

***The Strengths model: Enabling clients to
become champions of their own lives***

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Healthy Start Programme

Beyond Social Services ©

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1. Introduction

This paper advocates the effectiveness of Strengths Model for casework management and in empowering our clients to achieve a better quality of life and move towards attaining their goals and dreams. You will observe that some steps or actions planned to encourage and empower our client is done through simple tasks. From an observer's point of view it may seem trivial but each task or action conquered is a step forward to a brighter future. This paper will show that the local community plays an important role in a client's life. We are tapping into a pre-existing network on the ground. This network generates positive social capital which encompasses mutual trust, community spirit, racial cohesion and collaborative action in the community.

The Strengths Models challenges me as a community worker to move away from a traditional problem solving practice and to be focused on empowering my client to be a Champion of her own life. Community workers may struggle to adopt this approach as it challenges them to unlearn old habits and embrace new methods. Change is the only constant thing in life and learning is also another constant in life. We will continue to learn that the face of society is changing and we will need to move with creative models that allow us to be more effective as community workers. As we in Singapore move towards building a more cohesive and inclusive society, positive social capital will be important to ensuring that we remain a peaceful country in the midst of strife and war of our times.

Community Workers may argue that Strengths Model approach with clients is short-lived as they are needy when they approach you and may do whatever it takes. I believe that when man is challenged to look within himself, much like having a deeper revelation of himself - he would experience change within and never be the same again. This change can only have a multiplication effect on himself, family and society as a whole.

Many of my families have been stuck in a cycle of poverty for most of their lives. Their parents were unable to break free as education and awareness of opportunities were lacking. They did not approach the “government” for help and preferred to rely on themselves to resolve their problems. With the current generation, awareness of social services and outreach on our part has opened more opportunities for our clients and their children.

2 **Strengths Model in Social Work Practice**

2.1 **Strengths Model – an effective tool for Community Workers**

As community workers, it’s easy for us to become “a director” in the lives of our families. We direct / instruct them to the path that we perceive to be in the best interest of the family. But I do question - Are these families really in sync with my plans for them? They are the “directors” of their own lives and they would know how best to approach a problem which is unique to their lives.

The strengths model encourages community workers to discover the human potential and resources of their clients. In using their unique strengths and resources, we are able to implement more effective action plans. As part of case management, we are able to charter their progress in a more measurable manner through collaborative action plans which were derived from shared goals.

The strengths approach not only enables our clients to discover the untapped resources within themselves, but it goes a long way in developing a collaborative and trusting working relationship between client, community worker and the community resources.

The principles of Strengths Model are as follows:

- a) **To focus on the clients strengths, interests, abilities and capabilities, not upon their deficits, weaknesses or problems.**
This can be a life changing action especially when a client comes from abusive background. He tends to be more focused on his weakness than his strengths and abilities.
- b) **Clients have the capacity to learn, grow and change.**
Change is the one thing that's constant in life and learning is also a life-long process. When we stop learning, we stop growing to our full potential.
- c) **The relationship between client and Community Worker is built on trust and collaboration - enabling client and Community Worker to journey in the same direction with shared goals.**
- d) **The client is viewed as the director of his family life.**
We also engaged the family members to participate in the process as they can provide invaluable input to any action plans.
- e) **The community is viewed as a source of potential resources in enabling the client to be independent.**
No man is an island that he stands alone. Community that is engaged with its own people is one that is more compassionate and resilient in times of crisis.

Unlike traditional approaches which tend to focus on a client's needs, problems and weaknesses, the strengths model is concerned with helping clients clarify their dreams, define their goals and work towards an achievable level of self actualization. A Community Worker can help by collaborating with the person to awaken dreams and aspirations and use knowledge of past and current individual strengths as well as community strengths and resources to assist them in taking steps toward self achievement. With reference to Maslow's Hierarchy, we can observe that many of our clients struggle with their

Physiological and Safety needs i.e. basic needs of food, shelter, employment. Living at the bottom 4% of our society, life often appears bleak with no end to their cycle of poverty.

