

SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG
INTERNATIONAL DAY OF OLDER PERSONS (1 OCTOBER 2022)

Chairman of PAP Seniors Group Minister Desmond Lee

Vice Chair Ms Rahayu Mahzam

My Parliamentary colleagues, past and present

Comrades and Friends

1. Good afternoon. I am happy to be here today to celebrate our seniors and to mark the International Day of Older Persons with all of you. Very good to see such a large gathering of everyone in white!

2. PAPSG was formed just 9 years ago. You are the youngest wing of the party but you represent our senior and oldest members – many party veterans and stalwarts who have been steadfastly and faithfully serving the party and Singapore for decades
 - a. I want to thank all of you for your commitment and dedication.
 - b. I also want to thank PAP SG and everyone in the team for working so hard to engage and empower our seniors all over Singapore – to be the voice of older Singaporeans, and to continue championing their needs and interests. Thank you for your contributions too.

3. The importance of PAPSG’s work will continue to grow over the years – you are not in a sunset industry, you are in a growing industry. Because our population is ageing, so the demand will continue to grow.
 - a. By 2030, around one in four citizens will be above 65
 - b. So we will have more older Singaporeans, and we have to cater to their needs.
And this will also have a profound impact on our society.

4. The Government has been preparing for this for some time.

- a. We want our seniors to be able to age with dignity in the community, and for their families and caregivers to have greater peace of mind that they will be supported
- b. This is why we have been investing substantially in our healthcare capacity, in our infrastructure capacity, and introduced key programmes like the Pioneer and Merdeka Generation Packages.
- c. We have also been strengthening social and community support by rolling out more services for seniors closer to their homes.

5. But there is more we can do, because our seniors' expectations and aspirations are also changing. Seniors today, and seniors to come. Everyone will be a senior at some point in time, and our aspirations and expectations are changing.

- a. Up to now, the Government has been focusing on seniors' basic needs in retirement, housing, and healthcare.
- b. Now, more and more seniors want to stay active, be it in the workplace or in the community.
- c. In the future, I'm sure our seniors will stay healthier for longer, and they will be more educated, more independent, as well as financially comfortable.
- d. So we must adapt to the changing expectations and needs of a new generation of seniors too.

6. We have made some moves on this front, for example in supporting senior employment, creating more opportunities for senior volunteerism, and encouraging active and healthier lifestyles amongst our seniors. We will continue to study and see what more can be done.

7. Importantly, to make progress, our society's perception of seniors must also change.
- a. We must embrace productive longevity and view our seniors as assets
 - b. We must find new ways to tap on the wealth of experience and knowledge of our seniors

- c. This cannot be done by the Government alone, because we have to change attitudes and mindsets, and all of this requires everyone in Singapore to do their part.

8. This is something we hope to address through the ongoing Forward Singapore conversations, which is taking place right now. We are engaging Singaporeans across all walks of life to see how we can refresh and strengthen our social compact. We are asking questions like

- a. How can we combat negative mindsets about ageing?
- b. How can we give seniors better support so they can continue to thrive and contribute to our society?

9. I am very happy that PAPSG has already begun these conversations amongst themselves, and also to engage different groups, solicit ideas, and start working and partnering these different groups to translate plans and ideas into action.

10. PAPSG has identified some focus areas. Let me briefly touch on each one of them.

11. First, how do we ensure that our seniors can continue to have good **opportunities** in our economy and in the workplace?

- a. One way to do so is to help our seniors remain in the workplace for longer if they prefer, and to offer our older workers more options as they enter their golden years.
- b. Based on various recommendations from the Tripartite Workgroup on Older Workers, as well as suggestions from PAPSG and other groups, the Government has already announced raising the retirement and reemployment age, and providing wage offsets and funding support to encourage the employment of seniors.
- c. As many of you know, we are also working on a new anti-discrimination law at the workplace to protect individuals from unfair treatment, and that includes discrimination on the basis of age.

- d. We will continue to study what more needs to be done in this area, around employment opportunities and workplace and employment practises.

12. I am glad that PAPSG, led by Comrade Jessica Tan, has already been engaging and gathering feedback from a wide range of stakeholders – employers, HR professionals and workers – on how we can have a workforce that includes and embraces seniors.

- a. The team has gathered many helpful suggestions on the changes needed in the workplace, including changes to support continuous learning and skills relevancy.
- b. Some have also called for revised, updated employment policies and processes to better reflect the capabilities of today's older workers.
- c. So I look forward to hearing these ideas, and I believe Jessica is also putting up a Motion in Parliament on enhancing senior employability.
- d. I have no doubt that she and her team at PAPSG will continue to be a strong advocate on this front – not just with the Government, but also with our unions and employers.

13. Second, we must provide better **assurance** to our seniors, so they can age with purpose and dignity in the community – our seniors must feel that they are cared for and well-supported to make the most of their golden years.

14. Here we have taken a multi-pronged approach

- a. We are working to enable seniors to live socially active and healthier lifestyles by participating in community activities and through more efforts on preventive health.
- b. We will be making a bigger push on this over the next few years under HealthierSG.
- c. We are also working to bring more healthcare services closer to the community, closer to home, so that our seniors can conveniently enjoy the care that they need.
- d. And we will continue to ensure our HDB estates and neighbourhoods are senior friendly, so that our seniors will not be hindered in any way by their physical environment.

