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A volunteer stocking up Free Food For All's community fridge at Yishun.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) said on Wednesday (Sep 16) it will continue to partner a workgroup to tackle food insecurity in Singapore, amid a study showing that about 10 per cent of Singaporean households struggled to get sufficient or nutritious food at least once in the last 12 months.

MSF also said there are two initiatives in the works to enable better coordination of food support, including a database of beneficiaries and the testing of "local food support coordinators" at a few towns.

MSF's comments come after a report released on Wednesday showed that 10.4 per cent of Singaporean households in a survey experienced food insecurity at least once in the last year, with two out of five of those households experiencing food insecurity at least once a month.

The study, which was commissioned by The Food Bank Singapore and conducted by researchers from the Singapore Management University's Lien Centre for Social Innovation, collected responses from 1,206 households with Singapore citizens or permanent residents.

The report defined household food insecurity as occurring when a household does not have, or is not confident of having, "economic and physical access to sufficient, acceptable food for healthy life".

The absence of hunger is not a sign of food security, the report said, adding that limited access to adequate nutritious food for weeks or months at a time could point to a household being food insecure.

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Entitled *The Hunger Report: An In-Depth Look At Food Insecurity In Singapore*, the study found that only 22 per cent of food-insecure participants were receiving food support at the time the survey was conducted.

“A substantial percentage of food-insecure participants did not seek food support, citing embarrassment, being unaware of available food support and the belief that others need it more than themselves,” the report stated.

The report also found that food-insecure respondents were more likely to be in the high-risk Body Mass Index (BMI) category, and also reported having a slew of negative emotions, demonstrating the psychological impact of food insecurity.

Food-insecure households were more likely to reside in one- and two-room Housing Board flats, with the heads of their families tending to have lower educational qualifications, it said.

“Food insecurity is a concern even in an affluent society such as Singapore. The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated this problem exponentially with people suffering from pay cuts and job losses,” said Food Bank Singapore co-founder Nichol Ng.

“The Food Bank Singapore sees food as the defining denominator when gauging how severe someone’s situation is. We must do all that we can to ensure that food insecurity becomes history and that no one goes hungry in our country,” said Ms Ng.

The report made several recommendations, including mapping out areas where vulnerable households live, so as to better identify food-insecure neighbourhoods and further the efforts of food support organisations.

“At the national level, more strategic coordination of food support should involve multi-sector partnerships that encompass the relevant and diverse stakeholders in the food support ecosystem. These include the Government, and non-profit and private sectors,” the report said.

The report also called for greater awareness about food insecurity in Singapore and recommended “rigorous national campaigns” to encourage healthy eating. It also said that cost should be looked as a possible deterrent to people making healthier food choices.

It noted that some of these recommendations are already being addressed by the Charity Food Workgroup, which was formed last year by MSF.

The workgroup is made up of organisations from across multiple sectors - including The Food Bank, Food from the Heart, Free Food for All and Willing Hearts - as well as volunteers, companies and government agencies.

FOOD SUPPORT DATABASE AND COORDINATORS

MSF described the report as a “commendable effort that delves deeper into the state of food insecurity”, noting the ministry had worked with researchers of the study to improve their methodology and obtain a more nationally representative sample.

“The report raises awareness on food insecurity in Singapore, as well as the need for a cross-sector approach where the Government, the community and corporates come together to better coordinate food support,” it said, adding it will continue to work with the Charity Food Workgroup to address these issues.

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The workgroup is currently working on two initiatives aimed at enabling better coordination of food support, MSF said.

These are the development of a database of people receiving food support, as well as testing the use of “local food support coordinators” in various towns, it said.

Earlier this year, various food support organisations CNA spoke to had identified the need for such a database to better identify and serve those in need.

The lack of a centralised database has led to a wastage of food as some beneficiaries were served by multiple organisations, even as others remained underserved, they said.

“Through these initiatives, we can take concrete steps towards co-creating a responsive, efficient and sustainable food support ecosystem,” said Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development Eric Chua in a Facebook post on Tuesday.

In addition to the importance of data and digital solutions, members of the workgroup had also noted the need to “provide choice and preserve the dignity of those receiving food support”, said Mr Chua.

In its statement on Wednesday, MSF said that it will continue to adopt a holistic approach to ensure that those in need are supported through multiple lines of assistance.

These include providing basic living expenses through ComCare assistance, as well as “proactive outreach” by partners under SG Cares Community Networks to low-income and vulnerable households and broader Government support such as grocery vouchers and the COVID-19 Support Grant (CSG) for workers affected by pandemic.

“MSF welcomes like-minded groups or members of public to contribute to our ongoing efforts under the Charity Food Workgroup to explore effective ways to enhance food coordination in Singapore, so as to minimise food waste and maximise our collective impact,” the ministry said.

Source: CNA/az(aj)