

Dr S. Vasoo was given the Outstanding Lifetime Volunteer Award by the Ministry of Social and Family Development on Feb 2 for his contributions to the social service sector over the past five decades. He said: "If we can get more people interested and involved in community service, we will be able to strengthen the support network in the community."

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SHINTARO TAY



Outstanding volunteer award for social service veteran

He was part of team behind project that has evolved into today's Family Service Centres

Syarafana Shafeeq

In 1976, Dr S. Vasoo was part of the team that pioneered and set up a social service centre in Ang Mo Kio in order to bring social aid closer to vulnerable residents living in the heartland.

At the time, these services were centrally located.

Today, the project has evolved into what most people know as Family Service Centres, which can be found in almost every town in Singapore as an integral part of social service delivery.

Dr Vasoo, who spent 16 years as an MP, said he was labelled the "poor man's MP" as he would often promote issues faced by lower-income communities and explore how makers of social policies could tackle the problem.

For his contributions to the social service sector over the past five decades, the 82-year-old was given the Outstanding Lifetime Volunteer Award by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) on Feb 2.

Dr Vasoo told *The Straits Times*: "What keeps me going all these years is the hope that people can

change and become better. Increasingly, I see great hopes in people taking interest in helping others. If we can get more people interested and involved in community service, we will be able to strengthen the support network in the community.

"I trust and see that there is capacity in Singapore for more people to be involved in volunteer work."

Speaking at the annual MSF Volunteer and Partner Awards at Marina Bay Sands, Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli said that volunteerism has shifted beyond being just ad hoc, and is now increasingly focused on sustained impact.

Volunteers who come forward work hand in hand with the Government and social service agencies, and their time and energies are meaningfully deployed to address needs in the social sector, he added.

"This is a good development, as it brings about greater and more meaningful impact to the families we serve," he said.

Mr Masagos announced 2024 as the Year of Celebrating Volunteers, to recognise and celebrate the contributions of volunteers who have given their time and talent to build strong families and a caring and inclusive society.

Volunteerism rates have been relatively stable over the past 10 years, but there was a decline from 29 per cent of the population in

2018 to 22 per cent in 2021, according to statistics from the National Giving Study, due to tighter measures during the pandemic, said the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC).

In 2021 and 2023, the top three areas attracting volunteers were social service and welfare, religious causes, and community development, NVPC told ST.

Mr Masagos said: "We hope to inspire more to kick-start their volunteering journey. We want to support volunteers in discovering deeper volunteering opportunities."

This year, 298 awards were given out at MSF's award ceremony to honour the passion and dedication of its partners and volunteers.

Mr Lim Tze Beng, who has been a volunteer probation officer for youth-at-risk since 2007, received the Long Service Award. In the past two years, Mr Lim befriended a total of eight probationers and helped them take steps to improve themselves.

Mr Masagos said that many volunteers have expressed a desire to be better connected with fellow volunteers.

MSF set up the MSFCare Network in 2022 for volunteers to connect and explore volunteering opportunities.

In 2024, engagement and support for volunteers in the network will be stepped up, he added.

"There is great potential to harness the energies and abilities of

volunteers to better serve service users in the social sector."

Mr Masagos also launched a new Volunteer Development Guide, created by the National Council of Social Service.

The guide will help agencies improve the way they tackle volunteer development, and help sustain interest and passion in causes these volunteers serve.

It stresses how important it is to invest in volunteer development, and the different pathways a volunteer can explore within an agency - like supporting staff in designing a new programme or helping to manage fellow volunteers.

Said Mr Masagos: "Ultimately, the guide will support social service agencies in developing a more fulfilling volunteer experience."

Many corporates have also come forward to support the social service sector over the years.

Mr Masagos said the Government is developing the Sustainable Philanthropy Framework to provide standard metrics to measure, monitor and benchmark social impact so that corporates can fulfil their social and business goals more effectively.

The framework will be launched in the middle of 2024.

"Let us come together and work in common purpose to uplift those in need. Let us keep ablaze this strong spirit of volunteerism in the social sector," he added.

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