

Expansion of Circle of Care scheme to support more disadvantaged children and build capabilities of preschools

- Broadening network to 30 partner preschools and 7 primary schools by 2023
- Building regional clusters in Queenstown, Taman Jurong and Woodlands
- Engaging international experts Centre for Evidence and Implementation and Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute
- Strengthening child health and development with NUH partnership
- Deepening care for younger children from as young as 2 months old

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- 1) Circle of Care (CoC), a ground-up programme conceived by Lien Foundation and Care Corner Singapore to build a strong support system around a child from a disadvantaged background, will widen its sphere of influence to more preschools and primary schools. The expansion will take place over the next five years, and comes on the back of renewed commitment from the government to tackle social inequality and give every child a good start in life, no matter their family circumstances. At the same time, it will improve its quality of care through strategic partnerships and professional training to impart new skills to social workers, teachers and parents.
- 2) Run by Care Corner Singapore, CoC was piloted in two preschools in 2013 and has grown to 10 preschools and two primary schools. It is by far the first and only intervention care programme locally that combines social work, health specialist services, learning support and parental involvement to render help on different fronts and smoothen the transition from preschool to primary school, where the child is supported until Primary Three.
- 3) In this child-centric model, social workers play a vital role in bringing together different aspects of care to meet the needs of preschoolers. They work with educational therapists, health specialists, teachers and principals – professionals who usually work apart – together as an interdisciplinary team, which is a key feature of the CoC model. They also engage parents as partners and journey with the child into primary school. Through a formalised working relationship with primary schools, regular meetings are held with the school's teachers, allied educators, counsellors and principal. Individual child portfolios summarising the child's background, strengths, needs and learning

trajectory are also shared so as to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of support for the child's transition to Primary One.

- 4) By 2023, CoC will have a presence in at least 30 preschools and is projected to serve at least 1,800 children from low-income families. This is an increase from the current 325 children supported by CoC in 10 preschools, of which about a third have progressed to formal schooling. As more preschoolers served by CoC move on to primary schools, CoC will increase its partner primary schools from two to seven.
- 5) About 90 per cent of the children helped by CoC come from families with household incomes of below \$3,000 a month and the majority live in rental flats. This represents one third or less than the monthly median income of \$9,023¹ for Singapore resident households in 2017.

ENGAGING INTERNATIONAL EXPERTISE TO BUILD CAPABILITY

- 6) There is a need to constantly improve CoC's quality of programmes, while ensuring a continuity of support to children and their families. CoC is engaging the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) and prospective partner Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. CEI is an independent, not-for-profit evidence intermediary working to use the best evidence in practice and policy to improve the lives of children, families and communities facing adversity. FPG is one of the oldest multi-disciplinary research institutes in the US devoted to the study of young children.
- 7) Both organisations plan to use a rigorous evidence-based evaluation process to improve effectiveness of the programme. They will also provide ongoing professional development, support in programme implementation and technical assistance within preschools to develop the competence of CoC social workers and preschool staff to serve children and families. The aspiration is for preschool operators to replicate this model and scale up to serve more centres beyond 2023.

REDUCING INEQUALITY THROUGH INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

- 8) While not a panacea, quality early childhood intervention programmes should be viewed as a necessary and long-term investment in addressing social inequality. This third phase of CoC, which will be carried out over the next five years, will cost over \$12 million. Lien Foundation, which shaped and supported Circle of Care since its inception, will inject \$10 million to finance this project, while Quantedge Foundation has pledged its support with \$2 million. Care Corner Singapore will contribute \$750,000 to the initiative in the form of manpower overheads. Of the \$12 million, 70 per cent of the funds will go

¹ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-s-household-income-grew-in-2017-income-inequality-9939710>

towards providing services, 15 per cent will be invested into programme design and professional development while the other 15 per cent will go into evaluation and other costs such as developing an IT system for data collection.

- 9) Mr Lee Poh Wah, Chief Executive Officer, Lien Foundation, said: “Inequality has roots early in life and comprises a myriad of complex issues that can no longer be easily resolved through a conventional approach. Rather than a patchwork of services, which raises additional barriers for families as they have to navigate across different systems, we need a more comprehensive strategy braiding health, social services, schools and community to meet disadvantaged families where they are.”

- 10) Quantedge Foundation, which has a keen interest in programmes that enhance social mobility in Singapore, will contribute to Circle of Care as a co-funder. Mr Lee Yin Chao, Director at Quantedge Foundation, said: “Studies have shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, due to multiple risk factors, may already be lagging behind their peers in terms of development by as much as two years, by the time they reach the age of six. We need to prioritise early childhood intervention to better level the playing field for these children.”

