

MOBILISING COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO OVERCOME RECIDIVISM

Presented by:

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INTRODUCTION

The drug abuse problem in Singapore has improved significantly over the past 10 years. Between 1994 and last year, the number of persons arrested for drug consumption dropped by more than 80% from 6165 to 1127. During the same period, the relapse rate of drug supervisees fell from 70% to 15%.

2 The drug problem in Singapore saw several peaks in the past 3 decades. The worsening situation in the 1970s, with young people abusing methaqualone or MX pills and cannabis, the government responded with the formation of the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) under the Ministry of Home Affairs in 1971 to take coordinated action to prevent, detect and suppress the trafficking and abuse of controlled drugs. In 1972, the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) was formed to complement the work of CNB by providing drug addicts with counselling, rehabilitation and aftercare services.

3 Since then Singapore has seen various forms of drug abuse, from methaqualone, cannabis, morphine, heroin, inhalant abuse and now synthetic drug abuse. With a multi-pronged approach of preventive education, drug enforcement, treatment, rehabilitation and aftercare over the last 10 years, the drug problem has been brought under control.

4 The first major nationwide action against drug offenders was carried out in April 1977 and was codenamed Operation Ferret. Operation Ferret aims to flush out drug offenders from their hideouts and drug dens. In just four days, more than 900

drug offenders were arrested, drug traffickers were out of business because their supply of heroin was cut off. There was also a big drop in demand because their ‘customers’ had been rounded up by the hundreds. Seven months after the operation started, more than 5,100 addicts had been packed off to the DRCs.

5 By 1979, Operation Ferret had to some extent helped to contain the spread of drug addiction, but another problem surfaced in Singapore. Of the 10,750 addicts who were placed under supervision after treatment, 3,704 (or 39%) returned to their old habits. The road to recovery seemed even longer for addicts treated two years earlier, as many as 70.8% in this batch relapsed during supervision.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

6 The recovery process of addicts is akin to travelling on a long highway that has only a few exits. The aim of the rehabilitation process is to ensure that addicts get off at the correct exit and never return to the highway of addiction again. Addicts are equipped with proper job skills and attitude so that they can look forward to a meaningful life after their release from the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC). Ultimately, it is all about giving a second chance and how government agencies are rallying the community to accept the addicts again. The following case¹ illustrates how community involvement had helped a couple turned over a new leaf and managed to stay drug free despite multiple incarcerations.

7 “Peter”, 41, started taking drugs when he was 17, at the instigation of his friends. He recalled that it all started in 1980 that he started taking drugs because his friends told him it would give him a nice and ‘high’ feeling. He started with cannabis and went on to try heroin later. He was an odd job labourer and his parents were divorced and could not provide for him and his 10 siblings, hence he turned to burglary to support his drug habit. He was caught in 1981, jailed for about a year for both burglary and drug consumption. He was released in 1982, the same year that he was called up for National Service. He managed to stay away from drugs for a few years but after he completed his National Service, he returned to drugs again. He was caught

¹ Tan Ooi Boon, *Slaying The Dragon : Singapore’s Fight Against Drugs*, Singapore, SNP International Publishing Pte Ltd, 2006

in 1989 and sent to the DRC for another year. He was released in 1990 but was caught again in 1991. This time, he was not so lucky and was locked up for three years, until 1994. Despite three detentions, he went back to drugs again, this time just months after his release. He was sent back to the DRC for the fourth time in 1995 and was released only in 1997. At this time, he met his wife, who was also a repeat drug offender. For the couple, 1999 was a very significant year. This was the year they got married, it was also the year when they were caught together for taking drugs, just nine months after their marriage. Having to be separated from his wife for many years was a painful experience for “Peter” and he began to ask himself if it was worth it. So “Peter” vowed to make a clean break from drugs.

