



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE  
UNITED NATIONS | GENEVA

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PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE

27 July 2020

Ms Catalina Devandas-Aguilar  
Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities

Mr David Kaye  
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of  
opinion and expression

Mr Dainius Puras  
Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest  
attainable standard of physical and mental health

Mr Fernand de Varennes  
Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Dear Ms Devandas-Aguilar, Mr Kaye, Mr Puras and Mr de Varennes,

I refer to the joint communication dated 29 May 2020 [Ref: AL SGP 1/2020]. I would like to take this opportunity to provide an overview of the human-centred approach that the Singapore Government has taken to ensure that no one in our population is left behind in the fight against COVID-19, including deaf and hard of hearing persons. Singapore's measures during this time are in accordance with our international obligations, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Accessibility to Information and Communication

Singapore recognises the importance of public communications in our fight against COVID-19. **Our focus is to ensure all Singaporeans receive reliable, timely and accurate information, including updates on cases and advisories on social responsibility.** To this end, Singapore has adopted a multi-platform, multi-language and multi-format approach to ensure that information

is effectively disseminated to different segments of society, including persons with disabilities.

Official information is pushed out through various platforms, including Free-to-Air television (“FTA TV”), radio, print, digital display panels at public housing estates, social media, websites and online platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Twitter. Content is presented in various formats (e.g. visuals, text-based) and different languages. The diverse platforms, formats and languages broaden the reach of official information, including to persons with disabilities.

**To cater to deaf and hard of hearing persons, Singapore adopts subtitling and captioning for non-live programmes.** The Government publishes captioned video extracts of the Committee of Supply and Parliament debates on its YouTube channel. The Government’s national broadcasts related to COVID-19 are also captioned, where production timelines allow. **In addition, infographics are deployed across various channels, and presented in an accessible and easily comprehensible manner.**

**For live programmes, live signing is provided for key Government communications, such as the Prime Minister’s (PM) May Day Rally speech on 30 April 2020.** Live signing was also deployed for the live television broadcast of the Government’s COVID-19-related budgetary announcement on 26 May 2020. The use of live signing has also been expanded to other key Government announcements related to COVID-19, such as a series of National Broadcasts by the PM and Cabinet Ministers televised in June 2020.

These signing services are provided in collaboration with the Singapore Association for the Deaf, who together with other service organisations for persons with disabilities, also provide live signing and note-taking on their social media platforms for major local events. Collectively, these Government-led and ground-up efforts are in place to ensure access to COVID-19 information for the deaf and hard-of-hearing.

**Government agencies are required to comply with guidelines under the Digital Service Standards (DSS) for designing government websites, which are in compliance with the World Wide Web Consortium Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0.,<sup>1</sup> an internationally adopted standard that was developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative on 11 December 2008. This caters to the needs of persons with disabilities seeking information from government websites.**

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<sup>1</sup> Information on the Web Accessibility Initiative can be found at <http://www.w3.org/WAI>.

## Accessibility to Healthcare and Support Services

**Health-related public communications are disseminated in a wide variety of formats across various channels.** Accessible COVID-19-related information and other disability-related support have been made available on the SG Enable<sup>2</sup> and Enabling Guide (EG)<sup>3</sup> websites, which are WCAG 2.0 compliant and accessible via desktops, mobile phones, and screen readers. Persons with disabilities can also contact SG Enable via email to enquire about assistance or call its dedicated information helpline.

Government efforts are complemented by community efforts. **Public healthcare institutions and social service agencies (SSAs) have developed visual storyboards, video clips and other resources to explain COVID-19 and the testing process to persons with disabilities, including the deaf and hard of hearing.**<sup>4</sup> These have been used in frontline settings.

Singapore entered the “Circuit Breaker” period in April 2020, which was approximately two months of enhanced safe distancing measures to slow local transmission of COVID-19. Schools were closed and moved to Home-Based Learning (HBL), and physical workplace premises were also closed. **Our approach during the “Circuit Breaker” period was to ensure that services and support for persons with disabilities continued, by shifting to online modes of intervention and engagement. With the Government’s support, SSAs adapted their services and innovated to support clients remotely.** The Government addressed the increased telecommunication needs of SSAs by providing SSAs with grants to buy hardware and software, and provided self-help guides and telephone helpdesk support on remote working tools and other IT resources. SPD, a local charity for persons with disabilities, expanded its e-therapy services and piloted tele-practice with a group of caregivers. Several

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<sup>2</sup> SG Enable is an agency dedicated to enabling persons with disabilities. Set up by the Singapore Ministry of Social and Family Development in 2013, its key functions include administering various grants and government-funded schemes for persons with disabilities and their caregivers; improving transition management across different life stages; providing information and referral services for adult and child disability services; enhancing employability and employment options for persons with disabilities; and rallying stakeholder support in enabling persons with disabilities.

