

NTUC fund raises almost \$8m for lower-income members

Fund helps 35,000 union members and their families, including 15,000 children

Nadine Chua

Almost \$8 million was raised this year as part of the NTUC-U Care Fund, benefiting 35,000 lower-income union members and their families, which include 15,000 children.

This is up from the \$7.7 million raised last year, said the labour movement in response to queries.

The U Care Fund was established in 2009 to help union members affected by the economic downturn from the global financial crisis.

Since then, \$113 million has been disbursed to lower-income families, with the help of various

unions, associations and social enterprises.

Speaking at the donor appreciation session on Wednesday, Mr Zainal Sapari, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) assistant director-general and director of its care and share department, said: "2021 remains a challenging year for our workers, especially those who are earning less or whose incomes were affected by Covid-19."

He added that NTUC has been tapping new opportunities and fund-raising methods to ensure that those in need receive sufficient assistance during this time.

One of the new fund-raisers that was organised this year was Singapore's first non-fungible token



Madam Pathmanathan Muthulakshmi and her children (from far left) Sanjivraja, Vedesh and Palani Vel Raja, are beneficiaries of the NTUC-U Care Fund. Madam Muthu, a cashier, became the sole breadwinner of her family after her husband died from a medical condition in 2019. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

charity auction, called the Blockchain for Good initiative, which raised more than \$400,000, exceeding the initial target of \$250,000.

In another collaboration, more than \$200,000 was raised for the fund through live gifts and donations at an e-getai charity concert.

A total of \$5.5 million was set aside separately under the NTUC Care Fund (e-Vouchers) programme to provide 14,000 union members with up to \$100 in grocery e-vouchers each.

Families with school-going children were given an additional \$100 e-voucher per child.

Madam Pathmanathan Muthulakshmi's children are among

SIMPLE PLEASURES

Besides school needs, the e-vouchers give my children the simple pleasure to be able to buy snacks when we go to the supermarket."



MADAM PATHMANATHAN MUTHULAKSHMI, a single mother, on the e-vouchers her family receives.

those who benefited from the programme this year.

Madam Muthu, 38, became the sole breadwinner of her family and a single mother to her three children, aged two, 12 and 17, after her husband died from a medical condition in 2019.

The cashier has received assistance from the U Care Fund since 2015, when she joined as a union member.

Speaking to The Straits Times about the death of her husband, she said: "The loss was difficult to accept and there were many sleepless nights. I coped with some support from relatives but at the end of the day, a relative cannot replace the role of a father."

But she added that the e-vouchers she received took some of the burden off her shoulders.

"While schools provide textbooks for my children, it was with the help of these vouchers that I could buy stationery and assessment books. My Primary 5 boy would easily use 15 exercise books, and that already costs \$15," said Madam Muthu.

She said that she was grateful for the help given to her family, adding: "Besides school needs, the e-vouchers give my children the simple pleasure to be able to buy snacks when we go to the supermarket."

nadinechua@sph.com.sg

Social scientist stresses need for vaccine equity, multilateralism

Goh Yan Han

The new Omicron variant of the virus that causes Covid-19 is a reminder of the need for vaccine equity and multilateralism, said Dr Noeleen Heyzer on Tuesday.

The importance of vaccine multilateralism has been a focus of the Singapore-initiated Global Governance Group (3G) of 30 countries, which has been championing the voices of small states calling for vaccine equality to close gaps in global health security, she said.

Dr Heyzer was speaking in the second of her three-part lecture series on Singapore and Multilateral Governance: Securing Our Future, which is under the Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan Lecture Series.

The social scientist, who was formerly a United Nations under-secretary-general, is the 10th person appointed by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) as an S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

During a dialogue segment with IPS' special adviser, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, Dr Heyzer was asked about the state of vaccine equity given that some countries, including Singapore, are giving

booster shots to their population while other countries have an inadequate supply of the vaccine.

Professor Koh said: "One has to balance realism and idealism. The idealistic situation would be if vaccines were freely available to the seven billion people but that's not the kind of world we live in."

He then asked if Dr Heyzer agreed with the World Health Organisation's condemnation of countries who have given booster shots.

She said: "I personally feel that it is important for countries to protect their population. But the issue is not just about access to vaccines. It is about the production of vaccines, it is about intellectual property rights." Instead of just looking at countries that are using it, more production of the vaccines and their distribution have to be encouraged, she said.

In her speech, Dr Heyzer said global cooperation is key to tackling other great disruptions, such as climate change, the digital revolution and political upheavals.