To discover our client's strengths, dreams & aspirations, resources and networks, a Community Worker can also use an Eco Map, Genogram and Strength Check. The Eco Map is an essential strengths/resource finder. An Eco Map enables the client and Community worker to have a "big picture" view of his strengths, informal and formal social networks. The Eco-Map can be done on a large sheet by the client where he indicates all resources, people and organizations involved in his life. In doing the Eco Map, it expands his horizon to see the many people/resources who are involved in his life. Without a broaden perspective, a client who is overwhelmed by many issues/problems may have a narrow perspective of his social support networks. He is only focused on what he lacks and his limitations. It does not help that society is often focused on a man's deficits and limitations. Example - A client who was recently released from prison found it difficult to find work. Though the Government is investing into educating the society about the Yellow Ribbon project, the stigma and attitude towards ex-offenders is only slowly changing. It's an uphill task for us as community workers when we advocate for employment on behalf of our clients. Employers are still reluctant and jobs are a few for ex-offenders and some return to their old way of life.

"I praise you, so wonderfully you made me; wonderful are your works!" (Psalm 139:4). Created in the image and likeness of God, He saw us as good. God saw us as good yet Man in his wounded-ness has often allowed his own negative experiences in life through action or words to influence his perception of people. Instead of words of praise and encouragement, the focus has been on man's weakness

and misfortunes. I believe that if man is able to see himself as good, he would definitely be able to move forward in the path of self-actualization.

2.1.1 **Case Study**

With the cases I had encountered through the Healthy Start Programme, I have observed families whose lives are so difficult that they cannot imagine things being different and cannot see anything of value in their present circumstances. Their immediate circle of assistance in the community is often narrowed down to their siblings or relatives who may be unable to help them as their own home situations are no different. Appended is a case study on my client Mdm A to highlight strength model as a tool in case management.

i) **Problem Overview of the Case**

Mdm A is a single mother with a 2 year old child. She is estranged from her immediate family members and is struggling to raise her child on her own without full-time employment or accommodation. She was previously married and has three children from the said marriage. After her divorce, her ex-husband was awarded custody of her three children. Since her divorce, she had cohabitated with Mr Z and they had two children born from the said relationship. The 1st child was given away for adoption at birth and the 2nd child remained with Mdm A.

The case was referred to Beyond Social Services by the Medical Social Worker to assist the mother as she was unemployed and unable to provide for her child's basic needs. The child has been ill and hospitalized for asthma on many occasions in the year. As he

was hospitalized once again after an asthma attack, the Medical Social Worker was concerned for his health and safety.

Mdm A is homeless as her flat was repossessed by the Bank due to her defaulting payment of mortgage and she has been staying in a tent at East Coast Beach with her child. As the conditions by the beach are unsuitable for a young child, the child's asthma condition worsened and was admitted into KK Children's Hospital. At the hospital, the Medical Social Worker made some initial assessments and decided to make a formal referral to MCYS Child Protection and Welfare Unit. A Child Protection and Welfare Officer was assigned and investigations were carried by MCYS. As the client was unemployed and without fixed accommodations, the Child Protection and Welfare Officer recommended that foster care for the next 6 months be considered for the child. The Child Protection and Welfare Officer also contacted the Beyond Social Services - Healthy Start Programme (HSP) Department for assistance under the MCYS Healthy Start Programme. (*Healthy Start Programme helps children from disadvantaged household where there is risk of the child not having access to early childhood education as parents are unable to afford educational expenses.*)

I arranged to meet up with MCYS Child Protection and Welfare Officer to have a case discussion. Present at the case discussion was the MCYS Officer, Medical Social Worker and myself. During the discussions, it was assessed by Child Protection and Welfare Officer that mother's long term unemployment and lack of accommodation is a major concern as it puts the child at risk. The Medical Social Worker highlighted that the child is at risk as his medical condition would worsen if his mother continues to live by the beach and not have his basic needs of food and shelter met. A

medical report was submitted by the Medical Social Worker which indicated child had asthmatic bronchitis. Due to child's frequent hospitalizations and lack of accommodation, Child Protection and Welfare Officer preferred the child to be placed in temporary foster care for the next 6 months. Child Protection and Welfare Officer also expressed concerns about mother's quality of care or neglect to provide proper care for her child.

