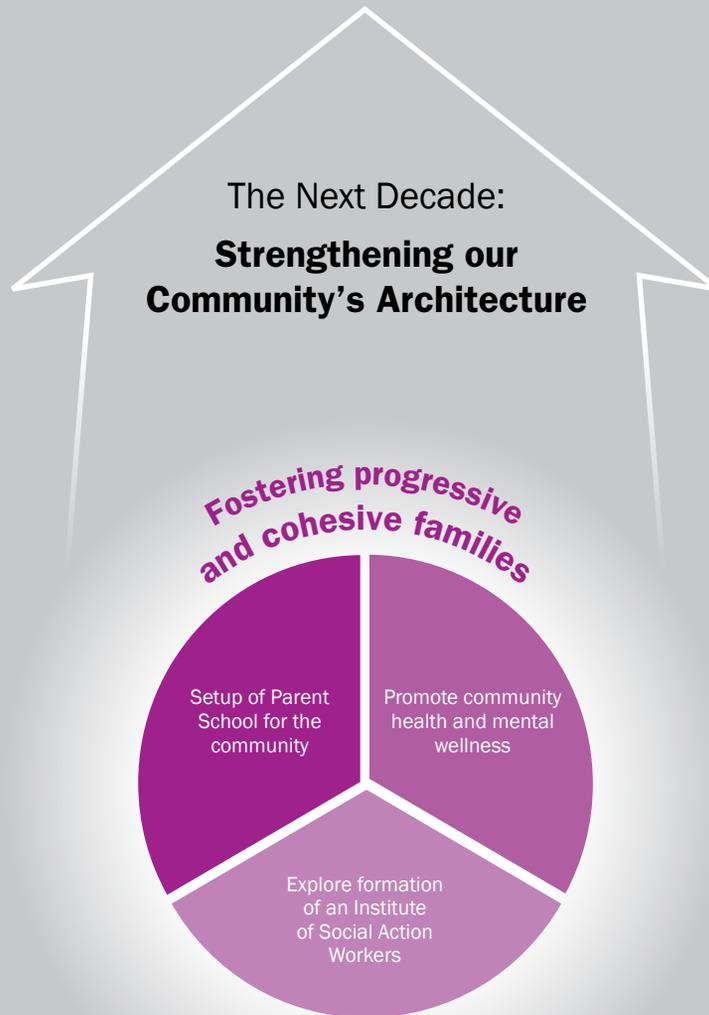




SOCIAL

SOCIAL PANEL

STRATEGY AND RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE



LOOKING BACK

In the past decade, the Malay/Muslim community has made significant and continued progress. This can be deduced from numerous educational and economic indicators (CLF Forward Planning Exercise 2010). Notwithstanding these improvements, the community still faces significant challenges in many spheres of life including financial, educational, social and religion. While the community strives to keep in tandem with Singapore's progress and development, the community seems to lag behind when compared to the progress made by other communities in Singapore.

Over the last decade, the community is saddled with the same three core issues of low-income families, high divorce and drug abuse rates, which have since become more complex.

The Malay/Muslim community is constantly reminded of the significant progress made by the community in the last decade. Yet, in a perception survey commissioned by AMP, only 31% of the respondents felt that the state of the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore has gotten better in the last 5 years. A majority of the respondents (59%) felt that there has been no change.

Challenges of The Malay Underclass

Low-Income Families

Social service agencies have observed that households which require support or assistance usually face multi-faceted issues. In addition to financial difficulties, they are also more likely to struggle with their children's development or underperformance in school, juvenile delinquency, marital and relationship issues, substance abuse, and the problem of gambling addiction. These issues could also be multi-

generational, wherein the present generation of assistance seekers comes from similar disadvantaged backgrounds as their own families, who had sought and/or received assistance in the 80s and 90s.

