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www.straitstimes.com

Published on Mar 08, 2014

Breaking down the barriers

The Budget gives people with disabilities a \$30 million helping hand, and follows several other big-ticket measures for them, amid a shift to a more inclusive society. Insight looks at the winding journey to reach this stage, and where to next.

By Charissa Yong

AS A child, Mr Edmund Wan dreaded taking public buses to school so much that he would walk half an hour in the heat instead.

Back then, bus drivers waited for no man - an ordeal for Mr Wan, who walks with a limp as his left leg is affected by polio.

"Today's buses stop, open the door and let you on. The buses I travelled on then, expected you to run after them and jump up.

"You had to gather momentum, otherwise you'd fall. I fell down so many times, with my school bag and everything. Worse still, the bus driver didn't stop. Those were the days," recalls Mr Wan, now 70 and president of the Handicaps Welfare Association.

But these days, things are different - at least when it comes to helping the physically and mentally disabled get around, enabling them to participate more in society and also helping them to obtain medical treatment they may require.

This year's Budget earmarks \$30 million to further help the disabled with accessible transport and more affordable therapy programmes and equipment.

It is one of several multi-million-dollar measures over the past few years that herald Singapore's shift to being a more inclusive society.

Most prominently, public transport fare concessions and subsidies, long on the wish list of the disabled community, of up to \$50 million were announced last November.

These deliver on political signals over the past decade that the disabled are no longer to be left out, including the two Enabling Masterplans in 2007 and 2012.

Insight looks at the winding journey the disabled community took to reach this stage, and where it will go from here.

The arduous journey

THE Government only began moving decisively on disabled-friendly public transport and infrastructure in the last 20 years.

Before that, many with disabilities had difficulty getting from place to place, let alone at an affordable rate. This hindered them from integrating into mainstream society, argued advocates.

People with disabilities had to pay full fares to use public transport, which did not have disabled-friendly facilities such as lifts and ramps. Nor did the Land Transport Authority (LTA) show signs of relenting.

In a 1992 letter replying to blind activist and founder of the Disabled People's Association (DPA) Ron Chandran-Dudley, SMRT had said wheelchair users would "most certainly hamper rapid evacuation" in an

emergency.

"The transport needs of the wheelchair-bound certainly deserve attention but the MRT is not the solution," it said then.

Cost was the other, larger consideration. The authorities wanted to find an economical approach to transporting large numbers of people efficiently. This trumped making public transport fully accessible to every single person.

LTA's chief executive back then pointed out that adding and maintaining equipment such as hydraulics for wheelchair-users to all 3,800 buses in its fleet would cost \$47 million.

The battle between the two opposing viewpoints, with transport as a touchpoint, was fought in forum letters over the 1990s.

Mr Wan, who by then had become an advocate, describes it as "a hard approach of persuading and being slammed down".

"You have to accept whatever the answer is, it may not be their priority, they may not have the resources, you just accept it. Sometimes you need to catch a break," he says.

That break came in 2001 - the Government reversed its earlier stance and announced that it would spend \$81.5 million to retrofit all existing MRT stations with ramps, lifts and toilets for the disabled by 2004.

Stations along the North-east Line were already being built with such barrier-free facilities.

In 2008, the Government vowed all public buses would be wheelchair-accessible by 2020.

In February this year, the LTA finally announced that disabled adults would get public transport fare concessions of 25 per cent.

The ageing population was inadvertently the disabled community's biggest ally in precipitating these changes.

The needs of the elderly, which dovetailed with the needs of the disabled, "opened up that little window where (such infrastructure) was seen as a priority", says Mr Wan.

Although lifts in MRT stations would not have made economic sense for just the 5,300 registered wheelchair-users in 1998, it does when the growing number of seniors needing these facilities were taken into account.

Today, there are about 450,000 people aged 65 and over.

State and societal attitudes towards people with disabilities were also changing as the country developed economically.