After listening to their feedback, I appealed on Mdm A's behalf to Child Protection and Welfare Officer that she can be assisted through the Healthy Start Programme. The child could be placed in a childcare environment while she searched for employment and that this would ensure child is in a safe and nurturing environment during the day. The childcare centre operates from 7am – 7pm and child will receive proper guidance, education and meals. In the meantime, mother and child could stay in a temporary women's shelter. This is just one possibility and I would have to explore further with Mdm A.

Under the Healthy Start Programme, I would be able to monitor the child's development and assist the mother in her search for employment and accommodations. The mother would also benefit from attending parenting skills workshops. The parenting workshops would allow her to learn parenting skills to better manage her child's behavior in his growing years. She will also attend Attitude, Skills & Knowledge workshops that cover topics like Early Childhood illnesses, Know Your Medicine, Diet and Nutrition which would enlighten her to better understand her son's condition.

After further discussions, Child Protection and Welfare Officer agreed to consider that mother continues to be the main care-giver provided the following requirements were adhered to:

1. Mother needs to find either permanent or temporary accommodations for herself & child and move out of the beach.
2. Mother to find employment (full-time or part-time) to enable her to provide for child basic needs.
3. To either place child in childcare or in care of babysitter to ensure child is in safe environment.

It was also decided that we would work together ie Beyond, KKH Medical Social Worker and MCYS Child Protection & Welfare Officer - each having different roles and tapping on our area of expertise to assist Mdm A.

Roles of the various organizations involved:

a) Infant and Early Childhood Services – HSP Worker

- To provide assistance under Healthy Start Programme. To secure placement for child in a childcare centre that is close to her accommodations.
- To apply for subsidies from MCYS and Community Development Council.
- To help mother link up with Community Development Council for job placement under the Work Support Scheme.
- To appeal to Housing Development Board (Rental) for a rental unit.

- To refer her for counseling sessions at the nearest Family Service Centre.
- To update MCYS Child Protection & Welfare Officer on mother's status.

b) Medical Social Worker – Kandang Kerbau Children & Women's Hospital

- To assist with applying for subsidies under Medifund so that child continues to get free medication.
- To work out a plan with mother to pay hospital bills by installment plan.
- To inform me and MCYS Child Protection & Welfare Officer if child is admitted into hospital again.
- Provide a month's supply of milk formula and diapers for child to help mother tie over this difficult period of unemployment.

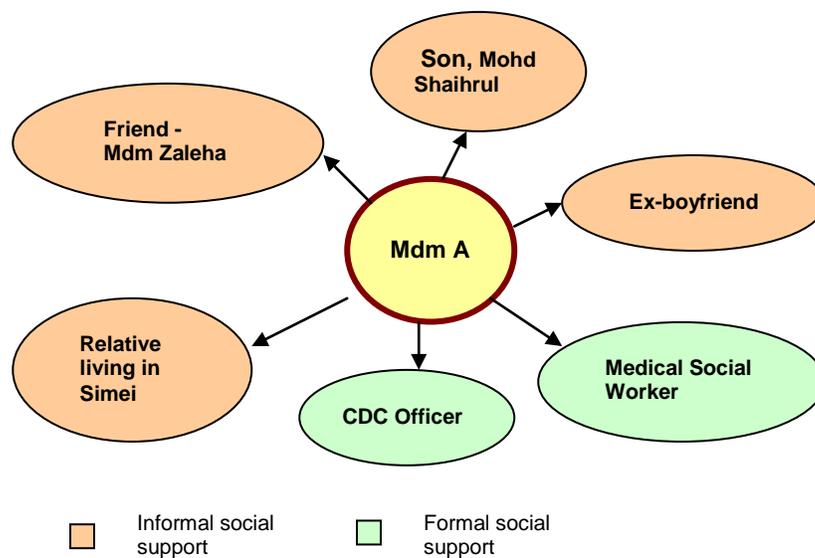
c) MCYS Child Protection & Welfare Officer

