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OF INTER-MINISTRY COMMITTEE ON YOUTH CRIME AT IMYC
FORUM ON COMMUNITY INITIATIVES FOR YOUTH SERVICES ON
SATURDAY, 9.30 A.M., 11 SEPTEMBER 1999 AT SUNTEC AUDITORIUM**

FORUM THEME: "SHOULDER TO SHOULDER FOR YOUTH"

Distinguished speakers

IMYC Members

VWO Participants

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to be here with you all. Representatives from many voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) are gathered at this IMYC forum. We are here with a common purpose - to discuss new collaborations and ideas for IMYC agencies, namely, Police, MCD, MOE, NCSS, the Courts and NYC, by tapping the expertise of VWOs, joining our hands and hearts to tackle juvenile and youth crime problems in Singapore. Many of you already run successful services and programmes for youths-at-risk and youth offenders at the community level and in schools. You have an in-depth understanding of their problems and backgrounds. For IMYC agencies, you represent a rich resource pool.

2 We all know that youth aspirations, issues and problems are never static. New problems and challenges keep surfacing. Hence, it is useful that we come

together regularly to take stock. Then, we can forge new consensus and directions to tackle problems and challenges.

3 We held the last IMYC Networking Conference in 1996. Since then, we have implemented a spectrum of new rehabilitative and preventive measures to tackle juvenile delinquency and youth crime. Indeed, many measures were developed and implemented by IMYC agencies with the help of VWOs. One notable example is the StreetWise Programme, a "second-chance" ground-breaking rehabilitative programme coordinated by IMYC with the help of 5 VWOs, namely Youth Guidance Outreach Service, Bethesda Community Services Society, Bukit Ho Swee Social Service Centre, Lakeside Family Centre and Teen Challenge.

4 The past two years of Streetwise collaboration have seen IMYC agencies and the 5 VWOs build up a close working relationship to tackle problems arising from street corner gangs. They shared information and co-ordinated the management of cases. The VWOs sharpened their expertise and approaches to managing local youth gang problems. This spirit of mutual collaboration has been recognised. The StreetWise Programme won the Commonwealth Youth Programme's Regional Youth Service Award recently.

5 The Streetwise Programme is but one example. There are other examples of multi-sectoral tie-ups that effectively tackle different problems relating to youth crimes and juvenile delinquency. These include the Guidance Programme, coordinated by MCD and run by VWOs; the Honorary Volunteer Special

Constabulary (VSC) scheme, coordinated by the Police and MOE with participation from the schools; and the Peer Mediation scheme coordinated by the Courts and MOE, again with the schools.

6 Clearly, there have been qualitative improvements in our approach in tackling juvenile delinquency and youth crime. The testimonies of practitioners in the field, such as yourselves, bear this out. The networking has improved. The comfort level has been raised. The quantitative indicators have also been gratifying. From 1995 to 1998, the number of juvenile offenders arrested fell from about 2,600 (2,574) to about 2,400 (2408), down 6% over four years. In particular, the number of serious assault and rioting cases fell from about 200 (199) in 1995 to about 120 (119) in 1998, down 40%. The number of cases involving other seizable offences such as vandalism, unlawful assembly and possession of offensive weapons also fell from about 170 (173) in 1995 to about 80 (82) in 1998, down 53%.

7 The first half of 1999 saw a further improvement in the juvenile and youth crime situation. Between Jan to June this year, about 1700 (1674) youth offenders ie aged 7 to 19 years, were arrested compared to about 2500 (2495) arrests over the same period last year, down 33%. Juvenile arrests, ie those below 16 years, also fell from about 1200 (1235) to about 750 (749), down 39%. Shoplifting, an area of concern last year, also saw fewer youths arrested, from about 1150 (1153) in the first six months of 1998 to about 650 (658) this year, down 43%. But we should not rest on our laurels. Every offender is one too many. We must go all-out to

prevent every offence. Whilst recalcitrant and serious offenders must be appropriately punished, the large majority of young offenders who are spotted early must be steered away from the slippery slope. Hence, our integrated and comprehensive approach that emphasises remedial and rehabilitative measures is the right one. Let us mobilise more resources to mount preventive and developmental programmes so that we can sustain this early success.

8 Yet, at the same time, we should not neglect upstream root problems and causes. We should devise more proactive approaches to early and effective intervention for at-risk cases. Viewed from this angle, the focus will not just be on crime prevention per se. The wider focus is really to help our youths find direction in life, overcome low self-esteem, imbibe useful lifeskills and make positive friendships.

