Desire to serve draws more to social work

MCYS aims to attract school leavers, those in mid-career switch

**By Tay Shan Chang**

SOCIAL work has drawn more people who have switched careers to do something that, in their opinion, counts more than just making money.

Many, like Mr Christopher Chiam, have not hesitated despite having to take a pay cut. Ten years ago, he was doing well as an executive in a property management firm. But when he turned 30, he felt a greater motivation “to serve people”. He joined the Salvation Army as a youth worker, earning $1,800 a month. “It was a big pay cut, and I wondered how I would be able to support myself and my family,” said Mr Chiam.

But two years on, he was convinced he had done the right thing and got a post-graduate diploma in social work at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Another person heading the do-good call is Mr Goh Kee Choon, 34. In polytechnic, he studied information technology. He was with the army for six years before working at his father’s furniture upholstery company for two years. In 2001, he took stock of his life. “I wanted to do something that had meaning,” said Mr Goh. In 2007, he joined the Salvation Army as a social work assistant while pursuing a degree in social work from Monash University in Australia. He received his degree in 2010 and became a social worker at the Society for the Physically Disabled last year.

The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) hopes to attract more people like Mr Chiam and Mr Goh to be social workers. Last month, it launched a campaign, targeting school leavers and those seeking a job change. With demand for social services rising, there is a need to attract and retain more social workers. There are more than 800 registered practitioners currently and about 200 vacancies need to be filled. A shortage means voluntary welfare organisations may not be able to help needy clients as quickly as they would like.

Programmes that we want to execute may have to be put on hold," said Mrs Rachel Lee, assistant director of Fei Yue Family Service Centres.

A social worker fresh out of university can earn between $2,550 and $2,750 a month. To beef up numbers, as well as retain staff, MCYS announced that social workers can expect a pay rise of up to 15 per cent this year.

To encourage those who switch mid-career to social work can consider three courses. The first two – the Graduate Diploma in Social Work and the Accelerated Bachelor of Social Work – are offered by the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) in partnership with the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) to offer a Place-and-Train Professional Conversion Programme (PCP).

WDA funds up to 90 per cent of the course fees, with the social agency and applicant picking up the remaining tab. The third course, the Graduate Diploma in Social Work offered by NUS, gets 35 to 50 applications every year. MCYS said an average of 25 students enrol in the programme each year.

Mr Ismail Mohamed, 34, is a recent PCP graduate with a Graduate Diploma in Social Work. The former prison officer had to take a pay cut of more than 15 per cent to be a welfare officer at In- spirasi, a centre which assesses and counsels Muslim minors under 21 who want to wed. “I feel the calling of wanting to do preventive work,” said Mr Ismail.

Those who switched mid-career said there is an advantage in starting later. Said Mr Goh: “The extra years of work experience allow me to see issues at a mature level.”

Their bosses agree. Care Corner Family Service Centre chief operating officer Daniel Chien said they are “amazed at understanding human interactions as they have more life experiences”.

**Christopher Chiam (left), 40, a former executive in a property management firm, and Mr Goh Kee Choon (right), 34, who was with the army and worked at his father’s upholstery firm, both made the switch to social work. PHOTO: DESMOND LUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES**