

WAS IT
**HINDSIGHT OR
OVERSIGHT?**

COVID-19 AMONG OUR MIGRANT WORKERS



1

living conditions & risk of infection

According to Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong, one of the reasons behind the spike in cases in dormitories^{1 2} is the “large number of workers living in close quarters”.³ Nevertheless, the **risk of outbreaks of infectious diseases in such dormitories has been raised repeatedly by local migrant workers’ groups.**

OVER **10 YEARS** OF ADVOCACY & WARNING

- In **2008**, TWC2 reported on a chickenpox outbreak in crowded dormitories that led to the death of a Bangladeshi worker,⁴ while HOME’s former Research & Advocacy manager reported on the “cramped, ill-ventilated and unsanitary housing” that migrant workers were forced to live in.⁵
- In **2016**, TWC2 again highlighted the need for better housing for migrant workers in light of repeated outbreaks of dengue fever and Zika.⁶ A **2017** paper by local medical researchers also identified poor living conditions as one of the factors that put migrant workers at higher risk of such infections.⁷
- In **2015**, the Government finally took action by enacting the Foreign Employee Dormitories Act (“FEDA”) which imposes minimum standards on operators of large dormitories for 1000 or more workers.⁸ There have since been multiple prosecutions of errant dormitory operators and employers under both the FEDA and the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (“EFMA”).⁹ However, advocates have expressed concerns over the limited enforceability under these laws due to underreporting. For instance, volunteers with Migrant x Me have highlighted the difficulties that migrant workers face in reporting sub-par housing standards due to the fear of reprisal.¹⁰
- In a **2015** statement, HOME also highlighted that FEDA does not apply to operators of dormitories with less than 1000 residents and lacks “clear guidelines and standards”.¹¹ This concern was reiterated in a **2016** joint submission for Singapore’s 2nd Universal Periodic Review, where HOME and Think Centre urged the Government to “ensure all migrant workers are housed according to internationally accepted standards”.¹²

2

access to healthcare

According to Minister Lawrence Wong, another factor for the outbreak among migrant workers is because many of the workers in the dormitories had very mild symptoms but continued to go to work, which maintained the chain of transmission in their work sites and back in their respective dormitories.¹³

HOWEVER



In a forum letter that forewarned the COVID-19 outbreak in dormitories, TWC2 cautioned that migrant workers are particularly vulnerable because some are fined by their employers for failing to show up at work while other employers refuse to recognise medical leave for more than one or two days.¹⁴

Healthserve has also highlighted how migrant workers are often given inadequate sick leave and medical care by errant employers and doctors.¹⁵ Despite the legal requirement that employers pay their workers on medical leave, HOME and Think Centre warned that this is “poorly enforced in practice” in a 2016 UPR submission.¹⁶



A study published in the Singapore Medical Journal also highlighted that migrant workers faced significant barriers in accessing healthcare because of financial and systemic barriers.¹⁷ This includes the risk of repatriation by employers if they are unable to work and employers’ refusal to recognise medical leave. A previous study also found that 73% of migrant workers did not receive any insurance coverage information from their employers.¹⁸

3

where do we go from here?

In response to the public outcry, Minister for Manpower Josephine Teo acknowledged that more must be done to address the living standards of migrant workers and promised to “deal with the issue in a dedicated way” after Singapore overcomes the COVID-19 epidemic.¹⁹ Many Singaporeans have also stepped up to donate over S\$300,000 to help migrant workers’ groups like TWC2 and HOME during this difficult period.²⁰

With the benefit of hindsight, what can we learn from this episode?

1

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM IS IMPORTANT

DPM Heng Swee Keat has described the “democracy of deeds” as important in our journey of nation-building.²¹ As NMP Anthea Ong suggested last year in Parliament, “the Government should re-evaluate their attitudes towards advocacy, activism and dissent [and] learn to embrace these actions as long as they come from a place of good faith.”²²

OUR POLICIES NEED TO WORK FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

Our policies cannot just work for the majority. As Dr Jeremy Lim from HealthServe noted before the outbreak in dormitories, “If we don't proactively look after the weakest link, then collectively, we will all pay the price.”²³

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how we can help



DONATE MONEY TO THESE LONG-SERVING GROUPS

- HOME (www.giving.sg/humanitarian-organisation-for-migration-economics/covid19andbeyond)
- TWC2 (www.giving.sg/twc2/topup)
- Healthserve (www.healthserve.org.sg/donate-online)
- Migrant Worker Centre (MWC) (www.giving.sg/mwaf/migrantswecare)

ASK THESE INITIATIVES HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Citizen Adventures (hello@geylangadventures.com)
- SDI Academy (sazzad.hossain@sdi.academy)
- One Bag One Book & Migrant Writers of Singapore (onebagonebook@gmail.com)
- ItsRainingRaincoats (itsrainingraincoats@gmail.com)

Do your part as an active citizen! Write in to your MP, sign petitions, advocate for better rights for our migrant workers!

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CAPE, or the Community for Advocacy & Political Education – a student organisation based in Yale-NUS College – was founded in 2017 by students from Yale-NUS College and the Law Faculty of the National University of Singapore (NUS). An independent and non-partisan community, we aim to build capacity for political literacy and constructive participation in Singapore's civic democracy.