8 After being detained in the DRC for two years, he was placed in the Halfway House in 2001 to undergo a recovery programme. The recovery group meetings and religious counselling helped him to find peace and the determination to stay clean. Although he could have left the halfway house in 2002, he chose to stay on to help as a volunteer, partly because his wife was still in jail. The Halfway House, well known for its ‘therapeutic community concept’ to promote change, uses peer pressure to encourage addicts to stay clean. As peer pressure is the reason why many addicts took drugs, the reverse has also been found to be effective to make addicts kick the habit. Residents who have been discharged are encouraged to keep in touch and to take part in ‘outpatient’ or ‘drop-in’ counselling sessions. Residents also take part in various job assignments such as banner-making, signcraft and silkscreen printing.

9 During this time, the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) also helped to get him a job. He exhibited responsibility and dedication in his job as a linen attendant and was soon promoted to a supervisory position. In 2004, his wife was released early for good behaviour. After she had completed a one year post-release supervision programme run by the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB), SCORE found her a job as a quality control assistant.

10 The couple now have a stable income and managed to save enough to buy themselves a four-room flat where they now live. Looking back, the biggest inspiration for “Peter” to stay drug-free came from the SCORE officers. They treated him like a normal person despite his bad records. That made him feel very good and he worked

hard as not to disappoint them. Vice-versa, Peter's success story is also an inspiration to the SCORE officers to want to help more drug addicts stay drug-free.

11 The learning points derived from the case is to treat ex-drug addicts like any normal human being, give them constant encouragement and expose them to positive role models. In addition, religious and spiritual growth is another ingredient for rehabilitation. Religion can strengthen one's character and increase the resistance against drug temptation, strain and stress. Another key step paving the road to recovery is to provide vocational and skills training to the inmates so that they have a better chance of employment upon their release.

12 Although the punitive regime for hardcore and repeat addicts is tough in Singapore, the government recognises that there is a need to give opportunities to new addicts and those who genuinely want to overcome their addiction. For Singapore, the unique approach taken involved the partnership of three organisations tasked with rehabilitating addicts after their release from detention. Since the mid-1990s, SCORE, SANA and the halfway houses have been working closely to offer support to addicts in their recovery process. It doesn't matter whether an addict is a Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or a free thinker, there is a place for everyone. This is one of the main reasons why halfway houses are effective in helping addicts in their recovery process. Not only are the addicts accepted by the institution of their choice in terms of his religious beliefs, each halfway house also has its own brand of treatment for its residents. For instance, Teen Challenge, a Christian centre works with adult males who are primarily ex-drug addicts and alcoholics. Residents go through the Drugs and Alcohol Recovery (DARE) Programme to help them overcome their addiction, which includes counselling and group therapy, bible study, prayer, character building and life skills classes.

CARE NETWORK

13 A major development in garnering the community's support for the rehabilitation of inmates took place in May 2000 with the formation of the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders (CARE) Network to coordinate the work of aftercare agencies which includes SANA. One of its objectives is to set guidelines

and directions for the provision of aftercare support services for discharged inmates and their families. It also seeks to raise the level of public awareness and concern about the needs and problems faced by ex-inmates and their families. One of the measures implemented was the Case Management Framework (CMF). Two months before an inmate is released, aftercare case managers from SACA and SANA will work with the inmate to identify his aftercare needs and to do a personalised aftercare discharge plan. Upon the inmate's release, the aftercare case managers follow up by providing him with the necessary support and assistance. An important goal of case management is to build the inmates' self-confidence so that they can eventually support themselves with minimum help from others. Support will also be given to family members as this will help to boost the inmates' recovery upon release.

14 It is not by chance that about nine out of every 10 drug inmates now continue to stay clean after they step out of the prison gates. Compare this situation to the one just 10 years ago, when every eight out of 10 inmates returned to drugs soon after their release.

