

Nursing home jobs for those with disabilities

Scheme seeks to encourage inclusive hiring in Singapore's community care sector

Shermaine Ang

Ms Pang Jian Ting, who has an intellectual disability which limits her communication and motor skills, was so stressed in her new job at a nursing home at first that she lost 3kg in three months.

She had gone from a desk-bound role in data entry to a physically-demanding job at Peacehaven Nursing Home, helping nurses feed and keep watch over the elderly with dementia, who could be difficult or disoriented.

Once, a resident left the ward without warning. Ms Pang went home only late at night after the resident had been found.

But Ms Pang, 34, has since eased

into her new role. She is one of about 250 people with intellectual disabilities or autism who have found jobs in the healthcare sector since 2014 thanks to SG Enable, the central agency for disability and inclusion in Singapore.

About 80 of these persons with disabilities – who have moderate to high support needs – are employed in nursing homes.

Under a new tie-up between the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) and SG Enable in October 2022, more than 60 job opportunities have been created in 12 community care organisations.

The agency has been working closely with SG Enable since 2019 to promote the employment of persons with disabilities in the com-



Ms Pang Jian Ting, a 34-year-old who has an intellectual disability, feeding a resident during lunchtime in her role as care assistant at Peacehaven Nursing Home. She cares for two wards of residents. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

munity care sector. AIC provides added support in areas such as training and retention to community care organisations which hire persons with disabilities.

People with intellectual disabilities or autism, who may need more accommodations such as flexible work hours and simpler instructions, often have a harder time finding work than people with physical disabilities.

While most of them can take on simple stewarding and cleaning jobs, suitable candidates such as Ms Pang are also placed in other roles such as care assistant.

Ms Pang's caregiver Madam Yeo, who

works in the same sector, told The Straits Times that a careful balance had to be struck: "The centre takes care of residents with dementia. And so we had to be very sure that whatever contribution she makes does not compromise the well-being of the seniors."

Ms Pang started with assisting, instead of directly feeding, the residents, then moved on to feeding even the more difficult ones. She now cares for two wards of residents.

Madam Yeo said Ms Pang finds her job meaningful, especially since Ms Pang's own grandmother has dementia. "She has learnt that

this is part of life, and all of us need help at some point in life."

Madam Yeo said Ms Pang is better able to pick up on others' emotional cues. She hopes Ms Pang can make friends with her neurotypical colleagues and model their behaviour.

Four batches of 29 special education school graduates have started training in nursing homes as interns, under SG Enable's School-to-Work Transition Programme. More than half of them were converted to staff.

Another care assistant at Peacehaven Nursing Home, Mr Mohd Shakir Mohamed Bathshah, who

has autism, feeds the elderly and wheels them around, on top of cleaning the ward and dining room. The 21-year-old Metta School graduate previously interned as a gardener and baking assistant at a cafe. But this is his favourite job by far. "The staff are friendly and I can chit-chat with them," he said.

His job coach taught him how to focus on tasks, manage stress and improve his social skills, such as by using eye contact. He has set his sights high: "In future I want to work hard and earn a lot of money, maybe become a boss."

Since starting his first job as housekeeping assistant at Lee Ah Mooi Old Age Home, 19-year-old Liew Dong En, who was diagnosed with autism when he was three, has become adept at following instructions.

Efforts by other staff to make the workplace welcoming for Mr Liew paid off, as the quiet teen has grown more comfortable interacting with them. These interactions have also made him more patient and understanding, said his mother Chong Moi Yoke.

She added that he has become more independent and able to problem-solve, travelling to and from work by himself every day.

Recounting an incident six months ago when he was half an hour late for home, she said she called him and found that he had accidentally taken the wrong bus. She was able to guide him safely back home on the phone.

The 50-year-old said: "He's proud of himself because he feels good doing this job. So long as he's happy, I'm happy." Madam Chong has high hopes for her son, who she says is highly observant. "I hope there are opportunities for him to upgrade his skills and transfer to other departments."

shermaineang@sph.com.sg