessary admission to inpatient mental health services and minimize the length of stay in hospital. APCATS also provides support for carers and reduces the burden of carers, hence allowing the elderly to remain longer in the community.

Medical Social Worker in APCATS works within a multi-disciplinary team to ensure the continuity of holistic patient care, by assessing and evaluating needs of the client and caregivers, and planning, coordinating, implementing and monitoring the interventions to address those needs.

APCATS Medical Social Worker's Scope of Work Include:



Respond to inquiries on the referral to APCATS,



Conduct home visit after liaison and discussion with team members,



Establish rapport and build therapeutic alliance with client and family members,

- 4 Identify client's/family's need(s), formulate and develop appropriate individualised service plan in collaboration with other team members,
- 5 Case-manage patients that require more social work input,
- 6 Provide social and/ family support for caregivers within the boundaries of patient care,
- 7 Conduct bio-psycho-social assessment of clients including monitoring signs of relapse and caregiver stress (eg. administering the ZARIT Burden Scale with caregiver) (Generic skill),
- 8 Conduct social and family assessment for clients when necessary and to provide clinical services in terms of supportive counselling, family work, caregiver support, information and referral for services required, as well as work with and support family members in implementation of therapeutic care plans (Specific skill),
- 9 Provide psycho-education to client and family in response to needs assessment,
- 10 Provide assessment of patient's financial status via means testing and render the necessary assistance if they meet the criteria,
- 11 Participate in APCATS multidisciplinary meetings and
- 12 Carry out duties as assigned by the Programme Director.

In conclusion, the roles of a Medical Social Worker may change over time depending on the needs of client and organisation. The training and education of social workers should equip entry social workers with a broad based knowledge and skills. In addition, for social workers who are interested to work with PMI, they must be further trained to function to meet the unique roles of Medical Social Workers in mental health field.

Eugene has been a Medical Social Worker since 2011. Having been a part of the multiple developments in the medical social work setting, he continues to view the role of a MSW akin to being on a journey, not only with patients, but with the communities and practitioners alike.



References

- Wei KC, Lee C and Wong KE (2005), Community Psychiatry in Singapore: An Integration of Community Mental Health Services Towards Better Patient Care. *Hong Kong Journal of Psychiatry*, 15:132-137.
- Bland R, (2001), The Social Worker in Meadows G. and Singh B (Eds), *Mental Health in Australia: Collaborative Community Practice*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

IS IT ONLY OPTION A OR OPTION B?:

My journey to stay relevant for uncommon roles in Social Work

by Tok Kheng Leng

During student placements and after graduation, the common advice from senior workers was always to choose an agency with strong supervision. I interviewed at two well-established agencies, both equally attractive, and ultimately accepted a job at Spooner Road, which was one of the two.

Figuratively, I followed the railway tracks into Spooner Road—located right beside the former Malayan Railways. I still remember how we used two large cardboard sheets to track the number of families with children and youths living in the two blocks. Our team needed to visualise who made up the community so we could design programmes that fostered community bonds and helped level the playing field.

