

THE STRAITS TIMES

Family violence victims can get help from 24-hour emergency response team from April 2023



Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling said the changes aim to better protect survivors, and hold perpetrators accountable while focusing on their rehabilitation. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO



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SINGAPORE - Victims of family violence will be able to receive help from social service professionals around the clock by calling the National Anti-Violence Helpline from April 2023.

The social service professionals, who are from the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), will work with the police to attend to family violence cases after office hours. They will also be empowered to issue emergency protection orders at the scene to keep victims safe.

There is already a team attending to child and elderly abuse, and it will be extended to protect abused spouses. The team may, for instance, require a grandparent to be present in the home in the case of child abuse, or require the victim to temporarily move to a relative's home.

This is among the measures that will be rolled out in 2023 to tackle family violence, said Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling at a conference on Wednesday.

Eleven social service professionals and organisations were recognised for their efforts in managing family violence cases at the event, which was held at The Chevrons recreational club in Boon Lay.

The measures were recommended by the Taskforce on Family Violence, and accepted by the Government in 2021 for roll-out in one to three years.

In September 2021, the task force released a report with 16 recommendations after examining more than 3,600 family violence cases and conducting focus group discussions with those involved in the work, among other efforts.

Other measures that will be implemented in early 2023 include changing the law to allow third parties such as MSF's director-general of social welfare to apply for personal protection orders (PPOs) for those experiencing violence.

The changes aim to better protect survivors, and hold perpetrators accountable while focusing on their rehabilitation, said Ms Sun.

The law will also be changed to allow the Family Justice Courts to order perpetrators to undergo mandatory assessment and treatment if their mental health conditions contributed to the violence.

It will be made an offence for perpetrators to flout efforts to rehabilitate them, such as counselling orders. Penalties for breaches of PPOs will also be raised.

More details will be announced in 2023, said Ms Sun.

Since September, victims and offenders can talk to forensic psychologists at Family Violence Specialist Centres, who can provide psychological assessments to identify trauma and depression.

An online channel for the National Anti-Violence Helpline will also be launched by Dec 30 as an additional way of reporting incidents of abuse.

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The Family Violence Specialist Centres will be renamed Protection Specialist Centres from January 2023 to reflect the support for victims of violence by intimate partners and dating violence, on top of victims of domestic violence.

Mr Ravindran Sadanandan, assistant senior counsellor at the Singapore Indian Development Association family service centre, received an award for his efforts in tackling family violence cases. He said the 24-hour emergency response team is helpful as many family violence cases happen at night.

Mr Ravindran, who does home visits to check on families and updates police on their progress and interventions rendered, said social workers can build rapport with families experiencing domestic violence and provide them with emotional support.

Mr Ben Ang, principal social worker at Thye Hua Kwan Family Services, who also received an award, said the higher penalties for breaching PPOs will send a stronger message to deter offenders, and the focus on supporting perpetrators with mental health issues will help to rehabilitate them.

Mr Ang, who runs a support group for men who previously caused harm to their loved ones, said: "The focus is a lot on women and kids, but we also want to help men repair their relationships and regulate their emotions. Not many people want to hear them. The support group allows these men to share their regrets and grievances, and learn where their aggression is coming from."

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