9 One area that we can develop further from the developmental and preventive point of view is school-based social work. Presently, many VWOs already have regular contacts and programmes in schools. These interfaces with the schools mainly involve provision of counselling services. I am glad that some VWOs are beginning to work closely with the schools on sustained developmental and preventive programmes. The VWOs' role should go beyond being direct service providers or youth problem-busters to the schools. VWOs may wish to explore with the schools ways to transfer knowledge and skills to the teachers so that teachers can reach out and identify the at-risk cases early. This will help schools build up more effective coping strategies over time.

10 Often, youths go astray because they lack self-esteem, positive role-models and direction in life. That is why IMYC is facilitating the work of the National Mentoring Network, a bottom-up initiative involving local mentoring service providers, dedicated to evolving a culture of youth mentoring. Hence, VWOs can also play a role in working with schools to nurture such mentoring outreaches.

11 Another area IMYC will look at is out-of-school youths ("OSYs"). Most OSYs have dropped out of primary or secondary schools. Currently, OSYs constitute a small percentage of each cohort of students. Nevertheless, they are still part of our human resources. OSYs have a higher propensity to be involved in crime and drugs. For example, it is estimated that about 30% of our youth crime problems are caused by OSYs each year. For drugs, 532 youths under 20 years were arrested for drug consumption in 1997 and 1998. Whilst this constitutes only 5% of the drug abuser population, nearly 90% of them were OSYs.

12 We should devise creative ways to reach out and continue working with OSYs. IMYC has set up a working group to do this. It has surveyed some VWOs on their services for OSYs. It is our aim to provide multi-pronged strategies to help them regain their direction and focus in life. Once they drop out, some of them may work, study at private institutions or stay at home doing nothing. Instead of trying to fit them into a standard service package, we hope to reach out to them using different platforms so that different options are available to these youths according to their needs. One common thread though is to teach them useful lifeskills to equip them to handle life outside school.

13 Another area which deserves attention is how to reach out to high risk families. Whilst we work on youths-at-risk at the community and school levels, we must realise that the involvement of their families is critical to sustaining the effectiveness of our work. A family under stress produces more than its fair share of problems. I understand that VWOs find it harder to work with family members than with the youths themselves. In this regard, the growing number of Beyond Parental Control or BPC cases is of concern. We must find ways to help parents before they lose control over their children. There are already many parenting talks. However, many parents who need these skills are not drawn to these talks. IMYC hopes to raise parents' awareness of juvenile delinquency. We hope that parenting and family life education talks can be further extended to our workplaces. IMYC will look into the feasibility of working with employers to bring parenting talks to their employees. We hope to involve CDCs in the process.

14 We know that most youth crimes do not occur in schools or within the families. Hence, at the community level, we also hope to see more outreach programmes being implemented. IMYC hopes to draw VWOs and other community based organisations such as CDCs closer to pilot new initiatives to address youth crime. Take the problem of shop lifting for example. The involvement of juveniles in theft related cases crimes increased from about 1,500 (1,437) in 1996 to about 1,900 (1,923) in 1998, up 34%. It is good that there is already a downward trend in the first half of 1999, due partly to the measures put in place by the Police to raise the awareness of retailers on how to prevent these

crimes. But there is a need to tackle the underlying causes of such behaviour. We know that many young shoplifters shoplift not because they cannot afford the item. Indeed, quite a number of them are from middle income families. Many do so because of negative peer influence. Some hear that others get away with it and are emboldened. So they try it too. Others are challenged by their friends to do it. Take the stealing of CDs for example. Many CDs are stolen from shops which have installed sophisticated security system.

15 At this Forum, we will focus on a few areas of youth problems to facilitate discussion. We welcome your ideas. However, the discussion should not stop here. We should continuously take stock of evolving youth trends, review our services and programmes, identify gaps in these services and find new directions and approaches to deal with them. I hope that VWOs can play a role in this endeavour. To the IMYC, VWOs are not just a network of social safety nets for our youths. You represent a wealth of resources, commitment and professional knowledge that can be tapped to solve youth problems and inspire youth aspirations. Individually, we have done well to touch the lives of our youths. We should now forge closer ties, working together, to implement more effective and extensive measures to tackle youth issues into the next millennium.

16 I wish you all a fruitful discussion. Thank you.