

Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) Annual General Meeting 2021

Committee Report on 2020

Executive Committee 2019 to 2021

President	Debbie Fordyce
Vice President	Alex Au
Secretary	Beverly Shaddick
Treasurer	Russell Heng
Member	Yew Kong Leong
Member	Christine Pelly
Member	Mizue Sauco
Member	Rebecca Liu
Member	Choo Wai Hong* <i>resigned 28 September 2020</i>

Sub Committee Chairs

Research	Rebecca Liu and John Gee
Direct Services	Debbie Fordyce
Communications	Alex Au
Fund Raising	Russell Heng
Human Resource	Russell Heng
Public Engagement	Christine Pelly

Project Chairs

Cuff Road Project	Debbie Fordyce
Dayspace	Ethan Guo
Discover Singapore	Irene Ong and Marcel Bandur
Outreach	Ethan Guo
Project Farego	Alex Au
Project Roof and Lifeline	Ethan Guo
Wednesday Clinic	Mizue Sauco

Audit Committee

Audit Committee 2018-2020
(from 22 Apr 2018 to 20 Sept 2020)

Sandip Talukdar

Antony Cherian

Audit Committee 2020 to 2022
(from 20 Sept 2020 to present)

Gurbinder Singh

Varun Iyer Mani

Staff (2020)

General Manager

Ethan Guo

Social Work Associate

Alfiyan Mohamed Sadali

Social Work Associate

David Kalimuthu

Admin Officer

Christine Scully

Accounts Officer

Christina Chng

Introduction

The Committee Report is an overview of TWC2 activities in the preceding year in pursuit of its mission:

1. through ground research and engagement with policy makers and employers, to advocate a more enlightened policy framework for migrant labour in Singapore;
2. to extend assistance to workers in need to ensure that they have fair resolution of their cases, dignity in work and living conditions, access to medical care, and protection of their rightful autonomy; and
3. through public education, to promote the social conditions in which exploitation, abuse and injustice become history.

The Report is in three Parts: Advocacy, Direct Services, and Organisational Support.

During 2020, most of our regular TWC2 activities were temporarily stopped or discontinued, and only the more essential projects were adapted to operate within strict safe distancing measures. For example, our popular Discover Singapore programme, which used to organise excursions and social activities for TWC2 clients, had to be put on hold throughout 2020. The number of migrant workers who had enjoyed coming to Dayspace, our field office in Little India and a convenient venue for meetings, declined rapidly. The Sunday enrichment classes held by the IFN and FFN and other training sessions that had previously been held at Dayspace were also stopped.

Despite these obstacles, it was heartening to see staff and volunteers from across teams unite and develop new projects that were Covid-19 specific so as to continue supporting migrant workers who were quarantined in dormitories and faced growing restrictions in their new environments. While most of our Covid-19 projects ceased at the end of December 2020, our TWC2 activities have since been readapted with a hybrid model of in-person and online contacts to serve the migrant workers during these uncertain times.

Part 1 – ADVOCACY

Our Advocacy activities encompass Research, Communications, and Engagement with the Public and with Policy Makers and Stakeholders.

1.1 Research

Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a large portion of the Research Subcommittee's usual and planned activities came to a halt. In the past, data collection usually involved face-to-face interviews with migrant workers at meal programs, or around Little India and Farrer Park. However, due to large scale quarantining of migrant workers, as well as social distancing measures, this mode of data collection was no longer feasible in 2020. Our mode of research shifted from large-scale quantitative surveys conducted at specific sites, to small-scale qualitative studies conducted largely by phone.

Long-Term Projects

In 2019, all but one of the Research Subcommittee's outstanding long-term research publications were completed and published. Editorial issues as well as a revamp of the TWC2 website initially delayed the publication of the last publication. However, in the report '*End injustice in migrant worker recruitment fees*¹' was finally launched in January 2021.

With the completion of the above-mentioned projects, the Research subcommittee opened recruitment for seven new projects in 2020. However, of the seven projects, four were discontinued due to inability to conduct data collection. Three projects did not require data collection and would be based on review of regulations in comparative jurisdictions, and were thus allowed to continue. However, progress on these projects remain slow-moving. The three outstanding projects are:

- Establishing a workplace injury: How does the work injury legislation in comparative jurisdictions differ? How do they determine whether an injury arose at work?
- Enforcement of court orders: What enforcement options are available in Singapore and in other jurisdictions?

¹ <https://twc2.org.sg/2021/01/09/research-report-policy-recomendations-to-end-injustice-in-recruitment-fees/>

- Insolvency schemes in Singapore & other jurisdictions: What insolvency arrangements and protections exist in Singapore and in other jurisdictions?

Short-Term Projects

With the onset of the global pandemic, the landscape surrounding migrant workers and the issues they face evolved drastically. Two qualitative studies were conducted in 2020:

- A qualitative survey conducted in September 2020 centered around rest day arrangements available for healthy workers to visit selected recreation centers. Of the 72 interviewees, 53 workers were work-permit holders with green access code status. However, only 4 of those 53 workers had recently left their dormitories.
- A second qualitative survey conducted in the months of January and February 2021 was centered around the experiences of migrant workers looking to change employers. The team conducted 35 interviews in total. Results are still pending.

1.2 Communications

TWC2's main vehicles for communication with the general public are our website and Facebook pages.

Through 2020, despite the difficulties of interviewing workers face-to-face through several months of lockdown, we managed to maintain a steady refresh rate for both channels. The website averaged a new article every two days.

