The social-service sector is facing a shortfall of about 200 social workers, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing said yesterday.

The current strength of 800 registered social workers is “insufficient” to meet rising needs, making it “critical” for the sector to attract and retain more such professionals, he said.

Mr Chan had announced plans earlier this month to set up 10 more family-service centres over the next three years, taking the total to 51.

He believes that more social workers can be found among fresh graduates and diploma holders, as well as those changing jobs in mid-career.

An average of 200 students graduate every year with social-work majors from National University of Singapore, SIM University and Nanyang Polytechnic.

Mr Chan was speaking to 30 students and social workers at the launch of a campaign to promote social work at the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) building in Thomson Road.

The campaign’s tagline is: “Empowered. To Change Lives.”

Mr Chan said the social-service sector has to improve its image as social work does not get the recognition and respect it deserves.

Social workers are often mistaken for volunteers, he said. “There is a distinction between a professional social worker and social-work volunteers,” he added. “Both are important parts of the community” but professional social workers are the ones who help people over the long term and see them through difficult times.

In recent years, MCYS has stepped up efforts to attract and retain social workers, such as by revising salaries in 2010 and introducing accreditation.

Mr Chan said that more hands are needed to share the workload, which is one the reasons some social workers quit their jobs.

“We’re trying to intensify recruitment so that we can make a significant difference to the workload of the social workers. The work is challenging and emotionally draining,” he said.

MCYS said it hopes to reduce the number of cases each social worker handles to 40, from the current average of 50.

Mr Mohamed Fareez, 31, has been a social worker for six years. He said it is important for social workers to be given enough time to handle each case.

“It will be unfair to our clients if we do not allocate enough time...to analyse their cases because of the high number that we deal with,” said Mr Fareez, who is the centre manager of the Nexus Family Resource Centre in Changi.

schang@sph.com.sg

Wanted: 200 more social workers

HARDWORKING: Professional social worker Mohamed Fareez, 31, said it is important for him and his colleagues to get enough time to handle each case. (PHOTO: JAMIE KOH)