

Helping the mentally ill find jobs in tough times

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EVEN in good times, job opportunities do not come easily for those suffering from mental illness, which is often stigmatised in the workplace.

But in the past few months, their job prospects have been hit further. They must compete with the recently retrenched, and companies have fewer jobs to offer.

However, at least three organisations here have made it a point to lend a helping hand. The Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH), the Tze Hng Wellness Studio and the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) are working with potential employers to find work for the mentally ill.

Next Monday, IMH will launch its latest rehabilitation programme, under which patients will undergo a three-month training stint at the hospital's Secret Recipe cafe. They will learn food-preparation and customer-service skills, earning \$3 an hour. They will be guided by an occupational therapist or therapy assistant.

Hard at work too are staff at Bukit Gombak Group Homes, run by the SAMH. Executive director Rajeswari K. is having a hard time finding firms able to offer large contracts for simple jobs such as product assembly or packing. She fears "the situation will get bleaker after Chinese New Year".

Some, like social worker Helen Yong, 47, help to secure short-term or odd jobs. She said: "They (patients) now have to compete with the elderly and foreigners."

Staff are even making cold calls to firms to get jobs for their residents - recovering mental patients who are unable to live with their families. They ask the firms to "give these people a chance" and help to coach job seekers.



Work-care agent Alice Tan (left) and Ms Christine Mak, who supervises a work-care team, chatting with job seekers at Tze Hng Wellness Studio, which tries to find work for people with mental illness. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

The Tze Hng Wellness Studio was launched by mental health advocate Silver Ribbon and the Aljunied-Hougang Citizens' Consultative Committee to promote mental well-being for everyone.

It also operates as an employment resource centre. Ms Christine Mak, who supervises the work-care agent team, looks for "lighter jobs with less stress, like being a cleaner or cashier".

Ironically, nine in 10 of the job seekers Tze Hng now deals with have no history of mental illness. Last month, most of its 109 registered job seekers were out-of-work Hougang residents. Work-care agent Alice Tan, 57, said: "We now have about six walk-in cases every day."

Helping the mentally ill does not stop with a job placement. They also need counsellors, who often mediate between them and

their employers. For instance, when a cleaner was slow to respond to instructions, his mental health worker had to explain his behaviour to his boss.

But health workers are richly rewarded when someone like Ms Annie Lee, 62, gets her life back in order. Work-care agents detected her suicidal tendencies when they tried to find her a job, and referred her for free counselling.

She is more positive now and won a "Best Cleaner Award" at her workplace. She said: "If they hadn't helped me, I wouldn't have known what to do."

IMH too will help find jobs for the patients it trains. It will also help by working with employers and forming support groups.

If employers could be a bit more compassionate, workers with mental illness would find it far easier to re-integrate into society, said Ms Rajeswari.