With Covid-19 being the top issue of 2020, many articles addressed various facets of the pandemic sweeping the dorms and carried real-life accounts of workers quarantined for months within their rooms, on ships or in hotels. There were also articles maintaining a running tally of Covid-19 cases in the various dorms, thus providing a ready resource for future reference.

With government policies often hastily made, several articles called them out. Of more concern was the way the entire narrative about migrant workers in various media seemed to be reduced to just the issue of infection and accommodation.

Together with our many interactions with journalists (see Section 1.4), we made sure that issues of recruitment cost, indebtedness, wage theft and Singapore's sponsorship system that denied workers the right to change jobs remained in the spotlight.

One of these articles highlighting these perennial issues faced by migrant workers was based on a talk given to mark International Labour Day. This article "The dorms are not the problem²" generated so much traffic, the website slowed down badly in the days after and almost crashed.

Our aim is that our website should be the leading repository for information about labour migration and the experiences of migrants themselves. From the way journalists and academics came to our site whenever they needed information – judging by how they were quoting facts and figures which were first featured on our site – we believe we are beginning to realise this aim.

The Facebook page was less active through most of 2020, but with the arrival of a new staff member – a Communications Specialist, in January 2021, it was strongly rejuvenated with the aim of having new content tailored specifically for social media every 3 or 4 days. Social media serves a completely function from the website. It is meant to be more contemporaneous and more engaging with the public, catering to shorter attention spans, whereas the website serves more as an ever-growing library.

1.3 Public Engagement

The Public Engagement (PE) team is the voice of TWC2 to students, teachers, researchers, media, other special interest groups and the general public in learning more about foreign worker issues in Singapore. It underpins TWC2's role in advocating for the welfare of these workers. The presence of foreign worker issues in the media took on a new dimension this past year with the Covid-19 infections in the dorms where to date more than 90% of infections in Singapore have been within the low wage migrant worker community. With this increased exposure there has been a greater impetus for public engagement and involvement with a greater sense of immediacy albeit much of it virtually. Since late March 2020, TWC2

² <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/05/01/the-dorms-are-not-the-problem/>

has received calls and emails almost daily with requests for information and meetings.

When the plight of workers during lockdown in the Covid-19 situation came to public attention it gave rise to many groups seeking to plug the gap in terms of provision of food and small comforts for the workers. While we too at TWC2 directed resources to keeping our links with workers in lockdown through provisions such as small and essential needs, phone top ups and welfare checks, we persisted throughout this period in bringing to light the underlying systemic issues that workers faced in the past and continue to face today. The chaotic, unpredictable circumstances of Covid-19 have directed much attention to workers' immediate welfare concerns. We see our role in public engagement as vital in not losing our focus on the long-term almost chronic nature of problems endured by the workers we serve. Issues like recruitment fees, salary non-payment, inability to change employers, difficulty in accessing medical care, poor housing and food. Since lockdown in early April 2020, the confinement of workers within their dormitories had become a serious mental and physical issue.

We feel that the general public, researchers, students, and media both local and foreign need an informed understanding of how foreign male and female work permit holders are recruited, employed, paid, treated, housed, managed, restricted, and perceived. Fostering this understanding is vital to TWC2's mission to improve foreign workers' welfare in Singapore.

Our public engagement team interacts with a wide range of groups regularly by meeting with students, delivering presentations, sharing information with researchers, sitting on panel discussions, talking to media groups, assisting film makers, and speaking to Singapore government bodies. Some of these interactions are informal chats over coffee; others are formal presentations to large audiences. We hope that in communicating about transient workers and TWC2's activities, more enlightened regulations and a more compassionate approach will eventually prevail.

Some of these groups have had a long-standing relationship with our members. This is especially true with researchers involved in migration, health care and recruitment issues and foreign universities who regularly sponsor students to visit

Singapore. Other groups make contact with TWC2 through our office and are referred to the appropriate individuals or to the Public Engagement team.

We welcome the chance to talk to others and share our findings, experience, conclusions and advocacy stance. Students who contact TWC2 for information relating to school/university projects are encouraged to conduct some research before contacting us, to keep an open mind, and to look beyond common assumptions such as racism, xenophobia or segregation as the main problems for migrant workers. In an environment where advocacy and questioning systemic issues is a challenge, we hope that engagement with TWC2 will empower students to take an active role in being agents of and for change. We are honoured to have established connections with such concerned individuals and diverse groups.

The list below does not include those groups and individuals who have generously donated useful items to assist the workers that we represent. Our regular meal program has facilitated many who seek such involvement in distributing items such as clothing, toiletries, phonecards, fruit and other items to the men on our free meal program.

Among the groups that our Public Engagement team met with in 2020 are those listed below. There are many other researchers, media people, and personal contacts who approached others from TWC2 but unfortunately may not be listed here.

Singapore bodies: MOM; MOE; CNA; NVPC; Straits Times; Business Times; MediaCorp; Eco-Business; New Naratif; Academia SG; fellow NGOs: AWARE; HOME; HealthServe; other charities and NPOs; National Library Board; People's Association; Lien Centre for Social Innovation.