<sup>3</sup> The Enabling Guide (EG) (<https://www.EnablingGuide.sg>) is an online, first-stop resource for persons with disabilities and caregivers. The platform pulls together various information and resources on disability schemes and services, and guides users in making more informed decisions about different service options across the life stages.

<sup>4</sup> With support from the Singapore Ministry of Health, public healthcare institutions have produced a visually-enhanced special care kit to support individuals with special needs undergoing COVID-19 procedures. The special care kit can be accessed at <https://www.nuh.com.sg/our-services/Specialties/Paediatrics/Pages/Special-Care-Kit-COVID-19-resources-to-support-special-needs-individuals.aspx>.

SSAs, community groups and volunteers hosted regular online activities to engage persons with disabilities who were at home, and to raise awareness on the measures to fight COVID-19.<sup>5</sup>

**Vulnerable persons with disabilities were also supported during the “Circuit Breaker” period.** The Government worked with various partners to arrange for the delivery of food and essential items for persons with disabilities with physical and visual impairments who were living alone, or with low family support. For persons with disabilities who had to be quarantined, arrangements were made for volunteers to stay with those who were living alone. Through partnerships with private operators, short-term home-based respite care was provided for those in need. A one-time S\$400 cash relief was also provided to approximately 800 households with more than one person with disabilities.

With the closure of sports centres, the Government worked with stakeholders, including SSAs, to produce online exercise content for persons with disabilities.<sup>6</sup> These resources were produced after taking in feedback on the suitability of the materials for persons with disabilities.

**Apart from ensuring the physical well-being of persons with disabilities, the Government maintained the provision of essential mental health support and services such as dedicated psychiatric day centres and community mental health services during the “Circuit Breaker” period.** Safe distancing measures and remote services delivery were employed where possible. At the same time, the Government recognised the importance of flexibility, and face to face interventions were used for those at high-risk or where tele-consultations were not suitable. Counselling was also made available via WhatsApp to provide basic mental health support for persons on “Stay-Home Notice” or Quarantine Order.

### Consultation and Meaningful Participation of Persons with Disabilities

The Government engages service providers, SSAs and persons with disabilities on an ongoing basis. **We are continually looking into how to better support persons with disabilities, and have been maintaining active conversations with community partners as well as persons with disabilities**

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<sup>5</sup> For example, an educational kit including a photo slideshow with videos and a comic strip was developed to instil good hygiene habits in young children with disabilities on <https://www.superherome.sg/covid19>.

<sup>6</sup> These exercises videos include strengthening exercises, dynamic stretches, chair pilates, and dance workouts, and are available on the SportCares TV YouTube channel at [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcB7q5Kh1WQqOysgj66n-76HgNqt\\_8sKi](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcB7q5Kh1WQqOysgj66n-76HgNqt_8sKi).

**themselves** to understand the challenges arising from COVID-19 that different groups of persons with disabilities face. **We also work with our community partners and other stakeholders to co-create solutions.** One example is the provision of live-signing services for key Government broadcasts described above, which was done in consultation and collaboration with SADeaf, who is aware of the operating constraints and partnered with the Government to find practical approaches. As another example, a joint circular was created to help enforcement officers, frontline agencies and employees in large supermarket chains to identify and interact with persons with disabilities and special needs. This has allowed for greater flexibility in the enforcement of COVID-19-related measures such as the compulsory wearing of face masks. Further, as part of the Government’s active engagement process, we have worked together with persons with visual impairment to improve the accessibility of new public service websites created as part of the COVID-19 response.<sup>7</sup> With feedback from the deaf and hard of hearing community, SG Enable connected with innovators to produce prototypes of see-through masks that allow students to read the lips and facial cues of their teachers.<sup>8</sup> To replicate such successful partnerships, SG Enable also set up a Collaborative Solutioning Group (CSG) for Pan Disabilities comprising disability sector players and persons with disabilities to identify challenges faced as a result of COVID-19, and to co-create and adopt quick prototyping of solutions. The CSG launched in May 2020 starting with consultations with the deaf and hard of hearing community.