- To call for a case discussion after one month and review case status.
- To look at placing mother and child in a shelter if she does not find accommodation within a week.
- To visit Mdm A and child once they have found a place to rent. This is to ensure that accommodations are suitable for the child.

ii) **Assessment using Strengths Model & Eco Map**

To assist with the initial assessment to identify the client's will and goals, I used the Eco Map to explore her immediate social support network/resources:

Mdm A's 1st Eco Map

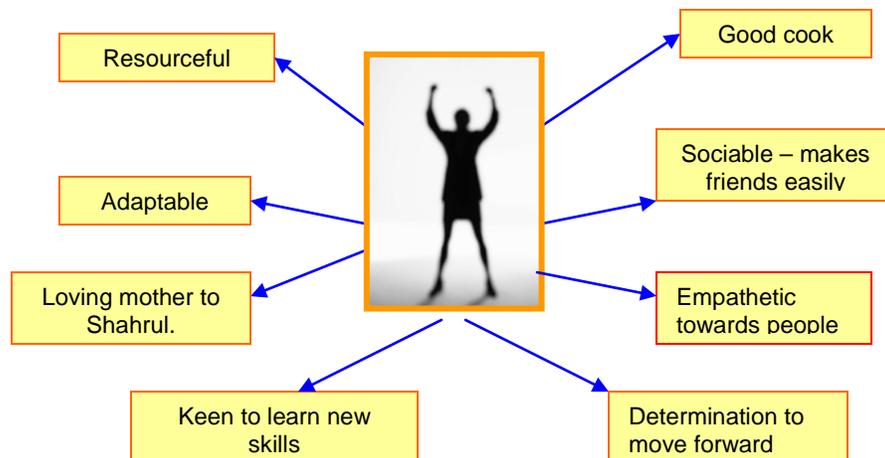


Through Mdm A's Eco-Map, I can see the kind of impact both her formal and informal social networks have on her life. I discovered that though her close friend, Mdm Zaleha is unable to support her financially (as she is a mother of 7 children), her close friendship is important to Mdm A. Mdm Zaleha is emotionally supportive towards her and is able to connect her up with friends living in her estate. Her relative in Simei occasionally provides her with some financial assistance. She is unwilling to approach her as she is not close to them. Her ex-boyfriend visits her but is often dependent on her for financial support. She had ended the relationship after the birth of her child, Mohd Shaihrul.

From her formal social support network, the Medical Social Worker (MSW) has been assisting her by applying for financial support under Medifund to assist Mdm A with her medical bills. Mdm A receives free consultation/medication for her child. The Central Development Council (CDC) Officer has assisted her the last few months to obtain short-term financial assistance for 3 months as she has been unemployed for at least 6 months. The CDC Officer has also assisted her by registering her for job interviews.

The above shows her strength of being resourceful as she had approached these organizations on her own and obtained assistance.

I then proceeded to conduct a Strengths Check with my client and the following are her strengths:



I felt that the strengths check was important as she had viewed herself limited and lacked the resources to make the necessary changes in her life. In putting her strengths in writing, it enabled her to see concretely the possibility of achieving her dreams of

providing for her child and herself. All things are possible, if only she believed in herself. The strengths check was a positive stroke which she had not received in a long time.

As I conducted the strengths check, I observed that she felt limited in certain areas and wanted to improve in the following areas:

- 1) She struggles to discipline her son when he throws temper tantrums and demands from her.
- 2) She finds it difficult to manage her finances as she often spends freely on others and her son.
- 3) She is afraid of being alone and this has lead her into multiple relationships and been hurt in the process. Her ex-boyfriend continues to harass her for money.

We planned to tackle these areas in our plan of action as it will be an important step in helping her have a new lease in life.