Singapore schools and universities: SOTA; VJC; River Valley High School, Nan Chiau High School; Raffles Institute; Temasek Polytechnic; Nanyang Polytechnic; UWCSEA; La Salle College of the Arts; NUS; SUSS; Yale-NUS; NTU; Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy; Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

Foreign governments, institutions and corporations: US State Department; British High Commission; Bangladesh High Commission; International Labour

Organisation; Migrant Forum Asia; Al Jazeera; Reuters; The Urban Wire; BBC; WSJ; Swiss National TV, Hong Kong Baptist University; University of Amsterdam; RMIT University; South China Morning Post.

1.4 Engagement with Policy Makers and Advocacy partnerships

During April and May 2020 – the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore, we had intensive engagement with journalists, averaging 2 to 3 media interviews a day. Some were for background, but TWC2 would be cited or quoted in about 2 or 3 news articles a week.

Most were international publications, chiefly from the UK, USA, Europe, Australia, China and Japan., such as BBC, Bloomberg, Reuters, Australian Broadcasting, NHK, CGTN, El País, AP, AFP, Swiss Public Radio, SCMP, Al Jazeera, and so on.

Our efforts raised TWC2's profile tremendously.

In November 2020 was a first – where we worked with the Straits Times to do a video documentary on recruitment costs and kickbacks. This was aired in February 2021.

In 2020, TWC2 did not have any consultation meeting with the Ministry of Manpower where we could freely raise issues. What we had instead were two briefing events in July and December 2020 where TWC2 and other NGOs were informed what MOM's plans were regarding management of Covid-19 risks in dorms and on rest days. We were also invited to an MOM appreciation event in October 2020; it was mostly ceremonial.

In February 2020, TWC2, along with other NGOs, were invited to a free-flowing dialogue with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as an opening step in the Universal Periodic Review Process. We were given plenty of talking time and raised the top issues concerning migrant workers (recruitment, wage theft, etc) and foreign fishermen (possible trafficking) whose trawlers dock in Singapore.

Beginning from the fourth quarter of 2020, just as the busiest part of engagement with the media was tailing off, several international consultations came onto the

agenda. TWC2 participated in several webinars where international bodies were seeking input from civil society for the review of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM).

The lead-up to the February 2021 session of the Global Forum for Migration and Development (GFMD) hosted by Abu Dhabi also meant a number of consultations in which we participated.

Singapore will come up for its third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in May 2021. In October 2020, TWC2 submitted a shadow report jointly with the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the Geneva offices of the United Nations. The submission was only the opening act. It was followed by several rounds of webinars with diplomatic missions in Singapore, and also with the organisers in Geneva.

Part 2 – DIRECT SERVICES

Direct Services allow us to attend to the immediate, tangible needs of destitute migrant workers while supporting advocacy to address the deeper issues.

2.1 – Casework Support and Helpline

On April 21 2020, all foreign worker dormitories were put on full lockdown. With workers unable to leave their dormitories, our usual intake source at The Cuff Road Project saw the number of workers seeking help there plummet dramatically. Additionally, regular volunteers were also unable to leave their homes, or fearful of exposure to the virus, leaving all case work for the year largely handled by the two full-time social workers.

Adapting to the evolving situation, the case work team moved its operations online, initially starting with a single WhatsApp hotline number manned by just one social worker holding the duty phone. Towards the end of July, the TWC2 team migrated to a full-fledged online call-centre solution, manned with the help of volunteers but with complex cases referred to the social workers. The call centre solution also referred to as TRINIDAD (Time-Responsive Integration for Information Dissemination and Action Delegation), had become our complete omni-channel inbox and call centre set up to monitor cases that would come in via Facebook, WhatsApp, and the responses of the casework team.

There were 1,007 new registration of workers in 2020, of which 457 cases were taken up for case work, which involved consultation, follow-up, and case management. This figure, unlike previous years, is almost fully attributable to the full-time Social Work team.

Case handling stats in 2019 and 2020

Type of problem	New problems registered	New problems registered	Cases handled	Cases handled
	2019	2020	2019	2020
Injury at work	988	323	269	50
Salary claim	835	379	308	214

Investigation	78	51	31	10
Recruitment scam	19	7	15	4
Premature termination	23	19	17	6
Injury outside work	14	6	12	2
Illness	3	9	3	3
Work pass revoked by MOM	1	11	1	5
Kickbacks	6	7	5	11
Other classifications	102	195	55	152
Total	2,069	1,007	716	457
Nationality	2019	2020	2019	2020
Bangladesh	1,698	762	595	317
China	15	23	13	22
India	311	199	88	103
Indonesia	3	6	1	5
Malaysia	10	9	8	8
Myanmar	0	1	0	0
Philippines	1	2	1	1
Sri Lanka	25	4	6	0
Other	6	1	4	1
Total	2,069	1,007	716	457
Gender	2019	2020	2019	2020
Male	2,054	984	702	439
Female	15	23	14	18
Total	2,069	1,007	716	457

Observations and notes

Work Injury Cases

One reason for the dramatic fall in work injury cases could be explained by how the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) had expedited the cases of workers who did not need to be in Singapore to be swiftly repatriated.

Salary Cases

The number of salary related cases stayed high, as workers disputed the salary they ought to be receiving after MOM made confusing recommendations on wage support in the form of levy rebates.

Other Cases

Among the “other” cases, over 100 were relating to repatriation and change of employer. These came about during the lockdown, when many workers fearful of contracting the virus wanted to go home, and after the lockdown, when workers who wanted to join a new company with higher pay were confused by transfer regulations.

Nationalities

A notable rise was seen in the number of cases handled involving Chinese and Indian workers.