**Persons with disabilities are included in broader national support measures, such as employability measures.** These employability measures include dedicating a workstream to persons with disabilities under the National Jobs Council, which was recently formed to identify and develop job opportunities and skills training for Singaporeans amidst the COVID-19 situation. The Council will explore strategies to scale up job and traineeship opportunities for persons with disabilities. SG Enable has also moved its training and employment events, such as career coaching services, to online platforms during the “Circuit Breaker” period. To keep stakeholders informed of these initiatives, SG Enable disseminated links to the Enabling Guide, online training and employment resources, and SG Enable’s Virtual Career Fair to some 16,000 recipients, including persons with disabilities, caregivers, Community Development Councils, grassroots constituencies and SSAs. This was done

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<sup>7</sup> An example would be [www.spaceout.gov.sg](http://www.spaceout.gov.sg), a website that provides the public with regular updates on the crowd levels in malls across Singapore so as to help the public make informed choices on where and when to make their essential purchases and maintain safe distancing.

<sup>8</sup> Pictures of the see-through masks are available at <https://www.facebook.com/MSFSingapore/posts/3416252455074515> and <https://www.independentmarket.sg/products/transparent-face-mask>.

through a variety of formats including email, text messages and social media. SG Enable has also curated a list of accessible courses on its website, which are supported by the “Open Door Programme Training Grant”,<sup>9</sup> for persons with disabilities seeking to upgrade themselves, and employers who send employees with disabilities for training. These are in addition to the Government’s assistance schemes for the broader population which persons with disabilities and their families can tap on.<sup>10</sup>

**Measures are also in place to ensure that persons with disabilities who wish to apply for legal aid during the COVID-19 period are not disproportionately affected.** Due to social distancing measures, correspondence with applicants takes place online or over the phone, where possible. However, applicants for legal aid may also attend appointments in-person and use the facilities at the Ministry of Law Service Centre (MSC) and the State Courts, both of which have barrier-free access. Additionally, two of the counters at MSC are equipped with technology to help deaf and hard of hearing persons communicate with staff. The Legal Aid Bureau (LAB), which provides legal aid, legal assistance and legal advice on civil matters, also has a set of guidelines to facilitate communications with persons with disabilities, such as reducing the number of appointments to cut down applicants’ commute and extending the duration of appointments.

Schools in Singapore implemented full HBL from 8 April to 4 May 2020, in line with our nationwide efforts to further enhance safe distancing measures. **For schools with students with sensory impairments, students were ensured access to assistive technology to support their learning.** For example, students with visual impairment had access to assistive technology like Jobs Access With Speech (JAWS)<sup>11</sup> or BrailleNote<sup>12</sup> to facilitate independent learning. For students who were not proficient users of assistive technology, they were able to access hardcopy braille-converted HBL resources. For deaf and hard of hearing

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<sup>9</sup> The Open Door Programme Grant is a government funded initiative which aims to encourage employers to hire, train and integrate persons with disabilities. Under the Training Grant, employers are encouraged to support their employees with disabilities to upgrade their skills through training.

<sup>10</sup> To help lower- and middle-income households affected by the COVID-19 situation tide through their financial challenges, the Government has introduced several help schemes. The Temporary Relief Fund provided one-off assistance in the month of April 2020. From May 2020, the COVID-19 Support Grant will help affected employees, while the Self-Employed Persons Income Relief Scheme will support self-employed persons. The Government has also enhanced support to low-income and vulnerable individuals and families under the ComCare scheme. All in, the Government has set aside S\$2.5 billion thus far to provide financial assistance to Singaporeans who need help.

<sup>11</sup> A computer screen reader programme that allows blind and visually impaired users to read the screen either with a text-to-speech output or by a refreshable Braille display.

<sup>12</sup> A computer for persons with visual impairments – it has either a Braille keyboard or a Qwerty keyboard, a speech synthesiser, and a 32- or 18-column refreshable Braille display.

students who required signing support, teachers catered to their learning needs via additional accommodations such as video recordings of signing, alongside any media provided during HBL. Schools also leveraged video-conferencing tools for students to communicate with their teachers and peers using sign language.