Using the Strengths Check and Eco-Map methods, we were able to derive Mdm A's will and goals. She identified her goals as follows:

- 1) *To find housing either renting directly from Housing and Development Board or from the open market.*
- 2) *To secure long term employment to help stabilize her financial situation.*
- 3) *To ensure that her son attends childcare regularly that he starts his preschool education. To take better care of his health by ensuring he takes his asthma medication timely and with the right dosage.*

4) *To not allow her ex-boyfriend to harass her for money and not allow him into her new home.*

Now that we have identified her goals, we discussed the various possibilities for her to achieve her goals:

Accommodations

- She could contact her relative in Simei and she could stay with her for the next 1 or 2 months.
- She could get an agent to locate a room for rent or look up in the papers for advertisements.
- She could contact her friend, Mdm Zaleha to link her up with families in Whampoa.
- To stay in a women's shelter for next 3 months

Employment

- Call her previous employer – a coffee shop owner at Hill Street for a job.
- Visit her CDC officer to check out openings in the employment database. To appeal to CDC officer to extend her financial assistance for another 3 months in the event of further unemployment.
- Check out factory jobs in the Straits Times classified ads.

Child's Care Plans

- Mdm Zaleha may be willing to help for short-term while Mdm A finds a job. Child will be placed in childcare once she has found accommodations.
- Not to miss the next doctor's appointment and ensure that Shaihrul gets his medication.

Her relationship with ex-boyfriend

- To inform friends to keep her new address confidential.
- To change her mobile no so that he cannot contact her.

iii) **Intervention Plans derived from Strengths Model**

After discussions about the various possibilities and assessments done with Mdm A using the strengths model and eco map, we came up with a proposed plan of action that intertwined her soft skills with her determination/resilience and goals. Some goals were linked parallel to her strengths and were achieved within a short period of time. There were areas where both community worker and client worked with a collaborative approach. It was observed that in pursuing her goals, it had a multiplication effect on her immediate community as it allowed me to assist other families in the process.

a) **Plan of Action derived from goals/strengths of client**

Goal: *To find housing either renting directly from Housing and Development Board or from the open market*

Strength: *Sociable/Resourceful*

Mdm A - As she is sociable woman, she networked with her immediate circle of friends who linked her up with their friends. We used this network to tap into their resources, and found a room for rent that she could stay with her son for the next 6 months. She signed a 6 month lease with her landlady and moved in straight from the hospital with her child.

This new network of friends in Whampoa Estate has resulted in them meeting in the mornings for coffee after they place their children in childcare. Now it has taken the form of an informal support group for woman in similar situations.

Community Worker role – I met the landlady and negotiated a more affordable rent and drafted a simple contract/letter that both landlady and client signed. This was to ensure that both landlady and tenant's rights were protected and that they agreed on the terms and conditions of the tenancy. This is also to ensure that Mdm A does not get kick out of the flat and is left without accommodations again.

Goal: *To secure long term employment to help stabilize her financial situation.*

Strength: *Keen to learn new skills/adaptable*

Mdm A - As she is keen to learn new skills and is adaptable, I linked her up with a Cleaning Agency where she received training as a domestic helper. The job paid her a basic wage while she was trained and then later she was assigned to work with different families. Though her boss required her to work long hours and weekends, she was open to the requirements as she saw it as a stepping stone to better opportunities. This also met the requirements of MCYS to ensure that she is gainfully employed and earning sufficiently to meet her child's needs.

The client receives her wages daily after each job. She was happy to have cash in hand each day after been

unemployed for many months and depending on handouts from welfare. Her daily wages is determined by her hard work and she has a sense of achievement each day when she receives her wages.

Community Worker role – I had sourced online for cleaning companies and emailed them. I gave a brief about Beyond Social Services and enquired if they were recruiting domestic helpers. Domestic helpers are paid on a daily basis approx \$10 per hour and that would give our clients about \$80 x 3 days work (on average) = \$240 per week. There was also an element of stability in this job as clients would be assigned a permanent household to clean and it's on a long term contract. I spoke with a cleaning company's supervisor who was open to hiring our families. The supervisor was empathetic towards the needs of the low income families and immediately provided Mdm A with employment. This liaison also created an opportunity for employment for my other female clients living in the estate!