"Singapore is a very pragmatic society, and I don't fault that. We began with nothing and survival was instinctive. Naturally, we looked at what can add to our gross domestic product, and if it didn't, we'd put it aside," says Christian Outreach to the Handicapped (COH) executive director Samuel Koh, 57.

"But now, we're in a better position to help those we've neglected."

The disabled community's consistent lobbying, and compassionate political leaders, were contributing factors, they say.

Mr Wan, who believes that advocacy should be "evolutionary rather than revolutionary", says: "We didn't bang tables. But we persevered, and we won."

Advocates worked hard at raising public awareness of disabled issues through fund-raising, as well as writing and publishing articles.

"We believe we first need the support and understanding of the public because they form the larger segment of Singapore," says Mr Wan.

It was also very important to have a listening ear and compassionate people in high places, says Mr

Chandran-Dudley, now 79.

The stalwart advocate, who has been blind since 17, began his advocacy in the late 1950s, visiting kampungs to persuade families to send their children to the first school for the blind in Singapore.

"That was one aspect of trying to equalise opportunities for blind children, by giving them education, although at kindergarten and primary school level," he recalls.

There was also usually some behind-the-scenes discussion and give-and-take before breakthroughs happened.

"We were facing blockages...but if you had the right key, the locks would open," Mr Chandran-Dudley says.

For example, he had faced some difficulty in registering the DPA in the 1980s until he and several others were invited for a meeting with former prime minister Goh Chok Tong, who helped the advocacy group to get registered.

Moulmein-Kallang GRC MP Denise Phua, who has a son with autism, has also been a tireless advocate in Parliament for the disabled cause.

"If the state can take over, the message will better succeed," says Mr Wan.

And the state did take over. For example, the Building and Construction Authority made it mandatory in 2002 that all new buildings must include more disabled-friendly facilities and be universally accessible.

Stage 2: Expansion

POLITICAL milestones and policy changes came more frequently.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong envisioned Singapore as an inclusive society in his maiden National Day Rally speech in 2004. He pledged to pay attention to several marginalised groups including the disabled, whom he described as "our brothers and sisters too".

In 2007, the first five-year Enabling Masterplan was announced. The wide-ranging blueprint listed key recommendations to improve programmes for the disabled.

These spanned the areas of early intervention, employment, caregiver support, community and residential care, public education and manpower training.

It recommended that early intervention programmes be funded through a combination of fixed and means-tested subsidies - for example, laying the groundwork for the more extensive programme subsidies announced in this year's Budget.

The Masterplan continues today, with its second edition released in 2012.

COH's Mr Koh believes the national blueprint for the disabled community "speaks volumes".

"We've never had anything like it. The mindset is different. It's not just charity money... the money spent is supposed to enable them. It augurs well," he says.

The daycare he runs for about 100 people with intellectual disabilities has been receiving more government grants, in addition to its public donations.

This has helped them employ more staff and become a more professional outfit, says Mr Koh.

Singapore also last year ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a formal move which signals that the Government recognises the needs of those with disabilities, say advocates.

And just yesterday, it was announced that students at universities, polytechnics and Institutes of Technical Education will now enjoy more resources in the form of funds and services to meet their needs.

The state has also strengthened the safety net for the more vulnerable groups, such as helping to ensure mentally disabled children remain cared for all their lives.

The Mental Capacity Act was enacted in 2010 so parents can request the Courts to appoint individuals to

care for their mentally disabled children after they die.

These children can also receive monthly payouts from the Central Provident Fund accounts of their parents on their death, under 2011's special needs saving scheme.

The Government also continues to pour more resources into programme and equipment subsidies for the lower- to middle-income groups, a trend that continues in this year's Budget.

This year, all Singaporean children enrolled in early therapy and educational support programmes will be subsidised by at least \$500 a month, up from \$300 now.

Additional subsidies were extended to cover four in five households, compared to one in two now.