In the past few years, newer issues have emerged. The effect of long-term unemployment and reliance on assistance on the esteem and sense of efficacy of family members, especially the head of the family, is becoming increasingly apparent. Members of households who have tried to be self-sufficient but failed to do so due to unemployment or insufficient income to meet the family's growing needs will resign to being dependent on assistance.

This then brings about a sense of helplessness and, in time, hopelessness. The children of the family, being firsthand witnesses to their parents' deteriorating sense of self-efficacy, will adopt and internalise the same attitude. In due course, they themselves lose their own sense of belief and start to underperform.

The number of those who need assistance has also increased over the years, with many coming from the middle-income group. They are what is known as the 'new poor', with many of them facing financial troubles when they live beyond their means in order to maintain their lifestyles.

Escalating Divorce Rate and its Changing Trends

There is an increasing number of divorce cases amongst both young¹ and middle-aged couples. Over the last decade, the general divorce rate nearly doubled from 3.8 per 1,000 married resident females in 1980 to 7.6 in 2008².

Slightly more than half of marriages dissolved in 2008 had lasted less than 10 years (Table 1). About one third of the divorces in 2008 occurred

within 5-9 years of marriage. Compared with ten years ago, the proportion of couples divorcing within 5-9 years of marriage has increased.

Table 1: Divorces by Duration of Marriage

	1998	2008
Duration of Marriage (%)		
Total	100.0	100.0
Under 5 years	21.3	17.6
5 - 9 years	29.6	33.6
10 - 14 years	17.1	18.0
15 - 19 years	13.5	12.0
20 - 24 years	9.9	8.3
25 - 29 years	4.8	5.3
30 years & over	3.8	5.2
Median Marriage Duration of Divorcing Couples (Years)	9.8	9.8

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, *Population Trends*, 2009.

While the concern has always been on divorce among the younger couples, an emerging trend is changing the social landscape, where older couples who have been married for more than 20 years, are also divorcing. This seems to suggest that the institution of marriage in Singapore is facing real challenges.

Divorce rates among Malays with low educational qualifications remain significantly higher than those with tertiary education. The 2010 Singapore Census revealed that 78% of Malay divorcees had secondary school education or less. This can be contrasted against 67% and 69% of Chinese and Indian divorcees respectively.

In the last two decades, the proportion of Muslim male divorcees (aged 45 and above) in Singapore has increased from 17% to almost 30% while the percentage for females grew from 10% to 22% (Singapore

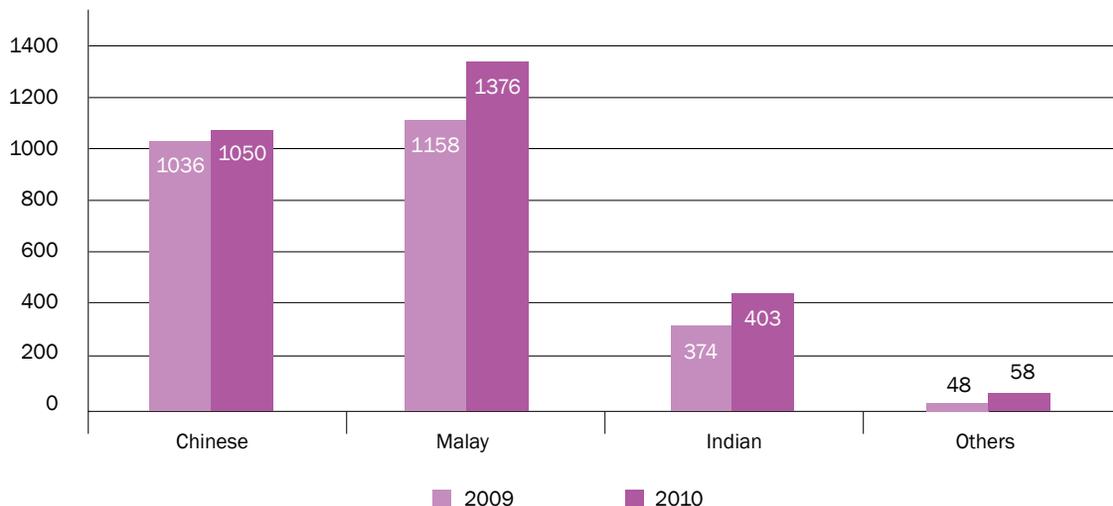
Department of Statistics, 1991, 1999, 2009). While the general Muslim divorce rate in 1991 was 21%, it has now ballooned to a staggering 40% (Statistics on Marriages and Divorces 1991, 2009). It must be qualified at this juncture that divorces are inevitable in all societies. Yet, high divorce rates could be symptomatic of larger structural problems within the community. The impact of divorces on families and the larger society often culminate to intractable social problems. It is thus imperative that the causes of divorce must be comprehensively understood and tackled.

