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DIRTY DORMS: Foreign labour crunch results in shortage of cleaners

More workers may end up being unhappy with living conditions

By amelia tan

THE shortage of foreign workers has hit a new sector - it is now becoming harder to find people to clean dormitories for these overseas workers.

Several companies, which together manage just over a third of the 39 commercially run purpose-built dormitories in Singapore, told The Straits Times that their cleaning contractors have been unable to provide them with enough workers for the past year.

As a result, observers say, there may be more foreign workers unhappy with living conditions if the matter is not handled well.

The hygiene standards of dorms were thrust into the spotlight after Chinese bus drivers from SMRT went on strike three weeks ago to protest against, among other things, bedbugs in their sleeping quarters.

Now, because of the labour shortage, dorms are getting two or three fewer cleaners than the number needed for each shift.

For example, 10 cleaners on average are required for a dorm of about 4,000 workers, but usually only six to eight turn up for work.

Most operators are dealing with the shortfall by paying workers to put in overtime.

But dorm bosses say paying workers to put in overtime and investing in technology are not long-term solutions.

They hope the Government can help by making it easier for them to hire foreigners.

Some hope that by paying locals more than the market rates, they will be able to urge more to take up the jobs.

Mr Eric Tan, who runs four dorms, said: "Cleaning and security jobs require manual labour, you cannot avoid it. We are trying to make do with what we have, but it is a challenge."

Operators believe that conditions in the purpose-built Woodlands dorm where most of the Chinese SMRT bus drivers were staying became an issue partly because they are designed as standalone apartments, which look similar to HDB flats.

These older dorms were built more than 10 years ago. Each unit comes with a kitchen, living room and toilet. Usually 10 to 12 workers share a unit and they have to clean the whole unit.

In contrast, observers say there is less of a hygiene problem in newer dorms, which look like army barracks. Toilets and kitchens are shared by all the occupants in a block or floor. The cleaning of these areas is outsourced.

Purpose-built dorms are just some of several housing types in the varied landscape of foreign worker accommodation in Singapore.

There are 723,000 foreign workers in Singapore, excluding maids.

A sizeable number - about 150,000 - who work in the construction, marine and manufacturing sectors stay in the 39 commercially-run purpose-built dorms.

These dorms typically accommodate between 3,000 and 9,000 workers each. They are generally located near industrial estates and remote places such as Mandai. Workers are charged rents of between \$250 and \$280 a month.

Industry observers estimate that another significant segment - more than 100,000 workers, mostly in the services and retail sector such as waiters - live in HDB flats so that they can travel to their workplaces easily.

The rest stay in several hundred factory-converted dorms that generally house fewer than 50 to a few hundred workers each, as well as construction site quarters and temporary housing such as shipping containers.

Residential premises such as shophouses and landed homes are also used.

All accommodation for foreign workers must meet conditions governing the basic legal requirements for land use, structural integrity, fire safety, and hygiene and sanitation.

Employers can be fined up to \$10,000 or jailed for up to 12 months, or both, for each foreign worker who is housed in unacceptable conditions.

Overall, Mr Alan Lum, who heads the Manpower Ministry's Housing Enforcement Branch, says standards of foreign worker housing have improved in recent years.

Statistics back this up.

From January to October this year, 648 employers were served warning letters for providing unacceptable housing for their foreign workers, down from 886 last year and 1,591 in 2010.

A total of 91 errant employers were fined as of October this year, down from 180 last year and 226 in 2010.

But with the labour crunch, dorm operators say it is even more important that workers do their part to keep their surroundings tidy and neat.

Mr Johnathan Cheah, who runs a dorm in Changi that houses 4,000 workers, said: "Cleaners generally feel that working at a dorm is hard work because there is a lot of mess.

"Workers can help us to change this perception by keeping the place clean."

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