The Budget also gives subsidies of up to 80 per cent for dedicated transport or 50 per cent for taxi travel. These address the needs of those with more severe physical disabilities who cannot use public transport. They would not have been part of the 50,000 with disabilities who benefit from last November's public transport fare concessions. However, only the lower two-thirds and half of households respectively qualify for the dedicated transport and taxi subsidies.

Mr Alvin Lim, chief executive of Bizlink, a non-profit organisation that provides employment services and job assessments for the disabled, says that these transport subsidies and concessions "will bring more and more people out into our mainstream society".

By lessening the burden of transport costs, this will enable them to step into the community and even work, he adds.

The moves cap the removal of the "first barrier" to integrating disabled people into society, Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) executive director Abhimanyau Pal, 48, says.

"We used to go for very hard issues like the MRT, roads, schools to be accessible, very basic physical rights that a human being should be participating in the community.

"Almost every day in the 1980s we used to hantam (Malay for "hit") the authorities for it," he says.

"But now, as a whole society we are getting more mature. Physical barriers are the easiest to tackle, as long as we have national resources, our GDP is growing quite well, we can settle it."

No rest for the advocate

ALTHOUGH the No.1 item on the disabled community's wish list - transport subsidies and better mobility - has been addressed, they are adamant that Singapore cannot rest on its laurels.

These days, they attend focus group discussions and give feedback about where policies can be improved.

Fine-tuning and plugging the gaps in existing policies still need to be done. The Government could also go further and move faster, they say.

The deadline that all buses must be accessible to wheelchair users by 2020 may be too slow, says Mr Wan, though he quickly adds: "But do I have a choice?"

Slow implementation of policies may also be a problem for the lower-income disabled, who grapple with daily inconveniences as they wait for their subsidy applications to be approved.

It took Madam Madiah Atan, 59, several months before taxi subsidies for her wheelchair-using son were approved. In the interim, he had to wake at 5.30am daily to get to school on time via public buses, which were often too full to fit him.

Advocates say gaps like these show that resources alone are not enough, though they are a good start. Smooth implementation is also needed.

A perennial woe for people with physical disabilities is when facilities meant for them, like parking lots for the handicapped, are misused by others. This can be resolved by better enforcement or stiffer fines, urges Mr Wan.

It is not enough to simply give money to help the disabled buy equipment to help them with their daily lives, such as wheelchairs, says SPD's Mr Pal, who wants more professional centres to be set up so the disabled can get recommendations on what they need.

But just as importantly, besides giving the disabled the means to step into society, society also needs to fully accept them.

This is what Mr Pal calls the "psychosocial barrier" - society still does not perceive the disabled as equal.

"There's improvement in integration, but not by leaps and bounds. A lot of people with disabilities in poorer families, their parents hardly bring them out... some may still find them shameful and embarrassing," says COH's Mr Koh.

Advocates agree that more public education is needed.

Mr Pal argues that not just the Government should do more, but also the private sector and society at large.

"If you're totally relying on government grants, you're standing on one crutch. If one economic crisis comes, that crutch is taken away, you collapse. It's slow because three hands have to come together, but more sustainable," he says.

Mr Chandran-Dudley says: "This is where civic education comes in. It's important to educate people in schools."

This can curb the problem of the public abusing facilities and services meant for the disabled, he adds.

The DPA recently proposed a civic education module to raise awareness of disability issues among students. It has been in talks with the Education Ministry.

There are already positive signs. Last year's disability awareness event, the Purple Parade, shows the public supports government efforts in creating an inclusive society, believes Singapore Association for the Deaf president Christopher Low.

In announcing help for the disabled in his Budget speech, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam voiced the view that they deserved more help: "Their difficulties are the greatest, and often their courage, too. They deserve greater support."

This is a far cry from the reservations expressed by one political officeholder at a youth forum in 2008 that more aid for the disabled might encourage more people to claim they were disabled to get those benefits.

Says Mr Wan: "We've come a long way. Today is better, but tomorrow we can be even better still."

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