Goal : *To ensure that her son attend childcare regularly and takes his asthma medication timely and with the right dosage.*

Strength : *Loving Mother to Shaihrul*

Mdm A - She is determined to ensure that Shaihrul gets an education as she is illiterate. She did not have an opportunity to study as her parents were poor and uneducated themselves. She lacked the knowledge about asthma and its seriousness in young children. As such, the child was frequently admitted into hospital for asthmatic attack. She

did not administer Shaihrul's medication correctly as she could not read the medication bottle's instruction.

She will bring her son, Shahrul to childcare from Monday – Friday and provide the childcare centre with his asthma medications as he requires his medication daily. She will provide them with a mobile no for emergency contact. She will also meet up with his teacher whenever possible to monitor his progress and get feedback.

Client is more at peace knowing that her son is well taken care at the centre. She is also more focused at retaining her job as she is already in her 40s and financial stability is essential to her.

Community Worker role - I explained to the ward nurse/pharmacist about Mdm A's inability to read instructions, they started using symbols so that she can comprehend the instructions and give him medications properly.

As Mdm A was eligible for Healthy Start Programme, I advocated for her case to be approved under this scheme. I prepared a social report which was submitted together with documentations for application of childcare subsidy, government subsidy for working mothers and top-up assistance from MCYS Social Support Unit. Under this scheme, Mdm A's son was able to start childcare immediately after his discharge from hospital. With the various subsidies applied, Mdm A is only required to pay \$10 per month for her childcare fees. With the child in a

childcare environment, she became more confident in starting her job search. I liaised with the nearest NTUC childcare centre in the estate which was located only 5 minutes away from her apartment. With the child in a childcare environment, the child has started to learn to socialize with other adults and pick up the language skills. He was very afraid in the beginning and not trusting of other adults. Within a month, he has improved a lot and even his appetite has increased and he has started developing well. He was observed to be small in stature when compared to his peers as he refused to eat any solids and was only on a milk diet though he was already 2 years old. I will continue to monitor the child's progress and keep mother updated of any concerns raised by the teachers.

I have also tapped on my own network of friends and I have managed to get milk sponsorship for families living in the estate. Mdm A also benefits from this sponsorship whenever a need arises.

Goal: *To not allow her ex-boyfriend to harass her for money or allow him into her new home*

Strength : Determination to move forward

Mdm A - In our discussions, client desires to put her past behind and move forward. This is a challenge for her as her ex-boyfriend continues to harass her for money. She will end the friendship and not allow him to enter her new flat. She hopes to be able to give her son Shaihrul a better future even if she has to raise him up single-handedly. She has suffered a lot in the past 2 years and would like to start afresh.

Community Worker role – Mdm A is still affected by her past relationships. She was living with her ex-boyfriend at the beach till her child's hospitalization. She would like to cut off ties with him but it has been a challenge as he continues to harass her. I will recommend Mdm A to attend counseling sessions with AWWA Family Service Centre. The counselors at the centre are trained to handle family & marital issues. I felt that the therapeutic sessions would help her in her decision to break free from previous relationships. In addition to the counseling sessions, I have arranged to have contact time with her, once in 2 weeks for a start as she needs emotional support and also to continue building rapport and trust with her.

Strength - A Good Cook

Mdm A - As she is a good cook, during the Ramadan period, she linked up with her friends to bake cookies for sale. This resulted in additional income for her and her network of friends. It was definitely a step in being creative and increasing her income as her wages as a domestic helper were insufficient.

Community Worker role – I played a small role by linking her up with my own circle of friends who may be interested in buying cookies. The enterprising spirit in the group of women has motivated them to look into the possibility of renting a food stall at a coffee shop. This project depends on funds and they will look into this opportunity once the group is able to pool together enough funds. I will also

make enquiries with MUIS (Muslim organization), if there are any funding for small business setup.