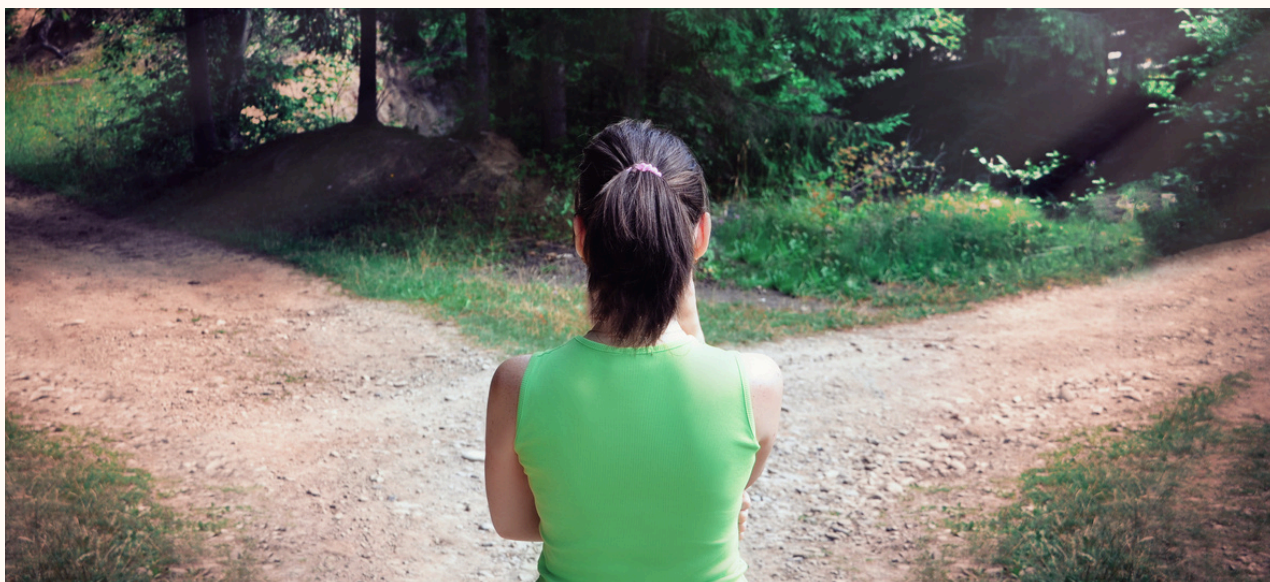
Some of my most memorable encounters include delivering daily meals to the community during the COVID-19 pandemic and leading a group of youths to Ipoh for an adventure camp. Our office, located just below the residential units, gave us first-hand insight into what was happening in the homes and allowed residents easy access to social services.



In an established organisation, career progression and promotion are often key topics of discussion with supervisors. While my batchmates pursued a graduate diploma in counselling or went on to do their master's, I went to explore funding work at a statutory board. Many people advised me against the decision, as I was close to a promotion.

I was curious about how government and funding systems work. As a ground worker, I wanted to better understand how funding bodies determined outcome targets and structured funding cycles. During my short stint as a service planner, I relished the opportunity to gain a bird's-eye view of services and to support each agency through their funding journey. While my colleagues may have grown tired of my usual introduction, I always made it a point to share with stakeholders that I am a Social Worker first—and that perspective consistently helped foster meaningful conversations and connections.

During this time, I found myself contemplating whether to return to the conventional ladder of promotion and progression. By then, many of my peers had already been promoted. Although I understood that my value was not defined by a title, I could not shake the lingering concern that future employers might assess my potential—and determine my salary—based solely on my current title and pay grade.



The door that opened next was very special. Although my title remained “Social Worker,” the opportunity to work with a marginalised group outweighed all other considerations. I did not even dare to tell my family who I was working with, for fear of being dissuaded. The organisation valued lived experience and hired peer educators to conduct outreach and support other sex workers. This aligned perfectly with what I had once envisioned at Spooner Road—where clients are seen as the experts of their own lives.

While I had very little vocabulary related to sex work, my Social Work skills—such as outreach, rapport-building, and knowledge of the social service sector—enabled me to add value to the organisation’s work. What I appreciated most about working there was that we did not have to constantly accommodate the perspectives of those in power at the expense of the people we served. There was no need to seek “balance” or wait for the “right time”. We stood firmly for what mattered to the community.

My main aim in sharing my journey is to encourage us to stay the course and keep our hearts open to uncommon roles in Social Work—beyond the usual Option A or B. Many roles require Social Work skills, knowledge, and experience. The challenge I see is that younger, more idealistic professionals may be interested in these roles but might struggle to support clients on their own. More seasoned Social Workers may find the limited pay and lack of career progression in these settings unappealing, especially when there is often only one Social Work position available. I don’t have a solution, except to encourage us to keep noticing and responding to the gaps where Social Workers can make a difference.

