

Cleaning toilets at their own pace

Sage aims to place seniors in jobs that do not exploit them

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IT IS a job most people would turn their noses up at, but the Singapore Action Group of Elders (Sage) is flushed with excitement.

With coffeeshops mushrooming in housing estates, the market is awash with cleaning jobs. And Sage, a voluntary welfare organisation, wants to ride on this by setting up a database of toilet cleaners for older Singaporeans, so that they can earn their keep at their own pace.

The number of seniors aged 55 and above seeking job placement has fallen from about 30 a month to just “a few” in the last two months, said Sage executive Soh Kwok Hong.

Even so, he said: “They’re being exploited. At their age they may not be able to work for you eight hours, three shifts, six days a week; and maybe the distance from home is too far.”

His solution: Have flexi-jobs.

A toilet cleaners database is a start – it will not only provide jobs, but also cut down on Government spending on welfare and counselling services for the elderly, he said.

“We’ll collect the jobs from, say, coffeeshops. In Toa Payoh alone there are many coffeeshops. If we can provide the cleaning service for their toilets, many people in Toa Payoh will be very happy,” Mr Soh said.

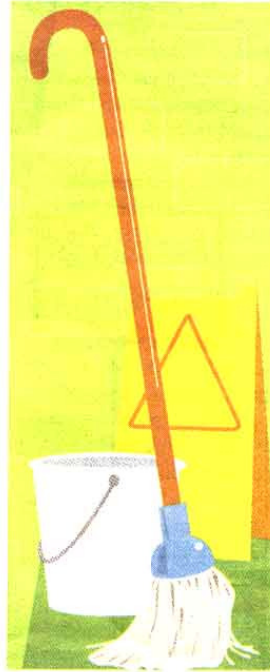
“(And those on our database) can be employed to work flexi time, like 20 hours a week. They can choose the day and time they want to work,” he explained.

Mr Soh is now fine-tuning the concept with the World Toilet College and a group of students, who are helping with market research.

However, he said that more help would be needed, such as training grants from the Government.

Mr Hong Poh Hin, chairman of the Foochow Coffee Restaurant and Bar Merchants Association, which manages about 400 coffeeshops here, is all for the idea provided costs are kept low.

“Peak hours, such as lunch and dinner time, are the most crowded, so if the seniors are



willing to work during these times and get paid on an hourly basis, it could benefit coffeeshops too,” he said.

He suggested that if they worked three hours a day at \$5 an hour, it would not add much to a coffeeshop’s monthly bill.

At present, coffeeshops either hire their own full-time assistants to clean toilets and wash dishes or contract the job out to a third party, Mr Hong said.

Foreign workers on contract are typically paid between \$600 and \$700 a month, while locals get about \$800 to \$1,000.

Deputy Labour Chief Heng Chee How commended Sage’s efforts, saying flexible working arrangements is one way to narrow the gap between certain jobs and prospective workers. But more research is needed to determine market demand and performance standards, plus pay expectations, so as to operate an effective and sustainable job-matching model.

Last April, Sage piloted the Maintenance on Wheels programme with a group of 10 elderly plumbers and technicians offering home repair services. So far, they have serviced more than 200 households.

Mr Peter Lim, the project manager, said that to seniors, such an initiative “means they get some money back and the sense of continuing with what they’re good at. It will not make them very rich but it gives them a life”. — 938LIVE