Increase in female migrant worker assisted cases

The contributions from Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) helped TWC2 to assist 3 cases, all of which involved clients who encountered difficulty getting their employers to fulfil their responsibility of paying for repatriation costs.

Metrics to evaluate our ticketing and handling of cases

Until movement restrictions are lifted entirely, our online case work system (TRINIDAD) is now the primary intake source and will likely remain a significant contributor in this new normal.

Online case work statistics (July to December 2020)

New tickets	3,437
Closed tickets	2,793

Resolution time	1 to 4+ days
First response	1 to 30 minutes

New tickets: Indicate every single message or call that has come in via Facebook, WhatsApp or telephone. All messages are responded to. While not every message requires follow-up by the social workers, the majority of messages require some level of response. This could be simple advice that is easy enough for the online volunteers to help dispense under the guidance of the social workers.

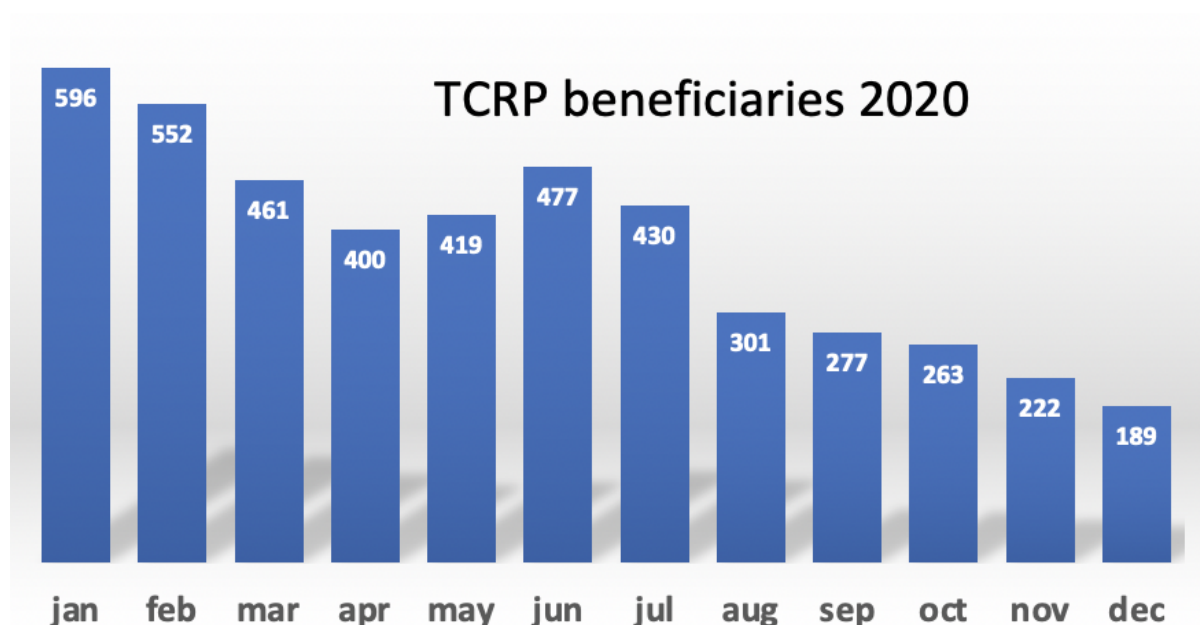
Closed Tickets and Resolution Time: Tickets are closed once the team believes the issues have been resolved and will require no further response from either party. The majority of tickets are closed after at least 1 day.

First Response The first response time of between 1 and 30-minutes shows that there is minimal waiting involved before a human operator (social worker or volunteer from the case work team) responds to the messages. An automatic reply is generated outside of manned hours.

While the official case work figures for 2020 look low in comparison to 2019, the large numbers seen online within a span of 6 months show that the case work team has been kept very busy with digital engagement, ensuring TWC2 retains its mindshare among low-wage migrant workers needing assistance.

2.2 The Cuff Road Project (TCRP)

Workers with work injury claims and salary complaints can no longer access TWC2's free meal program, TCRP, as easily as they once did. The meal program experienced a sharp reduction in participants since lockdown in April 2020. Where previously workers were able to find housing in private lodgings or leave dormitories to seek assistance in-person from TWC2 at the free meal program, they no longer are. Those workers whose work permits are cancelled due to work injury claims and salary complaints are penalized for leaving their dormitories except for certain specific reasons, and those who had been staying in areas near Little India have been forced to move to worker dormitories far from central areas.