This article was first presented as a talk at the Symposium and Ann Wee Alumni Awards event in October 2024.

Tok Kheng Leng is a Social Worker at Project X Society. When she’s not Social Working, she enjoys touching grass and lifting weights.





INTERVIEW WITH NANYANG POLYTECHNIC
AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE
IN INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME WINNER,

Ms Yeo Ka Mi Seraphina

by Dr. Nicodemus Lim

Yeo Ka Mi Seraphina is a recent graduate from the Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP) Diploma in Social Work and the award recipient of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) Industry Attachment Award. Nicodemus Lim, a member of SASW Publications Committee, caught up with her to learn about her journey into Social Work and her internship experience.

1. Thanks for doing this. Please tell us more about yourself and how you got started on your journey in Social Work?

Hi! I am Seraphina. Without much prior interactions with Social Workers, I started exploring the field of Social Work when choosing which course to study, post-Secondary. My time in NYP then cultivated my interest and passion for Social Work. I look forward to pursuing a degree in Social Work and joining the profession thereafter.

2. You have a nice name! I'm wondering if there's a connection between your given name and your choice in pursuing Social Work?

Haha! I have not considered a direct connection between my name and choice of profession before. But I guess it could be said that there are parallels between the angelic representation of my name and the Social Work profession. Angels are often seen as a positive source of energy, and similarly, Social Workers aim to bring light and positivity to those they serve.



3. Is there a particular reason for choosing to study Social Work?

My choice of Social Work as my diploma course was influenced by my affinity for humanities subjects and the joy I found from previous experiences of serving the communities I am passionate about. Initially, I chose Social Work based on these general interests. However, as I delved deeper into my studies, I discovered a profound connection with the profession's core values and approaches. The 'Social Work lens', with the emphasis on self-evaluation, continuous personal growth, and the different frameworks utilised in the work we do, resonated strongly with my personal values.

4. If you were to use a metaphor, how would you describe your Social Work journey thus far?

The first thing that comes to my mind is an image of a butterfly forming in a cocoon, in the process of transformation, and waiting to take flight. But more than just becoming a Social Worker personally, I saw in my internship how Social Workers constantly explore and grow throughout their career. They are also diverse and beautiful in their own ways, having positive influence and impact on the people who encounter them.

5. Please tell us more about your internship experience.

My first internship was at PPIS Family Service Centre (East); my second was at Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF). However, I had the privilege of participating in an additional one-month internship in Hong Kong through an exchange programme. The different internship settings greatly shaped my worldview and gave me opportunities to experience "applying theory to practice". Also, I experienced the warmth of the Social Work community, the commitment of my supervisors to my growth & learnings, and the genuine support and welcome from others in this community.

6. What was the main takeaway from the internships?

Self-discovery – which I define as a process of learning more about oneself through various experiences, whether it be discovering our own strengths and weaknesses or personal beliefs. For me, the process begun through exposure from concepts learnt in school, which were deepened through supervision during the internships.

7. What skills should we have to be future-ready?

I think that adaptability is essential, alongside the practice of continuously assessing and evaluating for areas of enhancement. During internship, I learnt that the "session plan" prepared could quickly be changed on the spot, depending on our clients' need. I realised that much flexibility is needed when working with people and systems. There were also times when the level of responsibility was stepped up and I had to quickly adapt to handle the intensity.

8. What do you see as the future of Social Work? How might it look like in 5 to 10 years' time?

With times ever changing and the systems and structures evolving, I see Social Work, as a whole, progressing in a manner such that our methods stay relevant, and our procedures remaining effective. I see potential for Social Work to grow in ways that we do not expect. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), I see AI enhancing efficiency in the social sector, particularly in daily work processes. However, we need to find an optimal balance between using AI beneficially and maintaining the humanistic aspects of Social Work, making sure to, firstly, avoid over-reliance in AI and secondly, remain mindful of data protection and ethics.



