

DELIVERED REMARKS BY MANPOWER MINISTER JOSEPHINE TEO AT MTF PRESS CONFERENCE ON 14 APRIL 2020

Our immediate priority for the workers in the dormitories is to help them stay healthy and minimise the number that gets infected.

It's a huge responsibility, and we are mobilising resources across the whole of government to make it happen. That's why we have set up a Joint Interagency Taskforce to look at this.

I think it will help to first give an overview of the dormitory landscape.

a. We have 43 purpose-built dormitories that house about 200,000 workers

These tend to be bigger, and can house 3,000 to 25,000 each. There was a very specific reason we built these dormitories. They were designed for communal living, where the workers could live together, socialise with their friends, prepare meals they liked, practice their religious beliefs etc. With scale, we could put in common recreational facilities like tv rooms, gyms. We could also provide minimarts, remittance services, wifi. It's a supportive environment for the workers. The dormitories are managed by professional operators which are regulated. Among other things, they have the responsibility to ensure modern sanitation and no over-crowding. In terms of sleeping arrangements, imagine a badminton court. Take one half and put 5 bunk beds in them, so that's for 10 people. Add another 20% for circulation space, that is roughly what a typical room would look like at the purpose-built dormitories.

b. We also have ~1,200 Factory-Converted Dormitories housing ~95,000 workers

These tend to be smaller, between 50-100, but some go to ~500. These dormitories have the advantage of being closer to the workplaces. Such dormitories may be operated by the employers themselves or by professional firms. They are also regulated and must meet standards for space, hygiene, and fire safety among others.

c. We have a smaller number of Construction Temporary Quarters and Temporary Living Quarters housing. These generally do not house more than 40 workers each. They are also regularly inspected.

Were precautions taken at the dormitories?

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, the first thing that we did, was to progressively limit the inflow of workers to minimise the risk of imported cases.

We reached out to dormitory operators to be more vigilant. Materials were produced in the workers' native languages to encourage them to also take steps to protect themselves. Subsequently, non-essential facilities like gyms and tv-rooms were closed. Mealtimes and recreational hours were staggered. Intermixing between blocks was stopped.

Why then has there been such a spread among workers in dormitories?

From the epidemiological findings, there is evidence that the infected dormitory residents are linked through common work sites. Workers from different dormitories may also gather during their rest days to socialise and shop, for example at Mustafa.

Back in the dormitories, they socialised with other friends, cooking, eating, relaxing together.

Despite the safe distancing measures in place then, the virus spread in the dormitories through these socialising activities, much like how it would spread among housemates, friends and the community.

This may explain why up to mid-March, the cases of dorm workers testing positive were few and far between.

But in quick succession in some dormitories, many popped up.

What are we doing now to contain the spread?

It's a three-pronged strategy.

First, in the dormitories that have clusters, we will actively contain the spread. It means locking down these dormitories – no more going in and out. Workers have to stay in their room as much as possible, minimise interactions with other workers. Meals are provided to avoid communal cooking. Those with communal toilets have scheduled, staggered shower times. We are also testing the workers, to identify and isolate the infected ones, and closely monitoring the health of the other workers.

Second, it is useful to note that not all the dormitories have clusters. 29 of the 43 purpose-built dormitories, and almost all the Factory-converted dormitories are like that. Here, we aim to prevent clusters from forming. All those tested positive and their close contacts would already have been isolated separately. While these dormitories are not gazetted as isolation areas, we aim to apply the same measures for these

dormitories – so they are effectively on lockdown. Likewise, workers have to stay in the dormitories. Within the dormitories, we enforce strict safe distancing measures, which means no more cooking and freely mixing with friends from other housing units.

Third, across all 43 purpose-built dormitories, we have moved or separated out workers in essential services who are still needed by their employers for work; this is now about 7,000 of them. We put them in separate facilities so that they do not have to enter and leave the dormitories daily, or interact with the dormitory residents. To provide a higher level of assurance, medical screening was conducted to ensure that the workers did not have symptoms before moving into the alternative accommodation. In the meantime, while at the workplace, or travelling to work, they are required to also implement strict safe distancing. This includes wearing a mask at all times, not interacting with other workers at work, and eating meals alone. Like all Singaporeans, they will be required to remain in their residences after work. We hold the employers of these essential workers responsible to do their utmost to keep their workers safe, even as they go about their duties. We will do the same for essential service workers in factory-converted dormitories – move them out, monitor them and screen them all. The moving out of workers from all the dormitories will help create more space for isolation facilities within the dormitories, so that we can house separately the workers who are unwell or are waiting for the results of their swab tests.

To implement this strategy effectively, there are three key enablers.

For all 43 purpose-built dormitories, we have deployed FAST teams that work round-the-clock to implement safe distancing measures on the ground. I visited some of the dormitories. The FAST teams – comprising SAF, SPF and MOM officers – understand their mission to take care of the workers' well-being. They sort out issues with food and cleanliness, keep in close touch with the workers and attend to their feedback. They are a great help to the dormitory operators. We will soon deploy roving FAST teams to also support employers or dorm operators at factory-converted dormitories.

The medical support at dormitories are also being stepped up progressively. These are supported by the Regional Healthcare Systems which deploy teams of doctors, nurses and technicians to the dorm. They tend to workers who are unwell, swab those who have ARI, manage the cases that need to be sent to other facilities, and assess if the workers are well enough to return back to their rooms. Their presence gives the workers great confidence. The medical teams will also work with the FAST teams to set up on-site isolation facilities. We now have 8 medical posts set up at the gazetted dormitories, and aim to have medical touchpoints at all 43 purpose-built dormitories. Most Factory-converted dormitories are well supported by the national network of Public Health Preparedness Clinics (PHPCs) so the workers can also get timely medical attention.

The third key enabler is the dorm operators and employers. The more the dorm operators can handle the food and hygiene matters, the more the FAST teams can focus on effective safe distancing and tackle other issues. For example, expanding the isolation facilities on-site and helping workers remit money home. A big part of the workers' sense of well-being is to be able to continue to receive their salaries. This is where the employers have a duty to ensure that this is done in a timely manner.

To recap:

We have a three-pronged strategy for dormitories: contain the spread in those where clusters have formed; prevent a spread in those with no clusters, and move out and test all workers who are still needed for essential work.

We will also ensure the three key enablers are properly stepped up: the FAST teams, the medical posts which will implement the medical support plan, the dorm operators and employers.

There will be a lot of adjustments required of our workers living in the dormitories. They cannot go to work or meet their friends. We would have to help them adjust, to keep them safe and healthy.

In summary, we thank the workers for their cooperation. We have a responsibility to these workers and we will do everything we can to take care of them.