While a divorce brings about a host of negative repercussions, its occurrence in the later years of marriage may lead to a different set of corollaries altogether. Beyond dealing with the stresses of a divorce, couples are further burdened with the task of softening the impact of divorce on their children who might turn to social ills to cope with the divorce.

Drug Abuse

The number of Malay drug abusers arrested has fallen by 13% compared to a decade ago. This 'improvement' is of little consolation given that the actual number of abusers has in fact increased by 271 persons (10.4%) in 2010 as compared to the previous year (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Drug Abusers Arrested in 2009 and 2010 by Ethnic Group

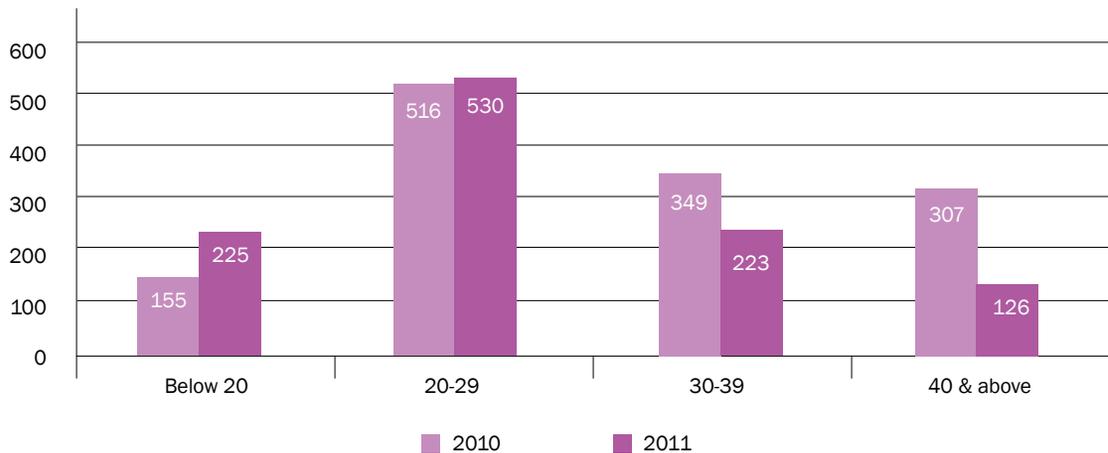


Source: Central Narcotics Bureau, 2011.

There were a total of 2,537 drug abusers arrested in 2008³, 2,616 in 2009⁴ and 2,887 in 2010⁵. By 2011, the number rose by another 13% compared to 2010⁶. Drug abusers aged 40 and above comprised the largest group at 45%, followed by those in the 30 to 39 age group at 26%⁷. Young abusers below the age of 20 comprised about 6%⁸.

While the new abusers arrested dropped 17% from 1,327 in 2010 to 1,104 in 2011, new youth abusers below the age of 20 had increased by 45% from 155 in 2010 to 225 in 2011 (Graph 2). The increase in the number of abusers arrested was seen across all major ethnic groups in Singapore. Similar to the ethnic profile of the abusers in 2010, the Malay and Chinese abusers formed the majority of arrests in 2011 at 48% and 33% respectively⁹.