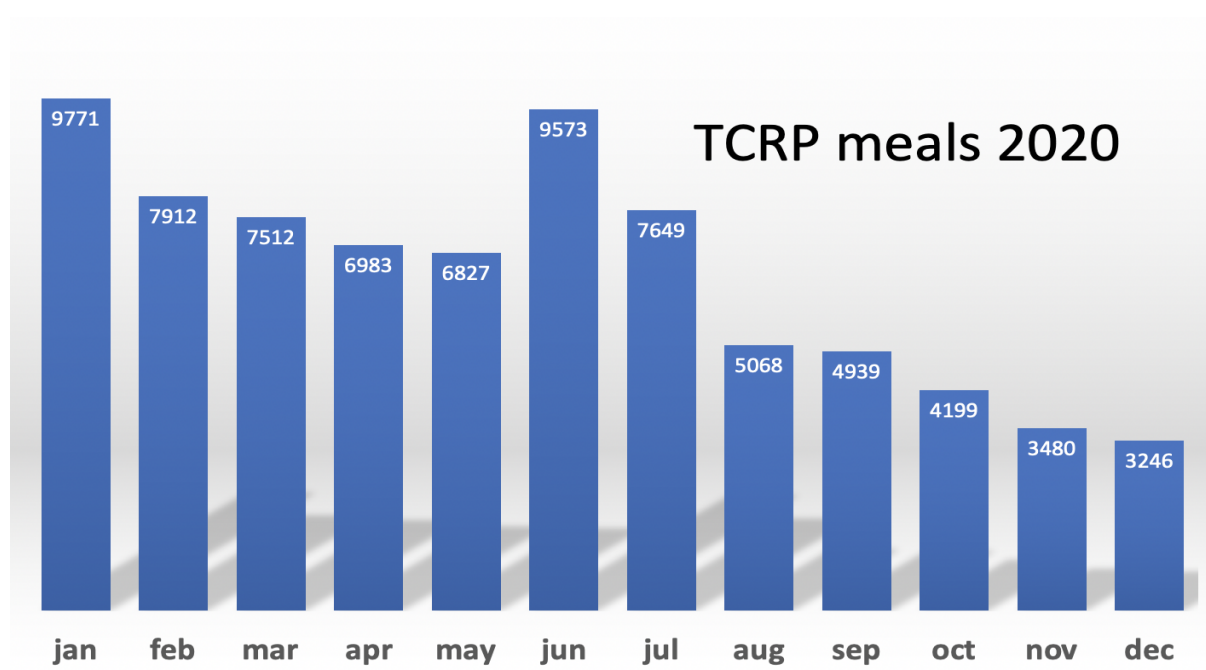
After lockdown in April 2020, TCRP was able to assist a group of people in addition to the usual beneficiaries: those who were prepared to return to their home country but unable to do so because of cancelled flights and rapidly changing regulations on personal movement, airline travel and Covid status monitoring. This included students, workers and visitors caught in transit, people who would normally have no reason to access free meals and assistance with flight details.

At the same time, the number of workers with ongoing claims dropped at TCRP, volunteers for this program soared due to media attention focused on migrant worker Covid rates and dormitories. TWC2 received a flood of people willing to volunteer and a mountain of donations to meet immediate needs. TCRP was forced to suspend the program for a short while during lockdown, but quickly managed to work with one of the restaurants, Isthana, to ensure that our regular beneficiaries were still able to access meals even when our volunteers were unable to attend. Once we received approval to continue with regular services, we followed recommended precautions of mask-wearing, hand sanitizers and distancing, all under the watchful eyes of the roving distancing ambassadors.

The numbers of meals and of individuals in the charts show similarly declining numbers, with a prominent hump in the middle. Thanks to excess donations during the early months of Covid-19, we were able to offer rent relief of \$300 to each TCRP participant in May and June. That cash handout drew more men from further away to join the meal program. We offered this amount to those who had registered with

the program within the first two weeks of the month. As many expected that the cash for rent relief would continue in July, the number of beneficiaries in July remained high in that month as well.

The free meal program continues as before, but it is no longer the main avenue for workers to reach TWC2. Our hotline and digital platforms have taken over as more people are contacting us and finding assistance online. However, as freedom of movement is essential for mental and physical health, especially since this vulnerable population is unable to work and almost entirely confined to dormitories, we would hope for greater liberalization of the present restrictions of movement for these and all migrant workers.



2.3 Wednesday Clinic

The goal at Wednesday Clinic (WDC) is to help level the playing field for migrant workers by increasing their access to justice, so that they can participate meaningfully in legal processes and procedures and counter the challenging complexity and cost of the legal system.

WDC helps workers navigate the injury and salary claims system by providing legal and non-legal resources. Partnering with other teams in TWC2, we advocate

positive change in the development of law and policy affecting low-wage migrant workers. Occasionally, we assist workers facing criminal charges.

Interpretation of Covid-19 Salary and Employment Advisories

During and after the Covid-19 Circuit Breaker, WDC partnered with social workers and volunteer caseworkers operating a TWC2 Hotline that provided assistance to migrant workers seeking to understand the complex and evolving work advisories and salary guidelines from the Singapore Government.

Critical issues centred around interpretation of entitlement to quarantine allowances for workers, foreign worker levy rebates and salaries payable, avenues for redress in instances of non- and short-payment, transfer of employers, and repatriation. Bengali, Tamil, and Mandarin interpretations and translations of key advisories were provided.

Caseload

In 2020, WDC assisted 14 legal cases involving migrant workers in various areas pertaining to salary claims, work injury claims, criminal charges, and charges under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act and Infectious Diseases Act. Some cases were concluded and others are pending.

Collaboration with Lawyers

Pro bono and low bono lawyers from a pool of over 25 law firms provided ad hoc advice or helped take cases to court. They offered migrant workers legal services free of charge or at low charges. LawLink volunteers from Linklaters, Credit Suisse, UBS and Microsoft continued to support us with professional expertise and donations. We remain ever grateful.

2.4 Roof and Lifeline

Due to the high cost of housing in Singapore, it is beyond our means to shelter more than a handful of the most needy clients. In any case, employers are required by law to provide housing for their foreign employees until repatriation. We step in only under extraordinary circumstances, e.g. serious injury or major surgery that

makes it difficult for them to use employer accommodation. It is not our policy to house salary claimants.

