

# Celebrating the family, no matter how beautifully imperfect

A posed picture of discord in the family affecting its members. The Alliance for Action to Strengthen Marriages and Family Relationships and its focal areas are structured to address the challenges that families face, Ms Sun said. She launched the alliance last August and it brings the community and Singaporeans together to find ways to strengthen and support marriages and family ties. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



## Sun Xueling gives update on alliance efforts to help strengthen marriages, family bonds

**Theresa Tan**  
Senior Social Affairs Correspondent

Families are sometimes beautifully imperfect and they do not come in just one shape or form, said Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Social and Family Development.

She said the Government recognises that families face challenges, adding: "We don't want people to go away thinking that the Year of the Family means that we celebrate one model or one form of family. That the family must be totally intact, which is father, mother, child smiling happily in one family portrait."

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) has designated 2022 as the Year of Celebrating Singapore Families.

The Alliance for Action to Strengthen Marriages and Family Relationships and its focal areas are structured to address the challenges that families face, Ms Sun said on Monday when giving an update of its work.

These challenges include the rising number of child abuse and el-

der abuse cases and the breakdown in parent-child relationships.

The MSF's Child Protective Service investigated 2,141 cases of child abuse last year – 63 per cent more than in 2020 and the highest number in the past decade.

More recent marriages are also not surviving the test of time. Of those who wed in 2006, 16 per cent of the marriages ended before their 10th anniversary – almost double the 8.7 per cent of those who were married in 1987, data released by the MSF previously showed.

Ms Sun launched the alliance last August and it brings the community and Singaporeans together to find ways to strengthen and support marriages and family ties. Its community partners include social sector agencies, companies and religious organisations.

Since its launch, the initiative has engaged almost 300 people on key social issues, such as single parenthood and the Maintenance of Parents Act, to hear their concerns and challenges.

Four of its six focal areas seek to address challenges that some families face, Ms Sun said. For example, one looks at providing support

### NO SINGLE MODEL

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**MS SUN XUELING**, Minister of State for Social and Family Development.

for families with early risks, like couples who marry young or are financially strapped or have many children at a young age.

The team for this area is working with partners to develop programmes, for example, that promote respectful relationships so that violence has no place at home. It also aims to help families maintain ties when a loved one is in jail, for example, by developing materials that help explain to children that their parent is incarcerated.

Besides community programmes, Ms Sun noted that the

Taskforce on Family Violence released its recommendations in September last year to tackle domestic abuse. For example, the MSF is looking to pass laws that will better protect victims of family violence and strengthen rehabilitation for perpetrators.

Ms Sun said the rising number of child abuse cases is due to greater awareness among community members to spot and report the problem, while pandemic-related stress and situations could have led to the rise in cases too.

One of the other focal areas provides support for single parents, which are defined as unwed, divorced or widowed parents.

The team is working with various community groups to run child-minding services in selected areas.

These initiatives arose after a focus group discussion with unwed mothers last year.

Another focus group discussion with divorced or widowed fathers was held last Saturday to understand their experiences and the support they need, said Ms Sun.

And yet another focal area looks at parenting issues, with the team working with the Ministry of Education and other community partners to provide information to help parents and grandparents cope with a child's key transitions and milestones. Parent support groups in schools are being engaged to

spur them to adopt parenting programmes.

The remaining three focal areas are:

- One that promotes the adoption of family-friendly practices, such as in the workplace;
- One that encourages young couples to go for marriage preparation and enrichment courses, where the team also partners fertility health interest groups to promote fertility-related conversations; and
- One that revolves around faith and families. The team has engaged major religious organisations across the different faiths to promote marriage preparation and parenting programmes, among other initiatives.

Mr Malminderjit Singh, chairman of the Sikh Advisory Board who is a member of the team working on the faith and families focal area, said the board is looking at normalising conversations around problems that may arise in marriages and families.

The board also wants to work with the MSF to train more counsellors in the Sikh community, among its plans to boost marriage and family ties, he added.

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## Singapore given quota of 407 places for Haj this year

**Syarafana Shafeeq**

Local pilgrims will be able to perform the Haj this year, with Singapore granted a quota of 407 places out of 850,000 international pilgrims.

Singapore's quota this year is less than half of the previous official quota of 900, said the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) yesterday.

Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Haj and Umrah announced that the Haj this year will be opened to one million pilgrims in total, with each country being given approximately 45 per cent of their previous official pre-pandemic quota.

The ministry said that this year's pilgrims must be aged below 65, vaccinated against Covid-19 with a Saudi-approved vaccine and must submit a negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test within 72 hours from the time of departure to Saudi Arabia.