A SECOND CHANCE – YELLOW RIBBON PROJECT

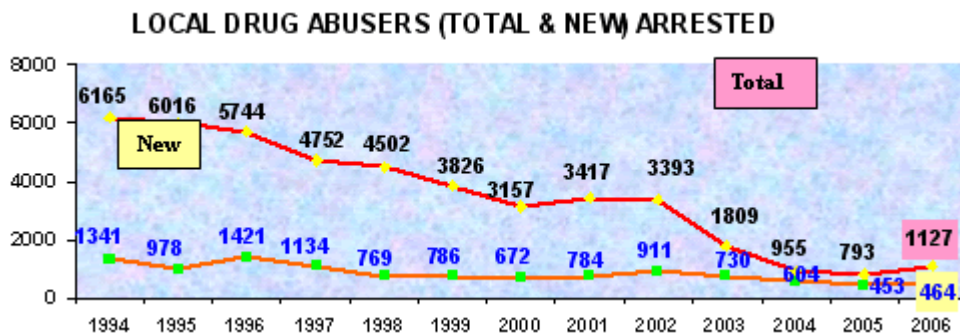
15 In October 2004, member agencies of the CARE Network launched the first nation-wide awareness drive termed the 'Yellow Ribbon Project' (YRP). One of the key aims of the YRP is to raise the awareness of Singapore's community towards difficulties faced by ex-offenders / drug addicts and their loved ones during the journey towards reintegration and encouraging the public to give the ex-offenders / ex-drug addicts a second chance. The series of programmes undertaken by the YRP to increase awareness and to generate acceptance of the ex-offenders / ex-drug addicts in turn increased the self-esteem of the ex-drug addicts, hence, deterring them from falling prey to drugs again.

16 Thus, the Yellow Ribbon Project aims to reinforce this awareness that if a second chance is given, such encouragement will not only help ex-offenders to reintegrate back into society and stay away from crime / drugs, it will help their families as well. An inmate shared that the Yellow Ribbon Project has made quite an impact on the inmates in the institutions. Many of them are now trying their best to

change because they now have some hope that the community will be more supportive and willing to give them a second chance.

SINGAPORE DRUG SITUATION

17 After more than 10 years of battle to overcome the drug problem, the number of drug abusers arrested fell from over 6,000 in 1994 to 1,127 in 2006. During the same period, the number of new abusers also dropped from 1,341 to 464 in 2006. The relapse rate of drug supervisees was 67.9% in 1994 and 65.1% in 1995. A decade later, the relapse rate had dropped significantly – to 14.9% in 2004 and less than 5% in 2005 and 2006.



Central Narcotics Bureau, Drug Situation Report 1994 - 2006

CONCLUSION

18 The local drug situation is well under control, considering that the total number of abusers arrested in 2006 has declined by 82% from its peak in 1994. A strong anti-drug programme and a change in the mindset have contributed significantly to reducing the addict population in Singapore. In particular, the change resulted in a major drop in the recidivism rate for released DRC inmates over the years, to less than 5% in 2006.

19 Public support is a crucial factor in any national campaign. When it comes to anti-drug campaigns, it is all the more critical to have the public's understanding and support to ensure that all rehabilitation programmes are effectively carried out. Every addict who has been successfully reformed will need to find gainful employment so

that they can lead a meaningful life and stay on the right path. Without all the help and support from employers, rehabilitation could be disrupted, resulting in ex-addicts falling prey to drugs again due to depression and disappointment. That is the reason why SCORE feels it is vital to continually knock on the doors of employers, to get more of them to support its cause of helping ex-addicts and their families.

20 Due to the changing profile of drug abusers (from heroin and opium to synthetic drug abusers), the educational level of inmates have changed too. The next addict who comes in may be a degree or masters degree holder, it may not be appropriate to match him with a job of a cook or baker. Effective rehabilitation means that there must be a good job fit.

21 Besides public support, the family also plays a significant role in helping a reformed addict stay drug free. At least, getting the families to accept the addicts again would be a booster for them to change for the better, at least for the sake of their children and loved ones.

22 Ultimately, there is only so much that the Government and the community can do to help the addicts. Addicts themselves must show a desire to change and turn over a new leaf, otherwise all efforts will go to waste.