

Infectious diseases agency to be set up on April 1

NCID chief to lead stat board that will safeguard country from disease threats

Judith Tan
Correspondent

The Communicable Diseases Agency (CDA) will be set up as a statutory board on April 1 to consolidate the public health functions that detect, prevent and control infectious diseases.

Leading the agency will be the current executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), Professor Vernon Lee. He will step down from NCID and become CDA's chief executive officer on April 1.

In a statement on Feb 13, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said CDA will allow the Government to respond quickly to disease outbreaks as one concerted public health effort, and "play a vital role in safeguarding Singapore from infectious disease threats".

Currently, these efforts are spread between MOH, the Health Promotion Board and NCID.

The formation of the CDA marks a significant step in Singapore's efforts to strengthen its capabilities in infectious disease management and public health preparedness.

Following the release of a White Paper on Singapore's response to Covid-19 in March 2023, then Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong told Parliament that the country would set up a dedicated centre for public health to consolidate its disease control and pandemic management capabilities.

A new Bill setting out the legislative framework for the agency was passed on Jan 7, 2025.

The CDA will focus on five key areas:

- prevent the spread of diseases through public education, vaccination policies, as well as infection prevention and control measures;
- lead and coordinate efforts to strengthen public health preparedness against infectious diseases, as well as develop vaccines and provide access to therapeutics;
- strengthen surveillance capabilities, and explore the use of artificial intelligence and data analytics to crunch large volumes of data;
- investigate and respond to cases and outbreaks of infectious diseases, provide policy and scientific recommendations, and implement public health and

social measures during a pandemic; and
• conduct and coordinate public health research, which it will use to make policies.

It will also work with international partners to keep abreast of developments, share best practices and enact swift responses to evolving disease situations worldwide.

Prof Lee, 47, has more than two decades of experience in public health policy and infectious disease management. The adjunct professor at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health has extensive global health experience in pandemic preparedness and response, infectious disease epidemiology, as well as health policy and management.

He played an instrumental role in the country's response to Covid-19 in advising a multi-ministry task force, and designing and implementing national policies on preparedness and risk management.

Prof Lee was also involved in Singapore's response to other outbreaks, including the 2009 influenza pandemic, Zika, tuberculosis and the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in 2003.

He was seconded twice to the World Health Organisation – to the Indonesia office from 2007 to 2008, and the headquarters in Geneva from 2010 to 2012 where he worked on local, regional and global disease preparedness and response initiatives.

"CDA will play a key role in protecting Singapore from infectious diseases threats," Prof Lee told The Straits Times.

"I look forward to working with my team, as well as strengthening collaborations with local and international partners, to enable a swift response to current and future infectious diseases."

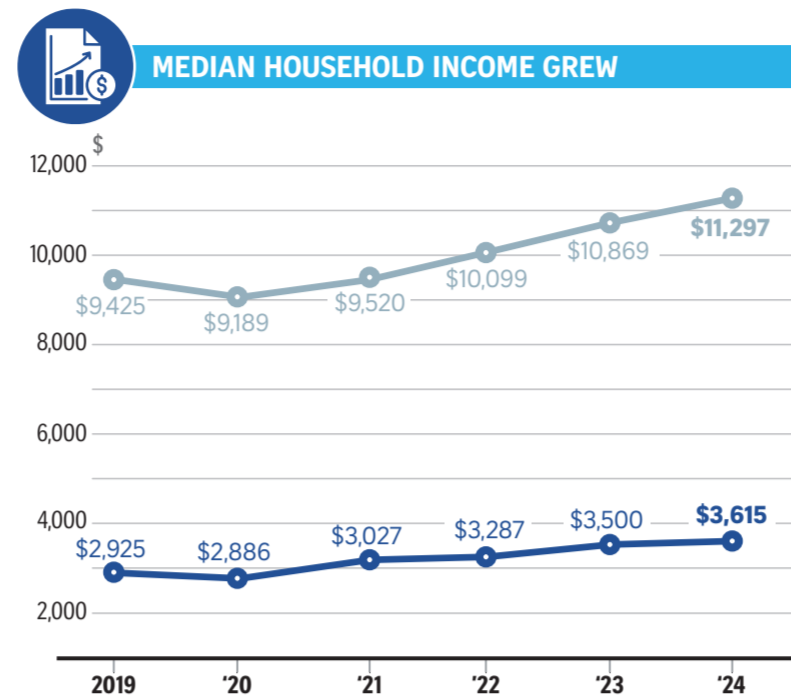
NCID said that, with the formation of CDA, the centre will focus on its core mission in clinical care and outbreak preparedness, better reflecting its evolving role.