Muis said that due to the deferment of the Haj in 2020 and last year, it will reallocate the limited quota to those who were supposed to perform their haj in 2020 and now meet the conditions and requirements for this year.

Muis had earlier reached out to pilgrims affected by the deferment to get their updated contact details, vaccination status and their interest in performing the haj this year.

"This is part of Muis' efforts to get prospective pilgrims to prepare early, remain flexible and be spiritually, physically, mentally and financially ready to perform their haj," it said.

Those who have yet to reply to Muis are urged to do so by Friday or they will be automatically moved in the queue to subsequent years.

A confirmed list of pilgrims who meet the requirements for this year's haj will be issued formally after letters on May 5. Eligible pilgrims will be notified via SMS to check their e-mail for details on the collection of their offer letter.

Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said in a Facebook post yesterday that he is grateful Singaporean pilgrims will be able to perform the haj even though the quota is smaller.

He added: "For those who have not been allocated haj places this year, please do not be disheartened. In our recent meeting, Saudi's Hajj and Umrah Minister, His Excellency Dr Tawfiq Al Rabiah, assured me that the kingdom will provide more haj places for international pilgrims once the Covid-19 situation improves."

"On my part, let me reassure you that Muis and I will continue to request for more haj places beyond our official quota in view of the long queue of aspiring pilgrims in Singapore."

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## Family pledge to get people to think on strengthening their bonds

The Alliance for Action to Strengthen Marriages and Family Relationships launched its SG Family Pledge yesterday to get Singaporeans to commit to acts that boost family ties.

The pledge goes: "I pledge and commit to strengthen my family bonds by:

- listening to one another

- making time for one another
- showing love, care and concern for one another
- respecting one another, especially when resolving our differences
- appreciating and affirming our family members
- supporting one another through good and bad times."

Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Social and Family Development who leads the Alliance, said the pledge aims to focus attention on the importance of family relationships, and to get individuals to think about how they can each contribute to strengthening their family ties.

The Alliance brings together community partners and Singaporeans to find ways to strengthen and support marriages and family relationships.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development has also designated 2022 as the Year of Celebrating Singapore Families.

Ms Sun said the pledge can be said at suitable events, such as during the National Family Week in June, which will involve a series of events to celebrate the importance of family bonding.

The community partners in the Alliance will also help to promote the pledge among the communi-

ties they reach out to, she said.

Ustaz Ahmad Khushairi Abidin, head of youth and family Development at Darul Ghufuran Mosque, said: "We will share the pledge with our community and encourage couples through our marriage programmes to pledge their commitment and support to each other."

People can also make their pledge at <https://go.gov.sg/CelebratingSGFamilies>

**Theresa Tan**

## 3 Covid-19 experts in S'pore knighted by French government

**Joyce Teo**  
Senior Health Correspondent

Three Covid-19 experts in Singapore were knighted by France yesterday in recognition of their outstanding contributions in health and science, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, which helped to strengthen ties between the countries.

Singapore's chief health scientist Tan Chorh Chuan, and National Centre for Infectious Diseases executive director Leo Yee Sin were conferred the title of Knight of the French Order of the Legion of Hon-

our. Professor Laurent Réna, director of the Respiratory and Infectious Diseases Programme at the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine at Nanyang Technological University and senior fellow at the A\*Star Infectious Diseases Labs, was conferred the title of Knight of the French National Order of Merit.

They were bestowed the awards by France's Ambassador to Singapore Marc Abensour at the French Embassy in Cluny Park Road.

The Legion of Honour is France's highest award for outstanding service made by civilians or military personnel to the country, regardless of their citizenship, while the National Order of Merit, created in

1963, is the second national order after the Legion of Honor. Both orders consist of three ranks: Chevalier (Knight), Officier (Officer) and Commandeur (Commander).

Professor Tan told The Straits Times the award acknowledges the teams of people working behind the scenes on the research and development that has been useful for Singapore's response to the pandemic.

At the ceremony, Mr Abensour said Prof Tan collaborated with France on many bilateral exchanges and information sharing sessions regarding pandemic management, to the mutual benefit of both countries. Prof Leo played a crucial role as the chairman for the

Singapore side, in the France-Singapore scientific working group on infectious diseases that was set up in July 2020, he added.

Of the work group's contributions, he said: "This has opened up multiple channels of cooperation in these priority areas between Singapore and France, not only at our respective national levels, but also on the international stage."

He said Prof Réna, who is French, distinguished himself as a reference for the Singaporean authorities, in addition to the high-quality scientific research he conducted in France.

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At the French Embassy yesterday were (from left) the French Ambassador to Singapore Marc Abensour, with Professor Laurent Réna, Professor Leo Yee Sin and Professor Tan Chorh Chuan. PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN