

Employment farm to help more autistic adults find work after Sped graduation

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A vocational training initiative in urban farming for autistic individuals is being turned into a supported employment farm, as part of efforts to help more people find employment after they graduate from special education (Sped) schools.

The programme by St Andrew's Autism Centre (SAAC) was unveiled at an event by the Autism Network Singapore to mark World Autism Awareness Day on April 2.

The network – comprising SAAC, Autism Association (Singapore), Autism Resource Centre (Singapore), Awwa and Rainbow Centre – is also calling for more schools, companies, community groups and public agencies to work with them to support adults with autism.

The five social service agencies will hold open houses in April for those interested in partnering them to support people with autism. Partners can employ people with autism, purchase goods they produce or donate to the organisations, among other ways to support them.

The free, 1½ hour-long tours will be hosted by the agencies' senior management.

Those interested can sign up at bit.ly/ansopenhouses2024

Speaking at the event held at SAAC on March 27, president of

Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) and chairman of Autism Association (Singapore) Denise Phua said there have been greater efforts to support young people with autism in the last two decades, but not so much for adults with the condition.

Many people with autism who are unable to work stay home and regress after graduating from Sped schools at the age of 18, if they cannot access any support services such as day activity centres (DACs). This problem is known as the "post-18 cliff".

"From 19 up to 85... that's a really long time... We must do something about this space, from post-18 up to the time that we pass on," Ms Phua said.

Around 450 people graduate from Sped schools every year, and about half of them have autism.

Mr Bernard Chew, chief executive of SAAC, which serves those with moderate to severe autism, said caregivers often have to leave their jobs to take care of their grown children in the long wait for a spot in a DAC, which can stretch up to five years.

He said the farm, which is under SAAC's Dignity of Work programme, offers another option for those unable to get a spot in sheltered workshops and DACs.

Set up in partnership with aquaponics farm BlueAcres, the farm started as a training initiative for SAAC's DAC clients, and sells pro-



Youngsters at St Andrew's Autism Centre's rooftop urban farm on March 27. A vocational training initiative in urban farming for autistic individuals is being turned into a supported employment farm as part of efforts to help more people find work after they graduate from special education schools. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

duce to restaurants. The plan is for the supported employment farm to start in August with 10 to 12 autistic individuals who will work for about four hours every weekday and be paid every month.

Mr Chew suggested that the sheltered employment model can be a lower-cost alternative to DACs, to help with long wait times for the

latter. He pegged the cost of running a sheltered employment farm at somewhere between the cost of sheltered workshops and that of DACs.

SAAC also has other vocational training programmes in baking, laundry and craftwork.

"They learn visually, so what we do is to have a set of visual sup-

ports for each of the steps," said Mr Chew, as he took the media on a tour of the rooftop farm at SAAC on March 27.

Mr Alex Ang, 18, a student of St Andrew's Autism School, joined the SAAC urban farming programme.

Since joining, he has become more adept at following instruc-

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tions, managing tasks and working with others.

Ms Phua said autism is a complex condition, with many autistic people also having some degree of intellectual disability or epilepsy. Autistic individuals can range from those who are able to live independently to those requiring significant support in their daily lives.

"So we need to build formal models for this work continuum – from not paid, to supported, to fully paid," she said.

To prepare people with autism for life after school, Rainbow Centre's social workers help each of its Sped students with transition planning from the age of 15, to connect them with programmes which match their specific strengths, interests and needs.

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