

Dorm operators set benchmarks to improve living standards

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by Amanda Lee

SINGAPORE - Less than a month after the illegal strike by some SMRT foreign bus drivers - who were dissatisfied over their salaries and living conditions - a group of major dormitory operators here have come together and pledged to raise the standards of living quarters for migrant workers.

A set of more than 50 benchmarks - including living space of between 4 and 5.5 sq m for each worker, adequate ventilation, access to adequate and convenient supply of potable water - has also been drawn up, with an accreditation scheme in the works and which will possibly be ready next year.

While the initiative was set in motion months before the strike, non-governmental groups and Members of Parliament welcomed the move in the aftermath of the SMRT strike which threw a spotlight on the living conditions of migrant workers here.

The benchmarks were drawn up by the newly-formed Dormitory Association of Singapore Limited (DASL), the Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC) and the authorities.

MWC Chairman Yeo Guat Kwang said the initiative was the result of two meetings with key operators earlier this year. "Now we are going to act together to really uphold the standards ... With this move, we will be able to provide better accommodation for our migrant workers in Singapore," he said.

The DASL - which was registered on Sept 18 - was inaugurated yesterday. It is made up of 13 members, including major dormitory operators which account for 70 per cent - or 100,000 bed spaces - of dormitory spaces here.

As of last month, there are 39 approved commercial dormitories for foreign workers.

The benchmarks cover a wide range of areas - from general living and sanitary facilities, to food safety and disease management.

Welcoming the initiative, a Ministry of Manpower (MOM) spokesperson said: "DASL's benchmark standards for the dormitories are consistent with what the MOM has been promoting to employers and dormitory operators.

"The MOM will be working closely with the association to explore new measures to further enhance the dormitory standards in Singapore and promote best practices amongst dormitory operators."

Following the SMRT strike, the MOM inspected the Woodlands and Serangoon dormitories where the foreign bus drivers were living in.

The MOM found that there was no overcrowding but the general housekeeping conditions of the SMRT drivers' rooms were below par compared to the other rooms in the dormitories.

Under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Regulations, employers can be fined up to S\$10,000 or jailed for up to 12 months, or both, for each foreign worker who is housed in unacceptable conditions.

DASL Secretary General Simon Lee said the association is also looking to set up a panel to investigate complaints against errant operators. To avoid any conflicts of interest, the operator involved in the complaint will not have representation on the panel.

Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) Chief Executive Officer Bridget Tan said she is concerned about the maintenance of facilities in the dormitories, which should include a health centre, as well as a counselling clinic to address the migrant workers' psychological and emotional well-being.

Holland-Bukit Timah GRC MP Christopher De Souza, who is the Deputy Chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Manpower, reiterated that the initiative is "certainly a step in the

right direction ... if it builds an ethos of care towards the employee".

Going forward, Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad suggested that an accreditation scheme be set up, such that companies can be assessed - even by customers - on the way they house their foreign workers.

Mr Yeo said an accreditation scheme could be rolled out within a year. "Now what we are trying to do is we will set aside three to six months for the operators to work on these standards ... then we will use this set of standards to form the scheme."

DASL's Mr Lee said he hopes that eventually, the authorities will consider using the accreditation scheme as a licensing condition for all operators.

He said: "Hotel operators need a hotel licence to operate. Dormitory operators currently don't (need any licence). They do need to meet all the authorities' regulations, but the management of it is actually up to individuals.

"So we hope that in time to come, we would have some scheme in place to actually let the industry know that this is the standard."

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