



Hougang Care Centre residents cleaning up the HDB area in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 5 yesterday. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

More firms hiring mentally ill

Work helps patients in rehab reintegrate into society

BY DARYL CHIN & JERMYN CHOW

FOR the past two weeks, Johnny (not his real name) has spent five days a week cleaning the void decks and open-air carparks in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 5.

The 40-year-old suffers from schizophrenia and is a resident of the Hougang Care Centre, a psychiatric rehabilitation centre.

Unlike ordinary cleaners, he and nine others from the centre are not allowed to go upstairs to clean the corridors outside flats.

Also, overseeing him and the others is a nurse-aide from the centre, who provides encouragement and support.

He is one of a growing number of people with mental illnesses from rehabilitation centres who have found jobs. They are hired to do anything from HDB estate cleaning to working as cooks, delivery goods drivers, petrol pump attendants and security guards.

They suffer from ailments like depression, anxiety and schizophrenia, and are on medication.

For Johnny, the four-hour

cleaning routine which started at 8am allowed him to "pass time", he said yesterday. "It's different from just staying in the centre to do the same kind of exercises. We can be more active."

Mr Arnold Pascual, 37, the nurse-aide in charge of Johnny and the others, said that while most of the cleaners were still on medication, they were "stable". "They have been very well-trained, independent and do not need too much hand-holding."

Cleaning services firm Sergeant Services, which had been hiring about 10 Hougang Care Centre residents at a time for the past two years, said the recent hires were hardworking and loyal.

Said operations manager Zackariah Abdul Razat: "While it can be quite difficult at times to communicate with them, they still get the job done well."

Groups working with the mentally ill are seeing an increase in companies willing to work with people with mental illnesses.

The Singapore Association of Mental Health, a voluntary group which promotes mental wellness, said that in 2008, it placed people with mental illnesses in 112 jobs. Last year, the number rose to 217 jobs.

Step-down care facilities, which house patients referred by either the Institute of Mental

Health, hospitals or private practices, see a similar trend.

Hougang Care Centre, which has 174 residents, saw them take up 270 jobs so far this year, up from the 232 for the whole of last year. About 60 per cent of jobs were in the cleaning industry, while others included clerical and security-related work.

Simei Care Centre, which has more than 200 patients, has seen a rise in the number of organisations paying its residents to perform jobs like assembly and handcraft work at the centre.

Part-time workers typically earn about \$400 a month. Full-timers can earn twice that.

Employment helped former mental patients reintegrate into society, said Mr Francis Goo, assistant director at Simei Care Centre.

He added: "There is still a large amount of misconception. Being unwell does not equal being dangerous."

Government Parliamentary Committee for Manpower chairman Halimah Yacob said mental illness was not a "death knell".

"We should not feed into the frenzy and entrench this stigma that mentally ill patients pose a hazard to the public," she said. "Allowing them to work in public will give them a sense of purpose and help them build self-confidence."

Dr Sally Thio, senior director for Hougang Care Centre, said people with mental illnesses also had dreams, hopes and aspirations. "Drawing a salary enables them to pay towards their own medications and treatment. It also helps with their self esteem."

Johnny hopes his stint cleaning HDB estates will eventually help him get a cleaning or even a desk-bound job in an office.

"I'm now learning how to use the Internet and improving my English so that I can get more job offers."

daryl@sph.com.sg
jermyn@sph.com.sg