It said: "The National Healthcare Group will further integrate NCID's clinical services and its associated functions with Tan Tock Seng Hospital. NCID will function as a clinical Centre of Excellence for infectious diseases and one of the designated national facilities for outbreaks."

NCID's new executive director will be announced in due course.

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Household income



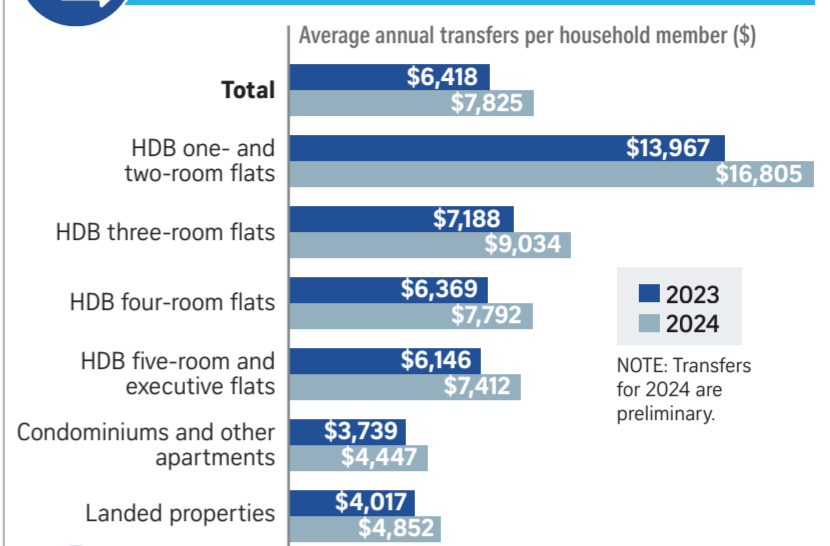
Change over the years after adjusting for inflation

Category	2024 Change	2019-2024 Annual Change
Per household	▲ 1.4% in 2024	▲ 3.6% (0.7% per annum) from 2019 to 2024
Per household member	▲ 0.8% in 2024	▲ 6.8% (1.3% per annum) from 2019 to 2024

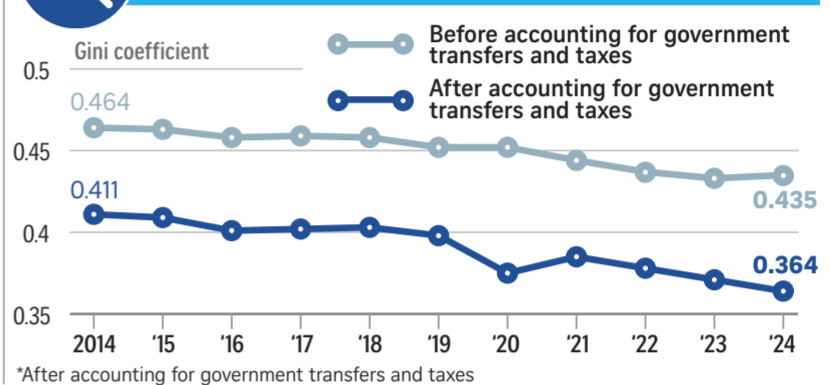
NOTE: The dollar values in the chart are not adjusted for inflation.

Source: KEY HOUSEHOLD INCOME TRENDS, 2024, DEPARTMENT OF STATISTICS
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

HOUSEHOLDS RECEIVED MORE GOVERNMENT TRANSFERS



INCOME INEQUALITY FELL TO ITS LOWEST SINCE 2000*



Resident households received more government transfers in 2024

FROM A1

in real terms, while that for households in the top decile declined by 0.7 per cent per annum.

A decile is the one-tenth of all households arranged by their incomes from lowest to highest. The last, or 10th, decile is the one-tenth of the households with the highest incomes.

The Gini coefficient based on household employment income per household member rose from 0.433 in 2023 to 0.435 in 2024, before taking into account assistance or benefits provided by the Government and taxes.

After such adjustments, the Gini coefficient in 2024 was 0.364, lower than the 0.371 in 2023. This is the lowest since records of the measure began in 2000, said SingStat. The Gini coefficient is a measure of income inequality. A Gini coefficient of zero occurs when there is total income equality, and one means there is total inequality.

SingStat also reported that resident households, including households with no employed person, received \$7,825 per household member, on average, from government schemes in 2024.

This was higher than the \$6,418 received in 2023. "This was due to measures rolled out in 2024 to support households in areas such as cost of living, retirement and healthcare needs," said SingStat.

Resident households living in one- and two-room Housing Board flats continued to receive the most government transfers.

