

► Sarah Ng

MENTAL patients who find it hard to persuade employers to hire them will soon get help.

A fund has been set up that will pay half a patient's salary for the first two months, to encourage employers to consider hiring recovered and recovering mental patients.

This initiative, called Fund-2-Work, is the first project of Silver Ribbon Singapore, formed by a group of volunteers who want to raise awareness about mental illness and early treatment, so that sufferers will not be shunned by employers and society.

It is inspired by a campaign of the same name in the United States.

An initial sum of \$50,000 from the Woodbridge Hospital Endowment Fund, managed by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), has been set aside for the scheme, which could benefit an estimated 70 patients.

The planned payout will be capped at \$350 a month for each patient.

The scheme will also help suitable candidates find jobs in food and beverage and retail establishments, as well as data entry positions.

IMH provides training in these areas and has already equipped

about 40 patients with the relevant skills.

President S R Nathan yesterday officially launched Silver Ribbon Singapore at the HDB Hub in Toa Payoh.

He hit a block of plastic cubes with a white hammer to reveal a silver ribbon sculpture, signifying the group's aim to break the social stigma attached to mental illness.

Executive director and founder Porsche Poh said Silver Ribbon will organise talks and events on mental health issues in schools and workplaces to address the commonly held belief that people with mental illness are incapable of living a normal life.

Daniel, 26, (not his real name) is among them. He has suffered from schizophrenia for a decade, but his condition is now under control.

Said Daniel, who hopes to find a job in a cafe: "I want to support my elderly parents. Being jobless is also not good for my well-being because I will become separated from society."

With medication and counselling, people with mental illness can handle jobs that match their ability, said Dr Adrian Wang, a consultant psychiatrist at Gleneagles Medical Centre and Silver Ribbon board member.

One employer, ISS Facility Services, which provides services in cleaning, catering and office support, has about 15 workers with mental illness among its 4,000-strong staff.

Said key account manager Gan Swee Hwa, 45: "None of them has given us any trouble so far. They are hardworking and willing to learn."

Silver Ribbon also hopes to find jobs for people with higher educational qualifications.

Of the 80 calls it received on job search, 20 per cent were from graduates, said Ms Poh.

Summing up the challenges people with mental illness face, 58-year-old private tutor and writer Harris Ng, whose schizophrenia condition has been stable for the last 18 years, said: "The greatest frustration is that people see us as crazy people who can't do anything."

"We may have a mental illness, but we are not mad."

**For more information on Silver Ribbon Singapore, visit [www.silverribbonsingapore.com](http://www.silverribbonsingapore.com)**

**To find out more about Fund-2-Work, call IMH's Occupational Therapy Department on 6389-2904. [ngsis@sph.com.sg](mailto:ngsis@sph.com.sg)**

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**'The greatest frustration is that people see us as crazy people who can't do anything. We may have a mental illness, but we are not mad.'**

—PRIVATE TUTOR AND WRITER HARRIS NG, 58, who has schizophrenia but has been in a stable condition for the last 18 years. He is pictured here with his wife Violet

## Mentally ill get help to find jobs

Silver Ribbon Singapore initiates project to encourage more bosses to hire those afflicted, with a fund paying half their salary for 2 months

PHOTO: LIM WU LIANG