

A helping hand from classroom to workplace

Panel to ensure seamless transition for young people with disabilities

By JUDITH TAN

YOUNG people with disabilities could be given more training and job opportunities to help them make the transition from school to the workforce.

This is just one of the areas being examined by a new steering committee set up to meet the needs of the disabled over the next five years.

At the moment, the Government works with firms and voluntary groups who run training and employment programmes for school leavers.

The 32-member committee, chaired by former director of prisons Chua Chin Kiat, wants to build on these schemes. It also aims to identify any gaps and plug them, so those with disabilities can transfer smoothly from classroom to workplace.

"We want to make sure that after their

education, the disabled continue with employment and training opportunities," Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing told reporters yesterday. "We want to make sure there is a seamless transition for people in this sector so they get cared for in a continuum."

Disabled youngsters are typically educated at special schools such as Pathlight School and Grace Orchard School. When they leave, usually around the age of 18, they can be taken on as trainees with establishments such as Holiday Inn.

Beyond that age, some of these adults have fallen through the cracks.

These are just the people who could be thrown a lifeline if more schemes like the one run by Holiday Inn are set up. Eight per cent of the 282 employees at the chain's Orchard Road hotel are disabled.

"They work in both the back end such as the kitchen and housekeeping, as well as dealing directly with customers," said general manager Kanchan Kanwar. She added that the target is to have them make up 10 per cent of the workforce.

The longest-serving disabled employee is cleaner Edward Wong, 43, who has worked there for 21 years. "I stay with



Pastry cook Tay Wei Cong, 24, at Holiday Inn in Orchard Road. Eight per cent of the hotel's 282 employees are disabled, and the hotel's target is to achieve 10 per cent. ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

the hotel because I get to learn a lot from my colleagues and I can be independent," he said.

Yesterday, Mr Chan visited Holiday Inn's centre for training and integration in Orchard Road. The minister praised employers "who have gone out of their way to provide training and employment opportunities" for the disabled.

He said the Government's latest Enabling Masterplan, which will run until 2016, is expected to be ready by early next year.

"We want to develop a greater variety of operational models to fit people with different abilities," said Mr Chan. "Some would require a bit more government involvement, others a bit more private. We are all prepared to have different models to cater to the different needs."

He told the media he has appointed Mr Sam Tan, the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Community Development, Youth and Sports, to oversee this sector.

Mr Tan said he is looking forward to taking on this portfolio, adding that disabled people can be just as productive as their able-bodied peers "given the right platform, right training and right environment and support".

Colonel Milton Ong, deputy chairman of the new committee, said: "We have identified three key focus areas where we think more work needs to be done, namely early intervention, education and employment, and adult care."

He added that the aim is to help disabled people maximise their potential "and embrace them fully in our society".

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Other steps taken

THE current masterplan to help the country's disabled was formulated for implementation from 2007 to March next year. These are some areas where improvements have been made:

EARLY INTERVENTION

■ The number of early intervention programmes for infants and children went up, and a monthly subsidy of \$300 was given to each child who is a citizen.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

■ Government funding for special education schools was increased.

EQUALISING JOB OPPORTUNITIES

■ The Open Door Fund, set up by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports in 2007, encouraged employers to create job opportunities for the disabled. More than 450 individuals with disabilities found jobs with its help.

CAREGIVER SUPPORT

■ Households with disabled dependants were granted a concession on their foreign domestic worker levies in 2007, benefiting more than 2,000 families.

RESIDENTIAL CARE

■ A pilot project is ongoing to look into introducing community group homes, to give the intellectually disabled a chance to live with their peers.

BARRIER-FREE ACCESSIBILITY

■ A \$40 million Accessibility Fund was set up by the Building and Construction Authority to speed up implementation of barrier-free access in private buildings.

■ More than seven in 10 MRT stations will have at least two barrier-free access routes by the end of this year.

■ All public buses will be wheelchair accessible by 2020.