Graph 2: New Abusers Arrested in 2010 and 2011 by Age Group



Source: Central Narcotics Bureau, 2011.

Crime and Delinquency Among Youths

Crime and delinquency among Malay youths is today becoming a more significant problem. The perception survey commissioned by AMP showed that there is a growing concern among the community in the social behaviour of its youth.

Both the issues of substance abuse, as well as crime and delinquency among youths, have been much discussed and addressed through various formulated policies or implemented programmes. Unfortunately, they remain persistent and have not been resolved at the community level. There has also been discussion in the last few years, pushing for a national approach to address these challenges, in line with the call for an inclusive society full of opportunity and compassion at the recent 2012 Budget.

Community Health and Wellness

In examining both social and health indicators, it has been observed

that the community is disproportionately-represented in major chronic diseases. There is also an increasing rate of Muslims suffering from nervous mental breakdowns and those who are prone to seeing suicide as a means to end their suffering, instead of seeking professional help. Cases of mental illnesses and suicides are stigmatised within the Malay/Muslim community. They comprise complex issues, which most families are not equipped or capable of handling.

LOOKING WITHIN

Considering the various programmes and services initiated to positively affect the community over the past two decades, the phenomenon of the “Malay underclass” still emerges. The complex nature of the issues faced by this group requires more creative and innovative ways to tackle them. There is an urgent need to develop new perspectives, to look for innovative approaches and timely interventions in order to ensure the continued progress of the community.

Analysis of Social Issues from Recent Works

In reviewing and deliberating the strategies for the Malay/Muslim community, two recent significant works were referred to:

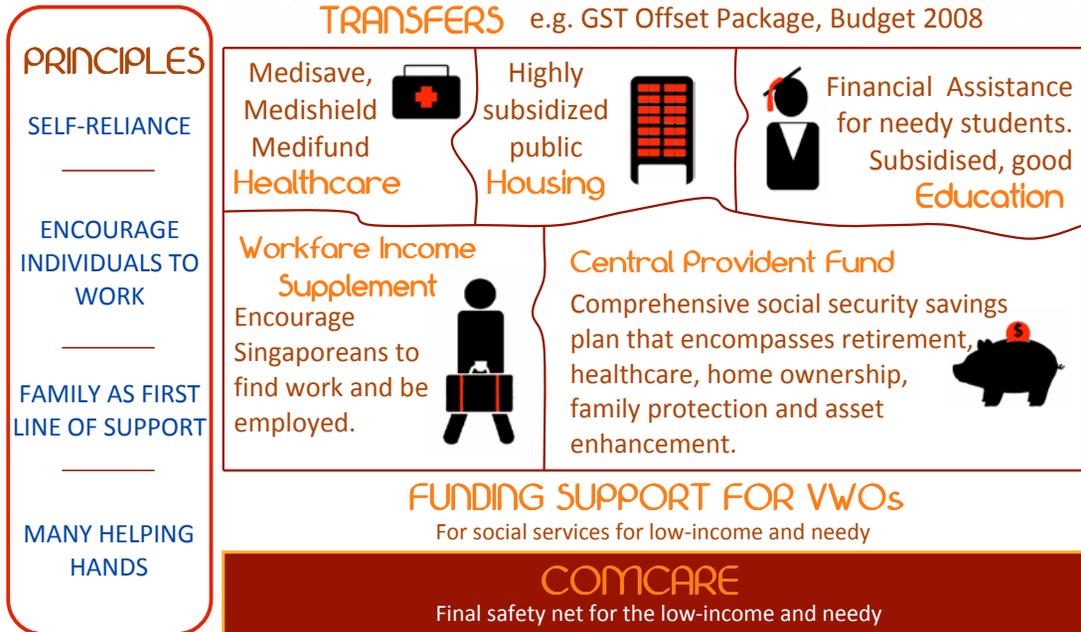
1. *Unmet Social Needs in Singapore, October 2011*
2. *The Malay Underclass: An Exploration of a Uniquely Singapore Social Issue, 2012*

Both publications acknowledged how Singapore has progressed into a nation of acclaimed successes and global recognition, which came with unintended outcomes and concerns. The *Unmet Social Needs in Singapore* report suggested that the adverse consequences of our nation’s success may have been inherent through the ideologies, policies or structures, which are put in place to address the social needs. The

extracted figure below shows an overview of the nation's social safety net from the perspective of the state.