15. The PAPSG has long championed for these issues, and helped to shape the Government efforts as well, and I hope you will continue to play an active role.
- a. In particular, I know Comrade Henry Kwek has been leading engagements on our housing policies for seniors, and on how our built and living environment can better meet their needs.
 - b. That is an important area which we are now focussing on, because we all know that more and more seniors are living on their own.
 - c. Those with children, very often after getting married and settle down, want to move out and so they start living on their own. Those without children will also live on their own. So more and more you see seniors living on their own.
 - i. But at the same time, they too want to be independent and also to age in place
 - ii. As seniors age and if they're by themselves, they need not just a roof over their heads, they don't just need a home. They also need some access to care.
 - iii. So how can we design what we call assisted living options, which are really home and care combined together? How can we design assisted living options and scale them up nationwide? How can we have these assisted living options supported with extensive community network – a community network that will keep our seniors active and healthy?
 - iv. All of you know – the worst thing that can happen is when a senior stays at home and just watches TV every day. It's true, the deterioration is exponential, the decline is very rapid. You need to go out, stay active and engaged. So we need that strong community network to go out to these seniors, identify them and engage them, give them some purpose to be in the community, to make friends and to have strong relationships.
 - v. Importantly, we can also have strong community network proactively identify those who are more frail and with greater care needs, and then we can design the necessary interventions to take care of them.

- d. That's what we hope to achieve – good living options, good assisted living options supported by a better community network of care. I certainly would encourage PAPSG to offer us suggestions on how we can continue to do better on this front, even as we review and think through what changes we need to make in our policies and programmes.

16. Third, there is one area which is less frequently spoken of, but no less important – and that is end-of-life care. It's a delicate topic, but all of us who have gone through an episode where we have had to take care of a senior in the family through their end of life, as they pass on, will have gone through the experience and know how difficult it can be.

- a. So we must help people maintain quality of care even in their final days, so they can fulfil their last wishes
- b. And spend their last days in a comforting environment of their choice, surrounded by their loved ones.

17. I am glad that this is something PAPSG has been looking into as well. For example, Comrade Yip Hon Weng has been an active champion for palliative care, ensuring that Singaporeans and loved ones can cope with challenges arising from end-of-life phases.

- a. He and 120 PAPSG activists and friends took up a Palliative Care 101 training session, picking up practical steps to support caregivers and those who are suffering from terminal illnesses.
- b. After the training, some stepped up to become palliative care ambassadors in their communities, volunteering to advise residents in need and guide them towards the right services and resources.
- c. Thank you for your dedication in upholding the ethos and values of our Party. We must always be the People's Action Party – we don't just talk, we take action. We are problem solvers, tackling the real needs on the ground.

18. Finally, our efforts to create opportunities and strengthen assurance for our seniors must be underscored by a continued sense of **solidarity** across generations

19. This is where society and families can make a big difference.

- a. Government policies can help our seniors age with a peace of mind;
 - b. But all of us have a part to play to empower our seniors to age with dignity and grace.
 - c. That means standing up against negative notions about ageing, fostering more intergenerational interactions so that seniors can remain active, and valuing our seniors for what they can offer.
20. Here, the PAPSG's "Live a Legacy" project is especially meaningful
- a. To get seniors to share about their lives, and what it was like for them to live through the important milestones in our nation-building journey.
 - b. All of us have something to learn from the seniors in our own families. I will always remember vividly what my parents and my grandparents shared with me. On my mother's side (I interacted more with my grandparents than my dad's side because they had passed on), my grandfather was a fisherman, grew up in Kampong Amber, he had an attap house and he would tell me stories about the war, and how he had gone through the Japanese Occupation. His brother was taken by the Japanese and never came back. He fortunately survived. His old attap house was built on stilts, he had to plank up the bottom area to create a hiding place for the children. So when the soldiers came, the children would be safe and they would not be taken away.
 - c. So those were the stories that I remember vividly from my grandfather. My mother too, of course – she is 82 now – she lived in a kampung, and I would ask her "Wasn't kampung life so fun? Did you play a lot?"; and she would scold me and say "What time to play, where got time to play?". Because she never played, she never had the chance to play. She had to work from young, she had to wash clothes for the neighbours in the kampung. Later on as she got older, she looked after babies for the extended family and for her neighbours - all of that while working and studying. Fortunately she had a chance to study at the same time.
 - d. So those were the stories that left an indelible impression on me, and made me the person I am today. I'm sure all of you will have memorable stories that you can learn from your parents, from your grandparents. And these stories help to

make up the rich tapestry that is the Singapore story. They enrich the fabric of our nation.

- e. We should get more seniors to share their stories. I'm glad that more are doing so, like Mr C. Kunalan, and many comrades including former MPs Mr Hawazi Daipi, Dr Lily Neo, and Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon.
- f. We'll hear a bit of their stories later
- g. Thank you for taking the time to contribute these stories and make history come alive for our younger generation. Thank you everyone.

21. Our seniors embody the spirit that has carried Singapore through tough times – the spirit of resilience, courage, and a deep sense of responsibility for our country and our fellow Singaporeans.

- a. I hope this Live A Legacy project and other efforts to share the stories of our seniors will help younger generations of Singaporeans develop a stronger sense of appreciation of what all of us have inherited.
- b. And I also hope that the spirit of our seniors, of our pioneers, of older Singaporeans, will motivate future generations to strive for even greater heights.

22. So to all members of the PAPSG – your work to empower and support seniors in Singapore is so important and invaluable

- a. Do continue to engage our seniors, speak up for them, and encourage them to continue being active members of our community.

23. To all seniors in Singapore, my message is – to thank you for all that you have done in building the Singapore that we enjoy today.

- a. The PAP has walked this journey with you over many decades, and together we have overcome challenges, and we have transformed our nation
- b. As we chart our new way forward, the PAP and PAPSG will continue to be your advocate and voice. We will make sure that you are supported and cared for. We will ensure that all of you can have dignified and fulfilling lives in your golden years. This is our commitment to you.

- c. Let us continue as comrades and partners in our journey to create a better future for all Singaporeans.

24. Thank you very much.