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## Dormitory operators unite to raise standards

New group sets out benchmarks, plans accreditation scheme

By amelia tan

THE biggest foreign worker dormitory operators here have joined forces to introduce new best practices for the industry, which has been ridden by complaints about poor living conditions.

The eight companies, which together provide more than 100,000 of the estimated 150,000 bed spaces in purpose-built dorms, are the founding members of the Dormitory Association of Singapore, formed in September.

Members will have to meet guidelines, such as providing clean and adequate toilets which ensure privacy, rooms that are regularly cleaned and aired, and separate beds for each worker.

These are on top of the basic legal requirements of land use, structural integrity, fire safety, and hygiene and sanitation that accommodation for foreign workers must already now satisfy.

The association wants to rope in the Manpower Ministry, the National Environment Agency and other government agencies to draw up an accreditation scheme based on the set of benchmarks by June next year.

It also aims to get more dorm operators, including hundreds of smaller players that run factory-converted dorms, to join as members.

There are about 20 companies in Singapore running 39 purpose-built dorms, and many more that run several hundred factory-converted dorms. They do not need to obtain a licence from the Government to operate.

The hygiene standards of dorms were thrust into the spotlight after Chinese bus drivers from SMRT went on strike three weeks ago. Besides being unhappy about their pay, they also complained about their poor living conditions, such as having to deal with bed bugs.

Mooted by non-governmental help group Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC) chairman Yeo Guat Kwang six months ago, the association was formed as founding members felt that some smaller operators were not playing by the book.

Mr Kelvin Teo, the association's president who manages three dormitories, said: "We have seen some of the photos showing bad practices by some smaller players in the media.

"It affects our industry's image and we want to put a stop to it."

The eight signed a document yesterday promising to follow these new best practices.

There are plans to form an independent committee made up of staff from MWC and government agencies who will check the premises of member dorm operators to ensure that they have followed the guidelines. Mr Teo said he hopes that by raising overall standards in the industry, the Government will be more willing to put up more land to build dorms.

The 39 purpose-built dorms in Singapore are full.

Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Manpower and Education Hawazi Daipi, who was at yesterday's signing ceremony, said government agencies will be interested to work with the association to help improve the living conditions of foreign workers.

Mr Simon Lee, the association's secretary-general who runs four dorms, said the association and MWC will also organise visits to dorms run by smaller operators to give them recommendations on ways to improve, and convince them to join the association.

Mr Lee said: "As an association, we can conduct classes and training and work with our members closely."

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