During 2020, there was a widespread economic disruption, causing many workers to lose their income stream. Paying rent became a challenge, and workers had to face the fear of landlords threatening to evict them. Two rounds of emergency rentals were handed out over the months of May and June. TWC2 had given \$300 each to applicants for their rent³.

2.5 Outreach

Outreach is aimed at informing the wider migrant-worker community of our mission. Our practice of leading in person monthly visits around key areas in Singapore were affected due to Covid-19. It was no longer possible to reach out to workers who had become increasingly inaccessible having moved to Purpose Built Dormitories.

Given the majority of our clientele being Bangladeshi and Indian, and that 90% of this population being avid users on social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) for their primary source of news, it seemed a natural fit to reach out to them online. TWC2 then moved its outreach to go digital, and used social media to reach them to provide trusted news and information in their language. This method also allowed us to circumvent restrictions such as distance and security checks at the dorms.

In July 2020, TWC2 started Project AWESOME (Amplified Workers Engagement through Social Media), where Facebook pages in Bengali and Tamil were created to reach out to Bangladeshi and Indian workers respectively. The workers in turn use it to consult with TWC2 and hence the cases mentioned under Casework Support and Helpline.

Moving into 2021, we would grow our digital outreach further to reach more workers and explore means to engage with workers in person again.

2.6 Covid19 Specific Direct-Services:

As the pandemic restrictions intensified
As the pandemic restrictions intensified

³<http://twc2.org.sg/2020/05/13/nearly-300-men-at-risk-of-eviction-and-homelessness-get-rent-money-from-twc2/>

As the pandemic restrictions intensified, TWC2 volunteers manning our helpline were getting a large number of distressed messages from workers scattered round Singapore. Besides asking for advice on work issues, some requests were for food, medicine and other daily provisions. As a quick response to the needs, TWC2 set up these projects:

Phone Top-ups

TWC2 led an initiative and provided a \$10 phone top-up per registered worker delivered remotely with the help of telephone companies or physical SIM cards delivered by volunteers. A fundraising campaign on giving.sg targeting \$300,000 has raised \$270,000. Other sources pledged funding. Over two rounds in April and May, TWC2 had provided top-ups for more than 90,000 phone accounts costing close to \$1 million⁴⁵.

Project Roof Relief

Many workers lost their income stream during the Circuit Breaker. Paying rent became a challenge. Landlords threatened eviction. Workers were frantic to keep a roof above their head so as not to fall foul of the law. As an emergency extension to its existing Project Roof programme that provides shelter to a number of injured workers, TWC2 handed out \$300 to workers who registered for relief. Two rounds of relief were handed out over the months of May and June. Total spent was \$185,000⁶.

Small Essential Needs (SEN)⁷

SEN was a short-term mission started in May 2020 to alleviate the impact of Covid-19 governmental lockdown measures on migrant workers. SEN aimed to send essential items to workers and provide comfort⁸. In doing so, they simultaneously gathered information ‘on the ground’ that would aid TWC2’s wider efforts at advocacy.

Our delivery destinations :

- Temporary Accommodations: Cruise ships, Housing Development Blocks, Old Schools etc.

⁴ <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/04/22/twc2-phone-top-up-campaign-spent-over-280000-so-far-to-help-28000-workers/>

⁵ <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/05/27/1-million-spent-helping-over-90000-migrant-workers-remain-connected-with-their-families/>

⁶ <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/05/13/nearly-300-men-at-risk-of-eviction-and-homelessness-get-rent-money-from-twc2/>

⁷ <http://twc2.org.sg/2021/01/11/through-deliveries-a-window-into-long-existing-injustice-and-inequality/>

⁸ <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/05/19/covid-19-theses-from-the-ground-part-3/>

- Quarantine Facility and Isolation: Hotel Rooms etc.
- Community Isolation Facilities: Changi Exhibition centre etc.
- Factory Converted Dormitories
- Purpose Built Dormitories

Items donated: Snacks, drinks, toiletries, other items (mobile phones, phone top-ups, over-the-counter medication, medical devices masks, fan, clothes, blankets etc.

The Covid-19 crisis exposed long-standing problems faced by migrant workers such as low wages, lack of bargaining power, and the marginalisation of the migrant worker community. Many migrant workers have been in an extended period of lock-down in dormitories, solely dependent on their employer or dorm operator for meals and any supplies⁹. Workers are unable to leave the dorm or isolation facility to purchase items for themselves even if they have resumed work. Online orders are hampered by men's lack of credit cards or delivery accessibility of dorms. Many workers are scared of jeopardising their jobs by asking their employers for help.

As we neared the end of SEN in November 2020, some men had begun working again. That said, the restrictions on their personal freedom and mobility persisted. Many men were still solely dependent on their employer or dorm operator for meals and any supplies and were unable to leave the dorm or isolation facility to purchase items for themselves.

2.7 Care Fund Medical

TWC2 spent over \$47,000 on medical needs for a large number of workers in 2020. Most of these were small amounts of less than \$300 for such things as medical consultation, dental services and medication. A few were for surgeries and costly medical tests that resulted in over \$5,000 as in the three examples below.