"Our world has entered a new era of uncertainty, anxiety and complexity, overlaid by four great disruptions that have burst open historical fault lines, creating great fractures in their wake," she said.



Dr Noeleen Heyzer speaking at a dialogue segment with Institute of Policy Studies' special adviser, Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh, during the second of her three-part lecture series on Tuesday. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

"The handling of these disruptions combined with our shared vulnerability will be one of the greatest tests of our generation."

Her speech delved into the topic of how the world has to rethink its approach to sustainable recovery. "Only an inclusive global public health and socio-economic response will help suppress the virus,

restart our economies and (help us) recover sustainably," she said.

She called for a large-scale, coordinated and comprehensive health-care response that includes Covid-19 vaccines that are affordable and universally accessible.

She also noted the importance of a recovery process leading to more inclusive, resilient and sustainable economies and societies, as well as an international system that can protect the global commons and deliver on global public goods.

Dr Heyzer listed four priorities for the recovery process: to revive economies and livelihoods by tackling inequality; to bridge the digital divide; to focus on long-term sustainability such as striving to reach the goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050; and to uphold human rights and good governance.

She noted that there was already a growing deficit of trust between people, especially the young, and political institutions and leaders before the pandemic, but Covid-19 has thrown these concerns into even sharper focus.

"People need agency and voice in crises and, more than ever, governments need to be open, responsive and accountable to the people they are seeking to protect," she said.

She noted that multilateral governance is now more difficult against the backdrop of a heightened sense of insecurity and unfairness.

"We need to put the inclusion, protection and participation of the excluded at the heart of a renewed global social contract, like the consensus that was forged at the birth of the United Nations," she said.

"The pandemic has also made it very clear that multilateralism, not nationalism, is the answer for recovery and to build back better."

gyanhan@sph.com.sg

Fewer people diagnosed with HIV/Aids in first 10 months of year

Wallace Woon

Fewer people were diagnosed with HIV/Aids in Singapore from January to October this year.

The 198 cases represent a 10 per cent drop from the same period last year.

This continues a downward trend from the peak of 469 people who were diagnosed in 2012.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) provided the figures on Wednesday in conjunction with World Aids Day.

The fall this year "could be related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic since early 2020", MOH said in its statement.

It urged individuals at risk, such as those who engage in casual or commercial sex, to go for regular tests, as early diagnosis can facilitate early treatment and care.

Of the 119 cases reported in the first six months of this year, 93 per cent were male. Nearly half of them were aged between 20 and 39 while a third were aged 40 to 59.

The main transmission mode,

sexual intercourse, accounted for 94 per cent of the cases - homosexual (55 per cent), heterosexual (35 per cent) and bisexual (4 per cent).

Other modes, although very rare, include intravenous drug use and blood transfusion.

Of the newly reported cases, 57 per cent were detected during the course of medical care and typically in the late stages of HIV infection, said MOH.

About a fifth of new cases were detected through self-initiated HIV screening. As these tend to be in the earlier stages of infection, they are more likely to offer a good prognosis for the patient, said MOH. Just 15 per cent were detected through routine screening.

Dr Wong Chen Seong, deputy director of the National HIV programme at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, said the pandemic could have affected the statistics in a few ways.

Covid-19 restrictions meant that there were fewer opportunities for people to meet, and hence sexual activities and the sexual transmission of HIV were reduced, he said. People could have visited HIV test-

ing services less, he added.

Dr Wong also attributed the decline in cases to ongoing efforts to reduce HIV transmission. These include the wide reach of highly active antiretroviral therapy for those living with HIV.

Such therapy allows them to achieve an undetectable viral load, greatly reducing the risk of transmission to their sexual partners.

The continued success of prevention messaging and campaigns and the use of other prevention strategies, such as pre-exposure prophylaxis, which is an HIV preventive drug treatment, also played a part, he added.

MOH said regular testing and early diagnosis provide an opportunity for infected persons to protect their partners.

It added that the most effective prevention is to avoid high-risk sexual behaviour, like having multiple sexual partners or commercial sex.

It also strongly advises the use of condoms to reduce the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

wallacewoon@sph.com.sg

Brand New Dormitory at Changi Coast Road

Rooms available for Rent

Welcome All Trades (Service, Manufacturing, Logistics, Factory Production, Semi-conductor)

- 10 pax per room with ensuite toilet
- Dedicated kitchen each floor
- Comes with amenities & full facilities
- Parking space available

9325 7878

HUATONG CONTRACTOR PTE LTD