

New charity sets out to pilot programmes for children, youth

Suncare SG aims to take incubator model path, then partner others to scale up meaningful projects

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A new charity here wants to cut the years needed for research to become actual practice through data-driven pilot projects for children and youth.

Suncare SG, set up by leading names in the medical, social and community fields, is aiming to do so by adopting an incubator model to test and validate its programmes, and then to work with partners, including the Government, to scale up the meaningful ones in Singapore.

The charity's board consists of the likes of Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore; Professor Daniel Fung, chief executive of the Institute of Mental Health; and Madam Rahayu Buang, chief executive of KidStart Singapore, which runs a nationwide programme to support low-income families with children up to six years old.

Other board members include Dr Chong Shang Chee, senior consultant and head of the child development unit in the paediatrics department of the National University Hospital, and Mr Lei Ming, chief architect and co-founder of Chinese tech firm Baidu.

The charity, which was registered in November 2022, held its first fund-raising gala dinner last Friday at the Singapore Island Country Club.

Prof Chong, who is chairman of the board, said at the gala that research has found that it takes on average 17 years for scientific data to be incorporated into real practice.

"To speed this up, we need to have transdisciplinary partnerships between scientists and social workers and the community," he said.

This is an area the charity hopes to address by piloting interventions suited to the local context and based on local research; and providing evidence of measures that will work and that can be scaled up in Singapore, said Prof Chong.

Asked why the team decided to set up a charity instead of working with existing organisations or their own workplaces, Prof Fung said the team found that other players

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PROFESSOR CHONG YAP SENG, dean of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore and board chairman of Suncare SG.

in the space did not share the same research-driven focus or model.

Using an incubator model, Suncare SG can also help to bring various parties together – researchers, funders and programme providers.

Prof Chong said that working from the ground up also provides easier access to the community for programme participants as well as

volunteers.

Suncare SG aims to be a "provider of good ideas", he said.

"It is not meant to be a service provider and run programmes for years and years," he said.

"If it's proven to work, we want to hand it over to someone else to scale it up and maintain it."

At steady state, the charity hopes to run about two to three pilots at any one time, with each lasting about two to three years, he added.

Some of the charity's programmes will be piloted in its space in Punggol that it has named Lighthouse. The structure, made up of easy-to-move containers, will be ready in July.

One programme, Let's Play, will teach grandparents how to engage their grandchildren of up to three years old without turning to television or phones, and improve their bond and the social, emotional and cognitive development of the child.

The programme, which will involve about 40 families, is supported by the National University Health System's Centre for Holistic Initiatives for Learning Development, and is being funded by the Temasek Foundation for a year.

Prof Chong said the charity hopes to also track the real-world outcomes of the children involved

in the pilot later in life, such as their self-confidence, executive function or self-control.

This is the manner in which all Suncare SG's pilots will ideally be evaluated, he said.

He noted that most social service agencies lack the funding or manpower to routinely do rigorous evaluation and measurements of the outcomes of their initiatives.

Another area that the charity is looking at is youth well-being. It has several programmes, including some on peer support training, mental health literacy as well as mentoring, which began in 2022.

The charity is recruiting volunteers – it has about 50 now – and raising funds. Since the gala dinner, where Singapore Pools donated \$350,000, it has raised about \$500,000.

Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling, who was the guest of honour at the dinner and is adviser to the charity, said there is a critical need to develop programmes in the community that are evidence-based.

These can then be accepted and followed through by parents and caregivers so that the benefits to children are sustained and impactful, she said.

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