9. If you can share this award, who would you share it with?

I am immensely grateful to the many who have supported me in my Social Work journey. This includes my family, NYP Lecturers and my internship Supervisors. I would love to give a shout out to Mr Adrian Lee from PPIS, Ms M Shamini from CCF, and Mr Augustine Yu from Saint Francis University, for their constant support during my internship time. It is a huge privilege to have been given the opportunity to be under their care.



The SASW Industry Attachment Award is a Course Award given annually since 2013 to the most outstanding graduant of every graduating class who topped his/her Field Placement modules. Students in the NYP Diploma in Social Work typically complete two internships in their course of studies. Graduates may work in the social services or continue their studies local and overseas universities. They can also join SASW as associate members. To find out more about the programme, kindly refer to <https://www.nyp.edu.sg/schools/shss/full-time-courses/social-work.html>

Dr. Nicodemus Lim is the Lead Social Worker at AWWA Family Service Centre and an Adult Educator with Social Service Institute.



LICENSING IN SOCIAL WORK:

Reflections from *SWD 2025 Panel Discussion*



by Hoo Wen Qian

The role of the Social Worker is complex. Social Workers work closely with vulnerable individuals, exposing them to ethical ambiguity and difficult situations. Hence, it is crucial for Social Workers to be qualified and be able to navigate through these challenges while upholding the interests of clients. Licensing is one key method to ensure this competency.

Social Work licensing is prevalent across the globe. In Singapore, Social Work accreditation is regulated under the Accreditation System for Social Workers and Social Service Practitioners. The accreditation system is overseen by the Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board (SWAAB) which is appointed by the Ministry of Social and Family Development and administered by the Accreditation Secretariat of the Singapore Association of Social Workers (Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board, n.d., retrieved from <https://accreditation.sasw.org.sg/>)

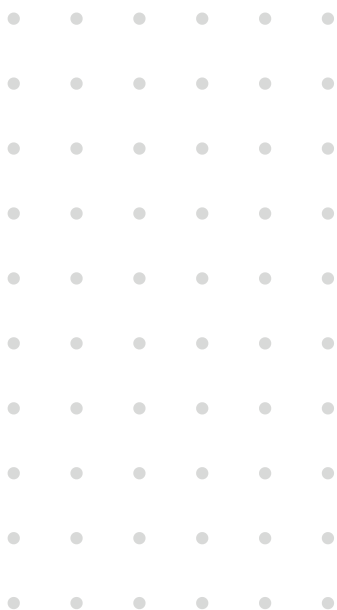
This accreditation system defines the criteria for accreditation and allows accredited Social Workers to use the title of “Registered Social Worker”. However, accreditation in Singapore is voluntary and individuals who are not accredited are still able to use the title of “Social Worker” and perform similar roles and functions. This lack of consistency in regulation makes it difficult for agencies and governing bodies to identify and account for practitioners.

In our evolving landscape, it is crucial to re-examine the significance of Social Work licensing and understand the necessity to explore a different Social Work licensing framework. During Social Work Day 2025, a panel of experienced professionals discussed the importance and challenges of Social Work licensing. This article will draw upon the discussion and examine three important aspects of Social Work licensing.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AND DEVELOPMENT

An essential function of licensing is ensuring the standards of the Social Work profession and the continuous development of Social Workers. Through mandatory processes such as training, tests and exams, and supervision, licensing establishes the core competency standards of Social Workers. As highlighted by Associate Professor Timothy Sim during the Social Work Day 2025 panel, licensing is crucial to ensure that Social Workers are qualified and well-equipped with the skills, knowledge, and values to serve the community.

Licensing also ensures the continuous development of Social Workers. The maintenance of licenses would mean that Social Workers are required to remain competent and relevant with the ever-changing social landscape. Licensing serves to identify and prioritise essential skills and knowledge that is crucial to our social context. It exposes Social Workers to various growth opportunities that allow for continuous professional and personal development.



PROFESSIONAL VALIDATION AND CREDIBILITY

In addition to maintaining professional standards and development, Social Work licensing also validates the profession's identity and credibility.