COMCARE SNAPSHOTS

SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL SAFETY NET



Reproduced from: <http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/Portals/0/Topic/Issues/CSSD/03-Overview-of-Singapore-Social-Safety-Net.pdf>

The review of the community's social needs must be a dynamic and evolving process which must be conducted in tandem with both global and local changes. Consequently, addressing social needs must go beyond short-term amelioration for the individual in need. The long-term approach should include interventions to wean individuals off governmental support systems. Long-term behavioural changes, which can be achieved through education, training and empowerment, will alter perceptions of social needs and could mitigate the challenge of unmet social needs.

According to the *Unmet Social Needs in Singapore* report, there are four functions of social protection – relief, security, prevention and transformation. The current social protection schemes in Singapore address the first three functions of relief, security and prevention. The longer term functions of security and prevention must be continually provided for contingencies and to reduce risks respectively. The most challenging function (yet one that brings the greatest benefit) is transformation, which brings about freedom from structural causes of vulnerability.

SOCIAL PROTECTION	Transformation	Nurturing an inclusive society	Tackling stigma and investing in mental wellness	Developing an empathic understanding of the alternative family	Choosing a measured approach to progress	Treating foreign workers as fellow human beings	Creating an inclusive multi-cultural society
	Prevention	Treatment and rehabilitation Special schools Job placement	Community outreach	Job support for women	Training schemes Education subsidies for children	Education for employers	Naturalisation programmes by public agencies
	Security & Relief	Absence of central registry to guide disbursement of public assistance	Medical insurance Healthcare savings plan Mental healthcare professionals Caregivers	Temporary placement of homeless Savings and medical insurance for women	Healthcare fund and savings plan Transition programmes for the unemployed	Executive arm of the legislative framework that protects workers' rights NGOs that look after workers' needs	Singaporean identity in a global city
		Disabled	Mentally-ill	Single-headed poor household	Silent worker	Foreign worker	New communities
VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES							

Source: *Unmet Social Needs in Singapore*, October 2011.

The landscape of available social assistance in Singapore encompasses three main areas: the State structures, the 'Many Helping Hands' (MHH) approach and advocacy-based organisations. These areas do not exist in balance, with a lack of advocacy-based organisations. The State structures have been formulated on the premise of the principles of self-reliance, encouraging individuals to work and emphasising family as the first line of support.

The call for more advocacy-based organisations to complement the network of social service providers within the MMH is important, as they create an impact by influencing law-making or framing a rights-based approach to meeting social needs. This may seem confrontational on the surface; however, the efforts can bring about sustainable change through changing mindsets, rules and structures that limit individuals in society. Engagement with the citizenry can then be moved beyond the civic-mindedness.

More importantly there is a lack of outreach programmes and services for the Malay/Muslim community. The lack of coordination among agencies and consistency in the services rendered towards beneficiaries are some of the challenges which need to be addressed. The web of schemes available within the social safety net and the accompanying qualifying criteria can be confusing for those who seek them.

Most importantly the human resource constraints within the social service sector are real and critical. There are limited support structures within the MMH approach to cater to the professional and emotional challenges faced by social service professionals. Both the publications cited above highlighted the need for collaboration among social service organisations and the enhancement of capacity-building for social service professionals so as to address the needs of the bottom 30% (low-income and high-risk individuals and families) in the community.