- 11) “CoC resonates strongly with us and we hope to be an additional voice to advocate for and demonstrate innovative solutions to tackle inequality in early childhood. High-quality programmes focusing holistically on health and relationships in the early years can have a meaningful long-term impact on children who struggle with the multifarious challenges associated with low-income families,” he added.

MORE SCHOOLS, EARLIER START

- 12) The Circle of Care’s expansion involves deepening existing collaborations with two preschool operators – PAP Community Foundation (PCF) and Singapore Muslim Women’s Association (PPIS) – as well as a new partnership with Presbyterian Community Services (PCS). The team will roll out its services in centres where at least 10 per cent of children come from lower-income households. This number could be as high as 50 per cent in some centres.

- 13) Mr Yap Poh Kheng, CEO, Care Corner Singapore: “It is our vision to see trusted and professional care brought to those in need and the less privileged. Partnering with different agencies who are experts in their own rights will accelerate and make help accessible to these children and their families. The sooner help is rendered, the sooner the gap of inequality can be narrowed. Through CoC, we not only see greater collaboration and concerted efforts across the disciplines, but also leveling up of competencies and unlimited potential of scaling up in Singapore.”

- 14) Ms Agnes Chia, Senior Group Director, Circle of Care, added: “Circle of Care is committed to install updated practices informed by science in multiple domains. This includes healthcare, early childhood expertise, social work, learning support and neuroscience. We are confident this will allow the model to provide children in poverty with a fairer chance to achieve lifelong success.”
- 15) Ms Tan Lee Jee, Assistant CEO of Preschool Services at PCF, said: “We have seen positive results in preschool attendance and development of children in the CoC programme. Through regular discussions, principals and teachers can jointly develop teaching strategies with CoC social workers and educational therapists to support children and families in the areas of health, finance, academic and social emotional development. Going forward, we are confident that more can benefit from the extension of the programme.” There are currently four PCF Sparkletots preschools under CoC’s support.
- 16) Mdm Rahayu Mohamad, President of PPIS, said: “CoC addresses the social aspect of the child that may impede the child’s development. When parents are able to address their own personal or familial issues, we are able to address the children’s issues like absenteeism from pre-school as well.”
- 17) A new preschool partner to the Circle of Care is Presbyterian Community Services. Its Executive Director, Mr David Lim, said: “The Circle of Care is in line with our outreach to disadvantaged and vulnerable children in the community. The programme, with its professional support, complements one of our strategic positions to provide early detection and intervention. Through CoC, PCS hopes that both parents and teachers are empowered to have a deeper understanding of their respective roles and children’s needs and to provide a supportive and nurturing environment for them to reach their fullest potential. This is a good opportunity for community partners to collaborate and scale up impact to a wider community.”
- 18) CoC will also expand to serve younger children from two months old onwards through services like systematic screening to identify priority areas of health. The CoC team will work with parents to build the foundation for the child’s learning, such as teaching them how to recognise and respond to their baby’s cues and creating opportunities for the child to respond in a positive manner.

TAPPING ON COMMUNITY CLUSTERS TO SUPPORT CHILD AND FAMILY

- 19) Circle of Care will work with centres under the three preschool partners in three regions: Queenstown-Buona Vista (Central), Taman Jurong-Ayer Rajah (West) and Woodlands (North). This strategy of ‘clustering’ aims to form a support system built on strong community ties. A team of social workers and social work associates, led by a senior

social worker will oversee each cluster and coordinate access to timely services like health care, student care and grassroots-led enrichment programmes.

20) Each CoC cluster will comprise of:

- a. About 10 CoC partner preschools providing childcare, healthcare and early learning services
- b. Two to three primary schools: CoC is building a collaborative network of preschools and primary schools to provide a structured transition for children under its care from preschool to primary school, with a specific focus on developing communication and collaboration between the two educational settings.
- c. A community of grassroots and family-support related services: For a start, CoC will tap on Care Corner's existing base of 50 family volunteers who have been trained and are ready to support these families. It will eventually build a pool of volunteers from the community to help parents practise newly acquired parenting skills and form healthy habits.

STRENGTHENING HEALTH SERVICES WITH NUH PARTNERSHIP

21) The Department of Paediatrics of the National University Hospital (NUH) has renewed its commitment to provide health and developmental support services for families served by Circle of Care to improve access to early intervention and bridge barriers towards seeking professional help for their children. Dr Chong Shang Chee, Head and Senior Consultant at NUH Child Development Unit, will be Special Advisor to CoC where she will work with the team to refine intervention strategies and support children with greater health and learning needs.