Through licensing, a distinct identity is created for Social Workers and this defines roles, responsibilities, and scope of practice more clearly. Currently, there are different titles and roles in the sector such as registered Social Workers, Social Workers, or Social Work practitioners. With this variety, it results in ambiguity and inconsistency in the responsibilities and scope of practice (Land, 1988). With licensing, the role of the Social Worker would be more definite. Clearer definitions enable for boundaries and structures to be set, which reduces confusion in both clients and practitioners.

Similarly, a distinct identity strengthens public recognition of the profession and enhances credibility in multidisciplinary settings. As licensing allows for legal, ethical, and professional oversight, it reinforces the profession's legitimacy of practice and provides reassurance in quality of care.



ACCOUNTABILITY AND SAFETY

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, as noted by Ms Tan Sze Wee during the panel, the goal of licensing is to protect Social Workers and the clients that they serve. Licensing facilitates managing accountability as well as establishing safety through outlining practice standards.

Social Workers undeniably hold a degree of power over the vulnerable clients that they work with. Hence, it is crucial for Social Workers to be subjected to objective checks and balances. This ensures that no harm is done and the primary interest would always be the client's well-being. Licensing reinforces the importance of optimum conduct and serves to prevent malpractice through strict regulation and oversight. It identifies and maintains professional and ethical standards, and helps to ensure that Social Workers adhere to these standards.

Besides the client, licensing also seeks to protect the Social Worker from risks. Licensing establishes clear structured frameworks that define legal, ethical, and practice risks, and helps to guide Social Workers through them. It allows for clarity of duty through structured definitions of scope of practice and responsibilities. These structures support the Social Worker in their role and allow them to practice safely.



LIMITATIONS AND CONCERNS

While many Social Workers acknowledge the benefits of licensure, there are undoubtedly concerns and ambivalence over it. A primary concern is the financial cost needed for licensing and its maintenance (Miller et al., 2015). Other concerns associated with licensing would be the stringency of requirements and losing permission to practice, as well as the time and effort needed to prepare and maintain the license.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while there are challenges associated with licensing, the panellists summarised that it is crucial to examine its importance in our current social landscape. Licensing serves not only to protect clients and regulate accountability but to also enhance the professionalism, development, and recognition of Social Workers.

Hoo Wen Qian is a Social Worker with the Ministry of Social and Family Development. He is a member of the SASW Public Relations Standing Committee.



References

- Land, H. (1988). The Impact of Licensing on Social Work Practice: Values, Ethics and Choices. *Journal of Independent Social Work*, 2(4), 87-96. https://doi.org/10.1300/J283v02n04_08
- Miller, J. J., Deck, S. M., Grise-Owens, E., & Borders, K. (2015). Exploring graduate students' perceptions about Social Work licensing. *Social Work Education*, 34(8), 986-1004. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2015.1096924>

• • • • •

• • • • •

• • • • •

Beyond Awards: A New Chapter in Singapore's Social Work Story

By Rafidah Mohamed Ayob



President Tharman Shanmugaratnam (third from left), the Guest-of-Honour of the event with (L-R): OSWA 2025 Winner Melissa Lim-Ler, SASW President Tan Sze Wee, Director General of Social Welfare and Host of the event Long Chey May, OSWA 2025 Winner Genevieve Wong, and PSWA 2025 Winner Louisa Bielig.

On 7 March 2025, the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW) hosted a landmark event celebrating Social Work excellence which, for the first time, combined the Outstanding Social Worker Awards (OSWA) with Social Work Day. Held outside the Istana for the first time (due to the availability of the location) and graced by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, this gathering exemplified the evolving landscape of Social Work in Singapore.

As a PSWA recipient from 2021, witnessing this convergence was both nostalgic and invigorating. It reminded me how far we have come, and how much potential lies ahead. The theme, “Celebrating Social Work Excellence. Bridging Generations: Co-Creating Our Social Work Future Together,” resonated deeply, emphasising the importance of intergenerational collaboration in our profession. It was heartening to see the hall filled with Social Workers from all walks of life, taking a momentary respite from their demanding roles to celebrate the profession and its people.