Changing Mindset and Shifting of Focus

In the publication, *The Malay Underclass: An Exploration of a Uniquely Singapore Social Issue*, it was highlighted that families who are struggling to catch up, need to be educated about the myriad of assistance schemes offered by both national- and ethnic-based organisations. The paper suggested that the current assistance rendered by self-help groups such as AMP and MENDAKI, along with other Malay/Muslim organisations (MMOs) and Family Service Centres, are adequate to meet the needs of the bottom 30% of Malay community.

The Social Panel's initiative to engage and connect the resources within the community through a World Café session was successful in attracting close to 70 leaders and practitioners in the social service sectors.

One of the participants at the World Café shared the Hong Kong experience in doing outreach to the troubled youth and youths-at-risk. The Hong Kong government invested a large amount of money to get professionals to do the needed and important outreach to the targeted group instead of relying on volunteers.

The panel recommended that the outreach model could be examined during the implementation stage of the strategy specifically pertaining to the training of the community workers. It was agreed that the branding of the social workers is important as the targeted group is the middle 40%. Thus positive branding would be useful to encourage favourable response from this group.

All participants agreed that the real challenge in community work is to reach out to families in need and potential volunteers to reach out and encourage them to come forward and utilise the available assistance and support.

It is proposed that a fundamental strategic shift be undertaken to address the needs of the middle 40% band of the community instead of focusing only on the lower 30% band.

There are two main reasons for embarking on this strategy of targeting the middle 40% band of the community. Firstly, for the last two decades, many MMOs have invested both monetary and manpower resources to assist those in the lower-income bracket. However, there has not been much assistance provided to the sandwiched group, which often do not qualify for the range of available assistance. This group is at risk of spiraling down the social strata and hence increasing the number in the lower end group.

LOOKING FORWARD

Shortage of Social Service Professionals

There has been much discussion about the need to recruit more trained social workers in order to meet the social service needs of Singaporeans. The recommendation for better pay packages, redesigning jobs, employing more part-timers and foreigners, reducing caseloads and supporting those who are in the business of helping the less fortunate to reduce burn-outs have been tabled out. With the government's commitment in building more Family Service Centres and increasing the capability of existing ones, it will mean more needs to be done to attract more capable individuals to the profession.

There are no easy solutions to manpower shortage in the social work sector. It will take a comprehensive and holistic approach to address this challenge.

STRATEGY

Fostering progressive and cohesive families

There is a need for positive approach, which builds on the strengths of Malay/Muslim family unit, looking into its aspirations and ideals rather than focusing on its weaknesses and limitations. A progressive and cohesive family is one that:

1. instills and promotes high needs for academic achievements striving for high educational standards;
2. promotes resilience in each family member to be able to manage and cope with pressures and stressors, be it external or internal, and stay intact;
3. encourages responsible behavior and good work ethic;
4. has more than one financially active and self-reliant member who supports the family

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Setup of Parent School for the community

Parental involvement in their children's upbringing and development is of utmost importance. Emphasis should be placed in early intervention to raise responsible and disciplined children. Currently, most parents in the community assume and execute their parenting roles through trial and error. Many of the parenting techniques are passed from one generation to another. This situation will change only if new parenting strategies and skills are inculcated among young parents.

This underscores the reasoning behind the proposal of setting up a Parent School. There is a strong perception that good and effective

parenting is instinctual and natural. This is contrary to the reality that parenting is a skill which needs to be learned.

In essence, parents can learn parenting skills through a school or education centre, which imparts these skills in a structured way. The young members of the community can be trained in the basic knowledge and skills of family life before marriage to better prepare them to build a strong foundation for their future family,

The proposed Parent School will complement the existing structures and services offered by schools and social service organisations. The Parent School will adopt the successful model of the National Family, School and Community Engagement in the US, which was developed based on decades of research showing that family and community engagement leads to increased student achievement and improvement in social skill and behaviour.

In promoting strategic and innovative policies and programmes for effective family engagement and school-community partnership, the Parent School will work towards engaging parents and collaborating with communities and schools using this model.

The success of this Parent School is very much dependent on the quality of manpower recruited to run the programmes. Trained social workers and social service specialists with skills in outreach and family work would be crucial.

