

Media Release

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BEFRIENDERS PICK UP TECHNOLOGY TO ENGAGE SENIORS ONLINE DURING COVID-19

120 befrienders and beneficiaries stayed connected through regular phone calls and videoconferencing sessions despite the pandemic

Singapore, 13 March 2021 – Mdm Hawa Binte Haron, 74, lives with her husband, and gets visits from her children during the weekends. With a history of liver transplant and multiple medical conditions such as kidney failure, hypertension and diabetes, Mdm Hawa stays at home most of the time due to her mobility issue, leaving her home only three times a week for her dialysis sessions, which her husband wheels her to. Under the Neighbours for Active Living (“Neighbours” in short) programme by South East Community Development Council (CDC) and Changi General Hospital (CGH), Mdm Hawa was introduced to Ms Verone Loh, a 61-year old volunteer, so as to increase her social participation.

Verone joined the “Neighbours” programme in 2018 and started befriending seniors after her training. Despite working full time as an Operation Manager, Verone made time to volunteer amidst her busy schedule, visiting Mdm Hawa monthly and sharing a common passion with her – cooking. Mdm Hawa and Verone traded recipes and explored various ways of cooking. Their conversations ranged from exploring the news in the newspapers to sharing of their daily lives, especially with their different background and culture – Mdm Hawa being a Malay and Verone, a Chinese. In just a few months, they went beyond a befriender-beneficiary relationship, to being friends.

When COVID-19 struck, all home-based befriending activities took a hit, with the seniors being one of the most vulnerable groups affected. Mdm Hawa and Verone exchanged contact numbers, and started video and voice calling each other instead of physically meeting up, building on the friendship that has been fostered over the past years. During the recent Chinese New Year, Mdm Hawa even dropped Verone a call, wishing her Happy Chinese New Year and to catch up.

Mdm Hawa and Verone are among the 120 beneficiaries and befrienders in the “Neighbours” programme who kept connected via video and phone calls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pioneered by CGH and South East CDC in 2013, the programme was set up to ensure that patients with complex and social care needs receive continued care in the community after their discharge from hospital. It combines a team of about 50 full-time professionals from CGH with health and social care expertise, known as the CGH Neighbours Community Care Team (CCT), with about 180 volunteers from the Friend-A-Senior @ South East (FAS) volunteer programme to care for elderly beneficiaries with multiple hospital admissions. Before the volunteers start their befriending journey, they would be trained in befriending and communication skills. The volunteers will subsequently be matched to beneficiaries to befriend them, provide social support and assist with simple but important tasks, such as reminding the beneficiaries to take their medications and attend medical appointments. The

volunteers live in the same neighbourhoods as the beneficiaries that they support, promoting the forging of long-term relationships that enrich the lives of both the beneficiaries and the volunteers.

Mr Fahmi Aliman, Mayor of South East District, shared, “When South East CDC partnered CGH in 2013 to pioneer the “Neighbours” programme, it started with the strong belief that everyone shares a common goal of helping one another within the community. We have no doubt that COVID-19 is one of the biggest challenges that the nation and world has faced, but it is heartening to know that our “Neighbours”, both the beneficiaries and befrienders, embrace technology and look for means to persevere on, and no one is left behind even as our community fight the pandemic together. I would like to thank the volunteers, partners and the CGH team for their unwavering dedication, and I look forward to their continued support for the “Neighbours” programme.

Dr Eugene Shum, Chief Community Development Officer, CGH, said, “CGH provides a comprehensive range of community-based services and partners closely with community organisations to ensure that residents keep well, get well and live well. The CGH Neighbours Community Care Team ensures that CGH patients continue to receive good care in the community after they are discharged from the hospital. When physical visits for befriending by volunteers were halted, our Community Care Team, South East CDC and community partners designed virtual training sessions for volunteers and equipped them with tele-befriending skills and self-care knowledge so that they could continue supporting the beneficiaries. There were 350 attendances over seven webinar sessions and many volunteers felt that this allowed them to make a difference for their beneficiaries during this challenging period.”

The efforts of our volunteers were celebrated at the annual Neighbours Volunteer Appreciation Day. More than 60 volunteers took part in the virtual celebration as they were recognised for their efforts towards their community. To further appreciate the support of the volunteers, each volunteer also received a thank you card, FairPrice e-vouchers, as well as a virtual “visit” to the zoo during the celebration.

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About South East Community Development Council

South East CDC was set up on 24 November 2001. It oversees the Marine Parade Group Representative Constituency (GRC), East Coast GRC, Mountbatten Single Member Constituency (SMC) and MacPherson SMC, and serves a population of about half a million residents. At the helm of South East CDC is Mayor Fahmi Aliman, who leads the team in fulfilling the CDC's function – an Aggregator of Needs and Resources, Builder of Capability and Capacity in Partners and Networks and Connector of Communities. South East CDC initiates and manages programmes in collaboration with both community and corporate partners, so as to nurture a vibrant and self-reliant community.

More information on South East CDC at www.cdc.gov.sg/southeast or be our Facebook fan at www.facebook.com/secdc.

About Changi General Hospital

Changi General Hospital (CGH) is an academic medical institution with over 1,000 beds serving a community of more than 1 million people in eastern Singapore. With a wide range of medical specialties and services, it is helmed by an experienced and skilled team of healthcare professionals who consistently deliver positive health outcomes and care for patients.