The morning's award presentations showcased our colleagues' impact across diverse sectors, from youth services to eldercare. Each story was a quiet revolution, not merely tales of perseverance but living proof that touching lives with care and advocating with conviction remain paramount.

This year marked the final iteration of OSWA in its current form, signalling a shift towards new avenues of recognition and reflection within our field. Making the moment even more poignant, I experienced both nostalgia and renewal as a PSWA 2021 recipient. I recalled the awe upon receiving the award, a recognition of effort, but more significantly, a reminder of the weight of responsibility we carry as Social Workers. Watching a new batch of passionate professionals, from newcomers to seasoned practitioners with decades of wisdom receive this honour filled me with pride and hope.

During the intermissions, the various SASW chapter booths breathed life into the hall. From student engagement to criminal justice Social Work, they showcased the diversity of our field. It was not just an event—it was a reunion, a discovery ground, a celebration. I saw seasoned mentors mingling with curious undergraduates. Conversations were not just about the past or present, they were about what is next.



Minister Masagos Zulkifli made an appearance as Special Guest and visited the SASW booths before the event to learn more about the work done in the different sectors.



The afternoon sessions picked up with renewed energy. The dialogue session delved into pressing topics, including artificial intelligence's implications for Social Work practice and potential licensing frameworks. These discussions emphasised our profession's need to adapt and innovate amidst rapid societal changes.

Perhaps the most grounding moment came during the closing workshop by the Happiness Initiative. Through interactive activities, we explored strategies to prevent burnout and cultivate well-being, a crucial reminder of the importance of self-care in our line of work. In a profession that gives so much, self-care is not optional but essential.

This event, set against the backdrop of Singapore's 60th year of independence, reinforced Social Workers' pivotal role in nation-building. As Singapore commemorates this milestone, we also honour those in the social service sector who have walked alongside the nation's journey. As we navigate emerging challenges and opportunities, we must continue upholding our professional values, advocating fiercely for our clients, and supporting one another in our shared mission.

Social Work is and will remain an anchor of our social fabric. To my fellow Social Worker whether you are just beginning or decades in, let us continue bridging generations, nurturing lives, and building communities. Together, we can unlock potential and sustain our commitment to touching lives with care, ensuring excellence, and fostering resilient communities.



Participants took part in a fun and interactive workshop, exploring strategies on managing burnout and cultivating wellbeing by Happiness Initiative.

Rafidah is currently a Senior Correctional Rehabilitation Specialist at the Community Corrections Command, Singapore Prison Service supporting offenders and supervisees in their rehabilitation and reintegration journey back into society. She was awarded the Promising Social Worker Award in 2021.



COPYRIGHT

Prior permission must be obtained in writing from the SASW before any article in this magazine can be reproduced.



The Singapore Association of Social Workers is the professional representative body of Social Workers in Singapore.

Established in 1971, SASW as the national professional association serves the following objectives:

- ★ Advance Social Work as a profession and foster a high standard of Social Work in the country
- ★ Participate in activities which promote Social Work and social welfare on the national and international level
- ★ Participate in and provide community and social services to the public
- ★ Promote the well-being of Social Workers

The work of SASW Executive Committee is supported by the various Standing Committees, Chapters, Special Interest Groups and the management and staff team.

Our Vision

A Thought Leader for the Social Work profession and the promotion of Social Justice

Our Mission

- P** roviding development to raise professional standards
- A** dvancing advocacy across systems to achieve equality
- G** alvanising social workers towards a greater sense of professional identity
- E** nabling adaptive work to effect change for the common good of society



sasw.org.sg



[@sasw.sg](https://www.instagram.com/sasw.sg)



[fb.com/SASW.sg](https://www.facebook.com/SASW.sg)



Singapore Association of
Social Workers (SASW)



publications@sasw.org.sg