Abdul (\$24,717.56)

Apr, May, Jun 2020

Abdul required surgery for kidney stones in both kidneys. The medical treatment had to be done before his salary claim was concluded but lockdown presented new

⁹ <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/07/13/water-water-every-where-but-three-cups-a-day-to-drink/>

problems. Abdul began his treatment soon after the lockdown in April 2020 when all non-essential medical treatment was being postponed. Even scheduling appointments for treatment was difficult as hospitals were struggling to cope with new measures to contain Covid-19. When we finally were able to schedule a date for the surgery, the salary issue was resolved and the MOM then insisted that he be repatriated. The doctor was sympathetic and was willing to liaise with the Ministry to plead for an extension of his special pass to enable him to undergo the necessary surgery before being repatriated. Especially because the outcome of the salary complaint was suboptimal, we felt it was important that he receive the operation before departing Singapore as we could provide funding.

Robel (\$5,007.94)

Nov, Dec 2020

Robel also presented with a kidney problem, in his case a swollen kidney with an uncertain cause. He required a temporary stent in the ureter to allow urine to flow and reduce pressure in the kidney. Robel, like Abdul, was also on a special pass, but his was for work injury compensation. His treatment continued into early 2021 with several more procedures because he continued to experience discomfort even after the stent was removed.

Azizul (\$6,257.38)

Dec 2020

Azizul came to our attention when the employer contacted us requesting assistance with payment for his medical treatment. He was still working at the time, but was in poor health due to badly managed diabetes and one failed kidney. The employer initially was willing to make use of their insurance to cover some of the cost, but had a change of heart when they realised how difficult the treatment might be. Although TWC2 had provided a Letter of Guarantee for tests and possible removal of the failed kidney, neither the MOM nor the employer would agree to allowing him to remain in Singapore long enough after his work permit was cancelled. Unfortunately he was repatriated one month before the removal of the kidney was scheduled to take place and did not have the means to arrange that procedure in Bangladesh.

2.8 POCRA (Post-Covid19 Relief Aid)

The worst of the health crisis may have passed towards the end of the year but the disruptions have led to unpaid salary, loss of job, etc. A retrenched and repatriated worker can end up going home with a loss of a few thousand dollars.

TWC2 set aside funds to meet the need for such financial assistance. However the numbers coming forward have not been large. TWC2 will close POCRA and place future applicants under its permanent CareFund project.

2.9 Filipino Family Network and Indonesian Family Network

FFN and IFN are independent support groups of Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers affiliated to TWC2, many of whom are also our members. We support them by providing the space and some funding for their activities. They in turn contribute to our work in many areas, including public and media engagement, research, outreach and case counselling.

In 2020, the FFN took part in various forums and discussions such as:

- How the use of mobile phone and the impact of social media affect the lives of domestic workers;
- Suicidal cases among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and how to spread awareness and reach out to those in distress;
- Knowing their rights and avenues for legal advice from Justice without Borders especially if they have been violated by employers

They also participated in a post-graduate student's research project on stress and depression of domestic workers in Singapore through Covid-19, while also learning activities to support themselves during this tough period.

Aside from these deep discussions, the FFN community also held other regular social meetings to celebrate International Migrants Day and Christmas too.

Part 3 – ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

Organisational support through Human Resource, Heartbeat, Fund-Raising, and IT Support is essential for us to pursue our core activities.

3.1 Human Resource

The 2020 pandemic posed these challenges for TWC2's work: Quantum and Mode.

Quantum: Work increased exponentially in some areas and dropped in others. For example a spike in donations required receipts to be issued in the tens of thousands, a task that can no longer be done manually and solely by the Accounts Officer. Restrictions on physical gathering made it much harder for workers to come in person to seek help. Therefore, the number of cases dropped.

Mode: Social distancing regulations made it necessary to migrate a significant segment of TWC2 work online.

TWC2's responses included:

- Exco member Yew Kong Leong devised an app that auto-generates and dispatches the huge number of pdf receipts needed for the big spike in donations
- Casework and Outreach pivot to online channels (please refer to sections 2.1 and 2.5 of this report)
- When the Singapore government imposed a Circuit Breaker countrywide on 7th April, staff and volunteers had to work from home (WFH). A daily Zoom conference maintained essential communications among staff and key Exco members. With the easing of the Circuit Breaker on 2nd June, staff members reported for work according to a weekly roster (at least one day/week) or when necessary. WFH remains the prevailing mode of operation in this hybrid model

The pandemic situation resulted in much greater use of social media making it necessary to have somebody handle these duties full-time. TWC2 advertised a position – Communications Specialist – in September and recruited Eliza Thomas who was only able to report for work in January 2021.

The launching of two Facebook pages – TWC2 Bangla and TWC2 Tamil - increased the need to translate content, both textual and oral. Apart from drawing on our

multicultural volunteers, TWC2 hired Nobinur – an ex-TWC2 client who has since returned to Bangladesh – to handle the heavy traffic on TWC2 Bangla.

Heightened interest in foreign workers' welfare led to more people signing up for Heartbeat to be volunteers. As physical contact was restricted, it was a challenge to absorb the increased numbers.

A fraternity of foreign workers helped TWC2 to reach out to those confined in their dorms. This group calls itself the Organization of Foreign Workers in Singapore (OFWS) and have been co-opted as “ambassadors” for TWC2.

The usual internship that TWC2 offered to students suffered a setback. For all of 2020, TWC2 had only one intern who did his stint before the pandemic hit Singapore.

The two members of the Audit Committee – Sandip Talukdar and Antony Cherian – finished their term of service and were replaced by Gurbinder Singh and Varun Iyer Mani. Restrictions on holding mass gatherings led to TWC2 postponing its April AGM to September. That was when the new Audit Committee formally took over.