Recommendation 2: Explore the formation of an Institute of Social Action Workers

To tackle the shortage of social service professionals, the formation of an Institute of Social Action Workers is proposed in the long run. This

institute will produce social service specialists (such as social workers, community workers, outreach workers, counsellors, etc.) who will work with individuals in the Malay/Muslim community to help build cohesive and progressive families. The institute will also ease the transition for those planning a mid-career switch into social work and community service sector by providing the specialist training required. In this regard, the institute can champion the social service and social action sector through the following steps:

1. Advocating and promoting the set-up of a progressive support and developmental structure in every agency within the sector (beginning with the MMOs);
2. Attracting and inspiring new entrants into the sector;
3. Raising the profile and prestige of the social work/service profession through advocacy towards a more equitable rewards and benefits scheme as well as through efforts in public education and public communications;
4. Promoting and facilitating a progressive system for the professional development of personnel within the sector;
5. Promoting and facilitating an efficient and superfluous two-way flow of information and knowledge between research and frontline work in the sector; and
6. Leveraging on national and other resources in efforts to achieve the above objectives and targets.

Of the six listed, the most crucial will be that of attracting new entrants into the social service profession. This needs to be done at two levels – attracting young people i.e. fresh graduates; and facilitating mid-career individuals interested in social service to make a career switch.

The institute will also develop research capability in the areas of professional development and support within social work and community development. This would be done through close working relationships with tertiary institutions, community organisations and the government.

As the first step towards the long-term goal of setting up this institute, the community could start by forming networks among social action workers by leveraging off existing stakeholders.

Both the Parent School and the Institute of Social Action Workers can be developed incrementally over a period of time and be fully functional within three years.

Recommendation 3: Promoting community health and mental wellness

Currently, little has been done to strengthen the community in the area of mental health. The community needs more experts in this field to volunteer their expertise and share their knowledge in this important area. Volunteers are needed to assist families to cope and overcome mental ailments.

The recent launch of Club HEAL to assist and empower person with mental illness (PMI) is a sign that our community are more open and committed to provide care and support to those who need the services to be reintegrated into the community.

More importantly, there is a serious need to collaborate with the Ministry of Health and Health Promotion Board to take the crucial steps towards preventive measures and the promotion of community health and mental wellness. Among many possibilities to achieve better community health

and mental wellness are:

1. To study the trend and pattern of suicide within the community
2. To conduct research on the community's positive deviants and share the skills to others who are suffering from the same predicament
3. To collaborate with the Health Promotion Board, Institute of Mental Health and Club HEAL in preventive and outreach work in the area of mental wellness
4. To explore creative ways to get the community out of addiction and criminal activities through extensive training and promotion of 'Positive Addiction' such as sports, etc.
5. To promote the inculcation of values, based on morality and spirituality

Sources:

- 1 In the Forward Planning Exercise (2010) report by the CLF, it was reported that in 2007, 33% (578) of 1,746 Muslim divorces comprised those who were married for less than five years, compared to 13% of all divorces under the Women's Charter.
- 2 Report entitled Tackling a rising number of divorces and its emerging trends in Singapore on <http://entertainment.xin.msn.com/en/radio/938live/calocalnews.aspx?cp-documentid=4007096>
- 3 More Drugs Seized, Fewer Abusers Arrested for Drug and Inhalant Abuse in 2010, Central Narcotics Bureau, http://www.cnb.gov.sg/Libraries/CNB_MediaLibrary_Files/Singapore_Drug_and_Inhalant_Abuse_Situation_Report_Jan_to_Dec_2010.sflb.ashx
- 4 More Drugs Seized, Fewer Abusers Arrested for Drug and Inhalant Abuse in 2010, Central Narcotics Bureau, http://www.cnb.gov.sg/Libraries/CNB_MediaLibrary_Files/Singapore_Drug_and_Inhalant_Abuse_Situation_Report_Jan_to_Dec_2010.sflb.ashx
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