### Other Vulnerable Groups

The measures taken to care for persons with disabilities, including the deaf and hard of hearing, are a part of the comprehensive approach that Singapore has taken to protect all vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some examples follow.

#### *Migrant Workers*

One of the Government's priorities during COVID-19 has been to ensure that migrant workers remain safe and that the number of infected workers, severe cases and COVID-19-related deaths are kept to a minimum. Any migrant worker tested positive is given the same medical care extended to Singaporeans, with costs covered by the Government. Most of the infected migrant workers have had mild symptoms and are on the path to recovery. The Government has worked to ensure that the livelihoods of migrant workers are protected, and that they continue to be paid their salaries. At the beginning of the "Circuit Breaker" period, an Inter-Agency Task Force (ITF) was set up as part of a whole-of-government response to provide comprehensive support for migrant workers. These include the provision of strong medical support for dormitory residents, housing recovered workers in suitable accommodation and minimising the risks of recurring transmissions.

#### *Older Persons*

The Government recognises that older persons are at higher risk of developing serious health complications if infected with COVID-19. Measures have been implemented to safeguard the well-being of our elderly residents whether at home, or at senior residential care homes ("Care Homes"). Older persons are advised to stay at home as much as possible and are encouraged to use online alternatives for essential services, such as tele-health, digital transactions, and food deliveries. The Silver Generation Office (SGO) under the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) provides support to about 47,000 vulnerable senior citizens, by monitoring their well-being and helping them run simple



errands. As social isolation is often an unfortunate corollary of safe distancing, the SGO also refers senior citizens to relevant support services, including befriending services for those who need a listening ear.

The Government carries out active testing for COVID-19 for the especially vulnerable and frail members of the elderly population, especially those in Care Homes. This ensures that any infections are detected as early as possible for treatment and to limit further transmission.

### *Prisoners*

As part of the Singapore Prison Service's precautionary measures for COVID-19, all newly admitted inmates in the Changi Prison Complex are segregated for 14 days away from the general inmate population. All newly admitted inmates undergo swab tests for COVID-19 upon admission and at the end of the segregation period, before they are allowed to join the general inmate population. Given that prison is a high risk setting for the spread of COVID-19, measures to ensure early detection, infection control and safe distancing will remain in place.

### *Ethnic and Racial Minorities*

Our existing legal framework against racial and religious discrimination remains robust during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, measures can be taken against individuals who stir up hatred between ethnic and religious communities.

As part of the support measures in response to COVID-19, the Government has partnered with the community to strengthen the network of support around workers and their families. The ethnic-based Self-Help Groups,<sup>13</sup> i.e. the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), Yayasan MENDAKI, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), and the Eurasian Association (EA), have stepped up efforts to help families and vulnerable groups through their own assistance schemes. The Government has also announced the provision of a

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<sup>13</sup> The ethnic-based Self-Help Groups (SHGs) assist low-income persons/families. These SHGs, which are funded by voluntary contributions from the respective ethnic communities and financial grants from the Government, provide a more targeted community-based assistance that complements national schemes. SHGs also work together to jointly organise activities that enhance interaction among members of the various ethnic groups, which promotes racial cohesion and uplifts the community as a whole.



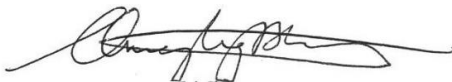
S\$20 million grant to the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) over the next two years to support the SHGs to better meet the needs of their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Women and Children*

The Government recognises that the safety of children and women is of utmost importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Helplines have remained accessible, with both statutory and community-run protective services continuing to operate even when other non-essential workplaces are closed. Measures have been implemented to step up the safety monitoring of known cases of domestic violence, continue the referrals to community-run protective services, and raise public awareness to call upon members of the public to come forward if they know of people who are experiencing violence.

The world has undergone an upheaval with COVID-19, and Singapore has not been immune to its consequences. Singapore takes our treaty obligations seriously and we are continuously looking to further improve our response to benefit all in Singapore. We will continue to engage all stakeholders and work towards protecting and supporting all vulnerable and minority groups, including the deaf and hard of hearing, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yours sincerely,



**UMEJ BHATIA**

Ambassador and Permanent Representative