

Publication: TODAY Online

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Headline: More households in need of food aid, including younger couples and private property dwellers: Charities

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In the first nine months of this year, non-profit group Food from the Heart revealed that the number of households receiving aid from its food distribution programmes has jumped by 50 per cent, from about 6,000 in January to 9,000 in September.

The Food Bank Singapore, a charity that does food distribution, also told TODAY that over the two-month circuit breaker period in April and May when stay-home curbs were imposed, it distributed 560 tonnes of food. This is already more than half of the 802 tonnes it distributed in the whole of last year.

The charities noted, too, that there is a “new poor” emerging due to the poor economic conditions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

These are people who typically do not reach out for aid such as young couples or those living in private properties.

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On Wednesday (Sept 16), the results of a study done last year was released, showing that one in 10 Singaporean households did not eat enough to stay healthy, and that some have just one meal a day.

The Hunger Report 2019, by a team of researchers from the Lien Centre for Social Innovation at the Singapore Management University (SMU), also showed that only about two in 10 caught in this situation were receiving support in this area.

These cases were classified as people who faced food insecurity, or households and individuals who do not have enough to eat because of limited money or other resources.

The report found that the top reasons given for not having enough food were linked to financial constraints, such as having to pay off mortgage and rent, job loss and health issues.

In response to the findings, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) said on Wednesday that it will continue to work and partner with a workgroup to tackle food insecurity in Singapore.

The Charity Food Workgroup comprises food support organisations — including The Food Bank Singapore and Food from the Heart — as well as various corporations and government agencies.

MSF said: “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.”

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It added that there are two initiatives in the works to better enable coordination of food support: A database of beneficiaries and the testing of “local food support coordinators” at a few public housing estates.



Ms Sim Bee Hia, chief executive officer of Food from the Heart, told TODAY that the reason for the recent stark increase in the number of people seeking aid was due to the nature of their jobs.

The charity gives away fresh items such as root vegetables, eggs and bread. It also distributes food packs of non-perishable food items such as canned food, rice and biscuits once a month to households in need.

For those who typically receive aid, including seniors and those living in rental flats, many are paid by the hour at work to do cleaning and wash dishes.

During the circuit breaker when non-essential activities were restricted, offices and food-and-beverage outlets shuttered, leaving these workers with little or no work to do.

“They were already hard hit, and were hit even further... The employer cut their hours, and there were no jobs given to them, so they did not have the income.”

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Mr Ronnie Ma, 50, a food coordinator who is taking part in MSF's new initiatives, observed the same trend among the vulnerable. The People's Association volunteer in Kampong Glam helps link food charities to the needy residents in the community he serves.

Before the pandemic, his team distributed about 150 packets of food for lunch daily to residents-in-need along Beach Road.

During the circuit breaker, there were days when his team distributed three times more — as many as 450 packets over lunch and dinner. The figure has since stabilised to 180 packets a day.

"We can help at least by providing security in terms of food," he said. "They can worry about everything else but they don't have to worry about food."

NOT READY TO LET OTHERS KNOW

In the study by SMU, slightly more than six in 10 of food-insecure households did not seek help, giving reasons such as embarrassment, being unaware of food aid, and believing that others needed the help more.

Ms Sim of Food from the Heart attested to this, saying that the stigma of asking for food donations has prevented some people from seeking help.

She also recounted the case of a sole breadwinner who had lost his job and was requesting a food pack. He insisted on picking up the pack from the charity's warehouse near Upper Aljunied rather than have it delivered to his house, which would have been more convenient.

"He explained to my staff that he didn't want his children to know that he is getting food help," Ms Sim said.

"They are not comfortable getting help because they've never had to seek help."

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A DIFFERENT GROUP

The jump in cases seeking aid notwithstanding, the profiles of people needing help have expanded.

In its outreach work, the team at The Food Bank has seen about 500 cases where the beneficiaries live in either five-room Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats, condominiums, or even landed properties. This group makes up about 10 per cent of all the cases that have reached out to the non-profit for food rations.

In comparison, there were just two such cases last year that fit this profile.

Ms Nichol Ng, co-founder of The Food Bank, said: "It might be the elderly who have not worked for a few years, or maybe those running sole proprietorships."



A similar trend was observed by Food from the Heart. Ms Sim, who calls these cases the "new poor", said that she encountered a case of a young couple in their late 20s or early 30s that had spent all their savings renovating their new HDB flat before the Covid-19 outbreak.

When the public health crisis intensified, the husband lost his job while the wife had her pay cut, and the couple was not able to afford their meals when their savings dried up.

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“These are people who managed to get by in the past, day to day... and then now, they totally lost their income,” Ms Sim said. “These are the people who would not know where to go for help.”

SHORTAGE OF VOLUNTEERS

At a time when charities have been facing a drop in monetary donations, both food charities said that these and donations of non-perishables have gone up for them, and this has helped them to cope with the surge in demand for aid.

Food from the Heart said that this increase was partly because there was more awareness on social media, for example, of the plight of the needy during the pandemic.

Retail and food-and-beverage outlets also donated their excess goods, The Food Bank said.

However, the struggle is in finding volunteers to sort and distribute the items.

They could no longer depend on students or some employees from private companies, since Covid-19 restrictions prevented most people from volunteering with them.

Ms Sim said that those from the civil service and members of the public stepped in to help in the food distribution efforts in the absence of the usual community of volunteers.

With the increase in donations, Food from the Heart was also able to rope in a delivery service to help in distribution efforts.



Similarly, Ms Ng from The Food Bank had to hire about 10 workers to distribute food rather than depend solely on volunteers. For Mr Ma, he had to recruit 15 volunteers a day, up from the usual eight, to deliver food to more residents around the neighbourhood.

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The charities added that the workgroup set up by MSF has made things easier for them in other ways though.

For one thing, the development of a database of people receiving food support has helped the charities better coordinate their efforts.

For example, this has prevented households from receiving food packs from more than one charity, since such duplication usually leads to food going to waste, Ms Ng said.

“MSF will say, ‘This guy has already been served by (the ministry or other group), don’t waste your food’,” she added. That way, more households will be able to receive aid, she explained.

“If we didn’t have the (workgroup), many more people wouldn’t have received help.”