In 2024, they received an average of \$16,805 per household member from government schemes, more than double the amount received by all resident households.

Mr Jester Koh, UOB's associate economist, said the real median household employment income grew by a softer clip in the recent

five-year period as the strong nominal growth has been largely eroded by the inflation surge since late 2021.

"This is likely driven by a confluence of factors such as the unleashing of post-pandemic pent-up demand, tightening of labour markets amid labour supply shortages, and the Russia-Ukraine war, which led to food and energy price spikes," he said.

Mr Song Seng Wun, economic adviser at CGS International, said median household employment income growth slowed in 2024 as the labour market normalised. This is likely the growth range for the next few years.

In contrast, there was faster growth in median monthly household employment income post-pandemic as companies started to hire again, and the economy rebounded strongly.

Those in the lower income de-

ciles are aided by the Progressive Wage Model (PWM), Mr Song said, adding that there will be higher growth among the lower-income as more sectors are included in the PWM.

The Government's transfers have also helped the lower-income, and helped decrease income inequality.

"This is where the Government can calibrate in terms of assistance in the upcoming Budget to help those who need the help most," he said. "The cost of living is still rising, though inflation has slowed down."

Associate Professor Walter Theiseira from the Singapore University of Social Sciences, who is a labour economist, said higher income growth in lower deciles aligns with efforts to raise wages for lower-income Singaporeans through policies like PWM.

For the upper decile, he noted

that non-employment income and capital gains, which are not included in the figures, are likely key factors for increasing income inequality, but they are not measured in the report.

"Recent strong growth in income for higher deciles outstripping the middle suggests income inequality will worsen without more government intervention," he said.

"Policy attention will likely need to be increasingly focused on helping the broad middle given the recent pattern of how the lower-income are 'levelling up' and how the higher-income are enjoying above-average gains."

Mr Chua Han Teng, an economist at DBS Bank, noted that Singapore's real median monthly household employment income continued the increases observed in the preceding three years from 2021 to 2023.

"The sustained real income growth reflects Singapore's economic resilience and healthy labour market performance despite rising global uncertainties," he said.

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SUSTAINED GROWTH

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Median monthly household employment income rose 1.4 per cent in real terms, after adjusting for inflation, in 2024. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Bukit Panjang gets 3rd centre to engage 1,300 seniors, with a 4th to come



Bukit Panjang MP Liang Eng Hwa and Minister of State for Health Rahayu Mahzam (right) joining an exercise session during the official opening of the active ageing centre at 406 Fajar Road on Feb 13. Mr Tan Pang Swee (foreground, centre) started going for the sessions, designed specifically for men, because he wanted to make more friends. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

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Correspondent

The latest of three active ageing centres (AACs) in Bukit Panjang is expected to engage up to 1,300 senior residents, who can enjoy exercise sessions or art activities in scenic surroundings.

The AAC at 406 Fajar Road – located near a pond popular with residents in the vicinity – is operated by social service organisation Fei Yue Community Services.

It has engaged more than 600 seniors since it began operations in April 2024.

At its official opening on Feb 13, Bukit Panjang MP Liang Eng Hwa said a fourth AAC in the constituency, located at Bangkit Market, is in the works.

A new senior care centre is also set to open at 422 Fajar Road.

Currently, about one in five residents in the constituency is above 60, and the figure is expected to re-

ach one in four in the coming years.

Mr Liang said Bukit Panjang faces a "twin ageing problem", as both the estate and its residents are ageing. Pointing out that work has been done to refresh the ageing estate's infrastructure – where flats are up to 40 years old – he said efforts have also been made to help seniors age well.

"In our community, it's vital that we continue to create spaces where our elderly can thrive and play an active role in society. These AACs reflect our collective responsibility to ensure that our seniors not only live well but feel valued," Mr Liang said.

Minister of State for Health Rahayu Mahzam also attended the AAC's opening.

By 2030, one in four citizens in Singapore will be aged 65 and above, up from one in six now.

Amid this impending silver tsunami, the Government has set a goal of having 220 AACs by 2025, so that eight in 10 residents will have a centre near their homes. As

at November 2024, there are 214 AACs.

Singapore has set aside \$800 million over five years for AACs to expand their outreach and increase the range and quality of their programmes, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung announced in November 2023.

One unique offering at the new AAC is a special exercise session designed specifically for men, led by Anytime Fitness.

One of its regular participants is Mr Tan Pang Swee, 73, who said he has seen improvements both physically and socially after attending the session.

The retired telecommunications engineer started going for the sessions because he wanted to make more friends.

"It's not just the body that feels better, but my mind too. It's a great way to connect with other men in the community who are in the same life stage," Mr Tan said.

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