

Early support for families of inmates

They can get help, queries answered at State Courts booth once court judgment is passed

Aw Cheng Wei

An agency that helps former inmates and their family members cope with life after prison wants to offer its services to them earlier, once the courts have passed judgment.

Starting in January, as part of a six-month pilot, the Singapore After-Care Association (Saca) will set up a booth at the State Courts to answer questions from family members of those who will be jailed soon.

The State Courts and Saca said in a joint statement yesterday that the stability of inmates' homes plays a vital role in their reintegration into society upon their release.

Saca director Prem Kumar said its work with young children whose mothers are in prison highlighted the need to help and support affected families. He said: "It makes sense to reach out and offer help to these families at the point of sentencing rather than wait until the loved one is in prison."

Staffed by experienced volunteers, the booth, called family-connect @ State Courts, will run every Monday and Wednesday from 10am to 2pm. It is a stop for families who want to know the type of help they can receive, particularly at the State Courts, which handle about 99 per cent of Singapore's criminal caseload.

Volunteers will point families in the "right direction based on their specific needs", said Mr Kumar.

Examples include referrals to social agencies for those cash-strapped, support for schoolgoing children and legal help.

Mr Kumar added: "Some families only need someone to pour their hearts out to, and we will be there for them as well."

At a Saca event yesterday, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon said family was one of the most critical aspects in helping former inmates reintegrate into society. He added that family-connect @ State Courts helps families to "weather through that time where somebody who may be the main breadwinner is going to be incarcerated".

For the pilot project, Mr Kumar's agency will train 25 volunteers.

At yesterday's event, Saca also launched a book series that aims to support children with family members in jail. It worked with final-year students from Nanyang Polytechnic to publish three books on how families can cope with the temporary loss of a family member. Among them is an illustrated storybook titled Alex Visits Daddy, where the narrator describes his struggles with his father's sudden imprisonment.

Translated into Chinese, Malay and Tamil, the books will be distributed at the family-connect @ State Courts booth, some schools and other agencies that work with inmates. Digital copies will be available on Saca's website at a later time.

awcw@sph.com.sg