3.2 Heartbeat - Volunteer Recruitment

Having a small staff, TWC2 continues to rely on teams of volunteers, and Heartbeat is our main volunteer recruitment point.

From February 2020 onwards, we moved all our Heartbeat sessions online. It was heartening to see members of the public show an interest in what TWC2 was doing and how they could help the cause. From an average of 20-30 people at our in-person Heartbeat sessions, we saw our online invitations go up to 70-100 people during some months.

While we saw a spike of interested volunteers who were keen in helping out, we had faced a low demand of volunteers as most of our projects had either stopped, or had needed time to adapt to the changing restrictions.

Heartbeat sessions evolved into more general educational sessions on what TWC2 does, explaining what was happening on the ground, and also acting as a quick guide to the surge of interpreters who needed to get up to speed before assisting with the helpline.

3.3 Fundraising

Donations for 2020 totalled \$4,152,190. Of these \$634,000 came from grant applications to regular donors. TWC2 initiated a giving.sg campaign to raise funds for its Covid19 Phone Top-up project that collected \$277,124. The balance of \$3,241,067 (78%) came from donations or fundraising campaigns that TWC2 did not have to initiate. This underlines the importance of TWC2 maintaining its reputation as an organization worthy of public support. A word of caution: this rush of charity and goodwill for TWC2 was probably enhanced by the pandemic and the plight of the foreign worker community.

Indeed the pandemic saw unprecedented needs in kind and scale from the foreign worker community. They required TWC2 to set up immediate projects to meet the demands (see Section 2.6 Covid19-Specific Direct Services of this report). These projects raised the expenditure for 2020 to \$2,010,975 compared to \$885,779 the year before.

TWC2 agreed to crowdsource money for two Indian workers who after recovering from Covid19 infection were incapacitated months later by a sudden illness. They could no longer earn a living and provide for their families. The campaign on Give.Asia launched on 27 November raised the target amount of \$60,000 to be split equally between the two beneficiaries. NB: heartrending hardship cases like this will continue to seek our assistance and TWC2 should resist the urge to oblige everytime. In this instance, we agreed because it was a request from a group of NCID (National Centre for Infectious Diseases) doctors who treated the two men and were very concerned that otherwise healthy young workers could suddenly fall critically ill months after recovering from their Covid19 infection. The campaign just about met its targeted amount. Point to note: There is a limit to which TWC2's constituency can be tapped for donations to our causes. We should be careful not to exhaust the generosity.

The new normal of the pandemic demonstrates how the donation ecology has changed. Unprecedented amounts came in via on-line donation portals, e.g., Giving.Sg \$1,103,390; Give.Asia \$322,667, Benevity \$206,393, YourCause \$16,682 and PayPal \$73,170. More effort should be made to sustain the interest of these donors in giving to TWC2.

For the year of 2020, TWC2 had a surplus of \$2,233,022. This plus our reserves mean we start 2021 with some \$4 million in the bank.

With the worst of the pandemic seemingly over, fundraising to service emergency needs is no longer a pressing issue. But going into 2021, the organization will have a higher salary bill because of pay increments awarded in 2020 and the addition of a Communication Specialist to its staff. A few key projects – TCRP, Project Roof and FareGo – have experienced a significant drop in numbers and will not need so much. At the same time, working online has expanded outreach and with that, more people seeking assistance from TWC2. It is tempting just to spend the healthy reserves and not bother with fundraising but this will be unwise. Fundraising for 2021 will continue in order to maintain the reserves at a healthy level of between two and three years of operational expenditure.

3.4 IT Support

Carried over from 2019 was the redevelopment of our case management system (Camans v2). With the onset of Covid-19 and the massive changes in case-handling, we felt it wiser to suspend development for a little while in order to better understand if the system requirements would need to be modified to cater to a different future.

Indeed, there will be some differences, but not so many as to render the existing technical specifications moot. We re-started work on the project around October 2020 when we were confident enough about the modifications we would need. Soon after however, in December 2020, the project manager on the vendor side resigned and the project went into limbo again while the vendor looked to hire a replacement. This hiatus lasted rather longer than we expected and the project is being revived only in March 2021.

One major change to case-handling came from the need to engage with workers through electronic platforms in lieu of face-to-face meetings. Quarantines and post-quarantine movement restrictions invalidated the previous reliance on personal contact. Simple things like getting a PDPA consent form signed, needed process redesign when manual signatures could not be obtained anymore.

Work-from-home requirements also meant that even internal communications had to be modified. Much of the middle of 2020 was spent setting up more sophisticated WhatsApp, Trengo and Slack platforms (and integrating them whenever necessary). From almost nothing, our subscription costs became a significant recurring expenditure – but we have to accept this as our new normal.

3.5 Executive Committee

The TWC2 Executive Committee (See listing on page 1) meets in alternate months during the year.

In 2020, the Exco held 8 meetings altogether. While we managed to have our first few meetings in early 2020 in-person at our office, we quickly transitioned to fully virtual meetings April onwards. Out of these 8 meetings, 2 were Extra Exco meetings that were in February and July. All our meetings were well-attended especially since we had the majority of meetings online.

At the end of September 2020, Choo Wai Hong tendered her resignation from the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee was down to eight members for a couple of months. This coming Annual General Meeting will be a new election of Exco members.

Contributors

Russell Heng, Alex Au, Christine Pelly, Debbie Fordyce, Beverly Shaddick, Rebecca Liu, Ethan Guo, Mizue Sauco, Sharon Tan, FFN, John Gee