

Three self-help groups may get bigger grants

Govt prepared to match their efforts to reach out to needy: Lawrence Wong

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THREE self-help groups with plans to step up community outreach might enjoy increased funding from the Government, as part of efforts to build stronger social safety nets and help low-income families.

Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong told reporters on the sidelines of a community dialogue at Bukit Batok East that the Government is prepared to increase grants to the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), the Singapore Indian Development Association (Sinda) and the Eurasian Association (EA) to match their efforts to reach out to the needy.

The three are looking at ways to raise more funds for their communities, including increasing their Central Provident Fund check-off rates, which are amounts individuals contribute towards self-help groups on a monthly basis.

The Government provides a matching grant to donations raised by self-help groups – up to an annual cap.

Just last year, the Government raised the cap for the matching grant for Yayasan Mendaki, the Association of Muslim Professionals and Malay Muslim organisations from \$4 million to \$5 million from this financial year onwards, in response to their increased efforts to help the community.

Sinda now receives up to \$1.7 million a year, while EA gets not more than \$200,000 annually.

CDAC does not receive yearly grants.

It received a one-off grant of \$10 million to be used from 1992 to 1997.

Both Sinda and CDAC welcomed more government support, saying they have been expanding their outreach and enhancing their programmes.

Sinda chief operating officer Ravindran Nagalingam told The Straits Times that the group has been running a deficit of just over \$1 million for the past few years. Costs went up as they whittled class sizes for their tuition programmes down to about 10 students, and hired tutors trained by the Education Ministry.

CDAC said that since the start of the year, it has opened a new centre in Ang Mo Kio, launched

skills training awards and offered more programmes in schools customised to students' needs.

The Government will announce its revised matching grant caps later this year.

Mr Wong said: "If these communities are doing more on their part, the Government then, in response, will be committed to providing more in terms of matching grants... it's in line with our philosophy that the Government and the community both work together to help individuals."

That was a point he brought up at the start of the community dialogue, where he and Parliament Speaker and Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob discussed topics like national service, education and youth issues with about 150 grassroots leaders and residents.

Mr Wong spoke about the new way forward mapped out by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day Rally speech

last year, which will see greater support for individuals, especially those who are vulnerable.

He said social policies need the Government and the community to work together to be effective.

"The Government can build more hospitals, but it's up to the community to promote a healthy lifestyle. The Government can build more HDB flats, but it's up to you to make this a home," he told the audience.

"These are the things that the Government cannot substitute. It's up to the community to also do its part to rally together and create that sense of home and that sense of belonging."

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Mr Lawrence Wong (second from left) and Madam Halimah Yacob (left) speaking to a stallholder during their walkabout at Bukit Batok East yesterday. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