22) She said: "Singaporean children enjoy high quality healthcare generally. There are some children from disadvantaged backgrounds who stand to benefit from more timely and early intervention for their development needs. Their parents may be busy working and find it a challenge to bring them for repeated visits to hospitals and clinics, or lack access to information on the services available. Being part of Circle of Care is a significant step for us as paediatricians and doctors to actively serve in a community and customise our services so these children and their families have higher, direct and quick access to healthcare."

23) The partnership between NUH and CoC will focus on these areas from 2018 to 2023:

- a. Fine-tuning targeted health screening in preschools to provide health education through a customised health toolkit.

- b. Provision of fast-track referral services to its primary care partners to remove systems barriers for families who need further health needs sorted.
- c. Regular participation in interdisciplinary team meetings of children who have higher developmental learning needs, provide mentoring by specialists such as speech therapists and psychologists to preschool teachers and train those who need specialist guidance for in-class development and behavioural issues.

24) Early intervention in children is critical because good physical health and social emotional development are the foundations on which cognitive skills are built upon. From 2017, NUH doctors and nurses performed health and developmental screenings for CoC partner preschools. Dr Chong noted that in the past one year of conducting health and development screenings across nine CoC partner preschools, a high proportion – or 43 per cent – of children screened were found to have a range of definite or probable medical or developmental issues that warranted health interventions at primary care or further detailed assessment by specialists. Among the common issues picked up were delayed language development and undernutrition.

25) Paediatricians from NUH also mentor the CoC team on the application of Brazelton Touchpoints, a well-researched, family-centred approach developed by Harvard Medical School that aims to prime every parent for success. This arrangement will continue for the next five years.

NURTURING SUCCESS

26) While the impact of Circle of Care has the potential to last long beyond childhood, the team has observed all-rounded progress of preschoolers under the programme. These children attended school more regularly and showed an improvement in literacy and numeracy skills – among 30 K2 children in five preschools tracked by CoC, about 90 per cent of them achieved improvements in these two areas. In one of the PPIS preschools, all of the seven children under CoC showed improvements in literacy skills, while in another PCF Sparkletots preschool, 4 of out the 5 children saw progress in their numeracy skills. Those who had health issues were also detected through the Health and Developmental Screening Programme (HDSP), and received timely intervention.

27) Parents, who play an integral role in their child's development, were observed to participate more in school activities and gained new skills that enhanced daily interactions with their children. Going forward, they will be engaged more extensively through support groups and workshops. Such learning journeys are aimed to forge support networks for parents to build confidence and parenting skills to engage their children in a hands-on manner. These include programmes like *Mind in the Making*, developed by US child development expert and work-family researcher Ellen Galinsky,

that uses a science-based approach to impart life skills that promote focus, self-control and perspective-taking to children.

28) Reflecting on the learnings from Circle of Care, Lien Foundation's Mr Lee said:

“Extending our commitment to CoC can realise our aspirations in changing the game for disadvantaged children, as we enable new capabilities grounded by emerging insights. Together with our partners, we are driven by a shared responsibility to close the widening income achievement gap.”

Annex A: Circle of Care 2013-2018 [Fact sheet](#)

Annex B: [Case studies](#): P1 transition and health

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The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to foster exemplary early childhood education, excellence in eldercare and effective environmental sustainability in water and sanitation. In the area of early childhood development, the Foundation aims to open up opportunities for children from low-income families and those with special needs. In its push for inclusivity in education, the Foundation set up Singapore's first inclusive preschool, Kindle Garden, with AWWA.

It spearheads Circle of Care, a child-centric model of care where teachers, social workers and therapists look after preschoolers from less privileged families in an integrated care approach to mitigate the impact of poverty on their potential. The Foundation, together with KK Women's and Children's Hospital and Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities, developed the Early Childhood Holistic Outcomes (ECHO), a new family-centred approach to early childhood intervention that focuses on daily functioning of children with special needs for better inclusion to society.

To advocate greater access to quality early childhood education, the Foundation commissioned a study, Vital Voices for Vital Years, that examined leaders' views on improving Singapore's preschool sector and Starting Well, a global benchmark study by the Economist that ranked 45 countries on their provision of preschool education. In 2009, it developed a community-based model of care, Mission I'mPossible, where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success has since inspired a scaled-up version nationwide.