Strength - Empathetic towards people

Mdm A - As her social network widened, she also started referring other families who were in need of assistance. She has benefited from our assistance and wanted other families to be linked up with us who would have otherwise not known about Geylang Bahru Outpost (Healthy Start Programme) in Whampoa Estate.

Community Worker role – Whampoa Estate is part of Geylang Bahru outpost. As outreach in the estate is ongoing, her networking among low income families proved to be important connection to the ground. An example of the case where she referred a 11 year old girl who had drop-out of school. I made contact with the girl and she will be starting with Kids United in Alexander this week. The collaboration of efforts between client and community worker has definitely caused a paradigm shift in the way I do outreach. It has affected my street outreach work and I am now more open to talking to people in the community. They are my partners in my work in Healthy Start. Being on the ground in the community has also allowed me to build partnerships with relevant grass root communities and it has raised awareness among the local community of the low income families in the area.

As discussed earlier, these were identified areas for growth/ improvement in the coming year and it will be addressed in the following manner:

Areas for Growth/Improvement

1. **Parenting**

Mdm A to attend Triple P Programme to learn parenting skills. The parenting Programme will be held over 3 sessions where she will learn the following key components of Positive Parenting¹ :

- Understanding general parenting issues, why children tend to behave in certain ways under certain influences, and what they best respond to.
- Dealing decisively and effectively with behaviors such as aggression, non-cooperation and disobedience.
- Recognizing and managing situations that might be less obvious such as sadness, anxiety, difficulty with separation and problems mixing with other children.

Community Worker role - In addition to attending the 3 sessions, I will follow-up Mdm A at home to observe if she is putting into practice the skills learnt at Triple P Programme. Through my observations, I will be able to reinforce the skills learnt. It will be a challenge for Mdm A as she is observed to be permissive (if it's seen in a strengths perspective – she is extremely loving/attentive towards her son!) in her parenting styles and her son gets away with a lot. We would like to see some positive change in this area as well as client.

2. **Managing her finances**

I will refer Mdm A to AWWA Family Service Centre as they provide Financial Counseling. Family Service

Centre counselors are trained to conduct financial counseling and we would like to tap into their area of expertise to help Mdm A manage her finances better.

Community Worker role – As AWWA Family Service Centre is serving the families in Whampoa Estate, I will make a formal referral to seek their collaboration in helping Mdm A's family. The Family Service Centre also runs Programmes for single parent and step families. These specially designed workshops will be useful for her.

3. Relationship

Mdm A has hopes of breaking free from her relationship with her ex-boyfriend. With her move to Whampoa Estate and establishing ties with women in similar situations, she is now able to stand more independently and does not feel as lonely. She has not informed him of her new address as it would prevent him from harassing her. It will also protect the landlady from any confrontation. She has been informed to notify the police if she feels threaten in anyway by her ex-boyfriend.

Community Worker role - I felt that it was important to tap on the invaluable support of this informal support group to provide emotional support for Mdm A. It would be impossible for me to provide support for my clients 24 hours a day as a community worker! It's good that she has friends and support from those who are close to her.

b) **Evaluation of Plan of Action**

Evaluating Mdm A's situation after a month through my contact times with her, I found that the plan of action proposed has improved her circumstances and she has taken small steps forward. These are her goals and achievements within the first month.

1) To find housing either renting directly from Housing and Development Board or from the open market

- Mdm A found a room for rent in Whampoa Estate and has signed a 6 month lease with landlady. Staying with a family has helped her as the landlady does help her out with child-minding when she works late.

2) To secure long term employment to help stabilize her financial situation.

- She has been working for a month and is happy with her job. She has paid off her landlady the 1st month rent.

3) To ensure that her son attend childcare regularly. Takes his asthma medication timely and with the right dosage.

- Her son has been attending school regularly. The teachers provided me with his attendance at the end of the month for verification. She has also provided the teachers with a spare set of inhaler for child's medication.

4) To not allow her ex-boyfriend to harass her for money and not allow him into her new home.

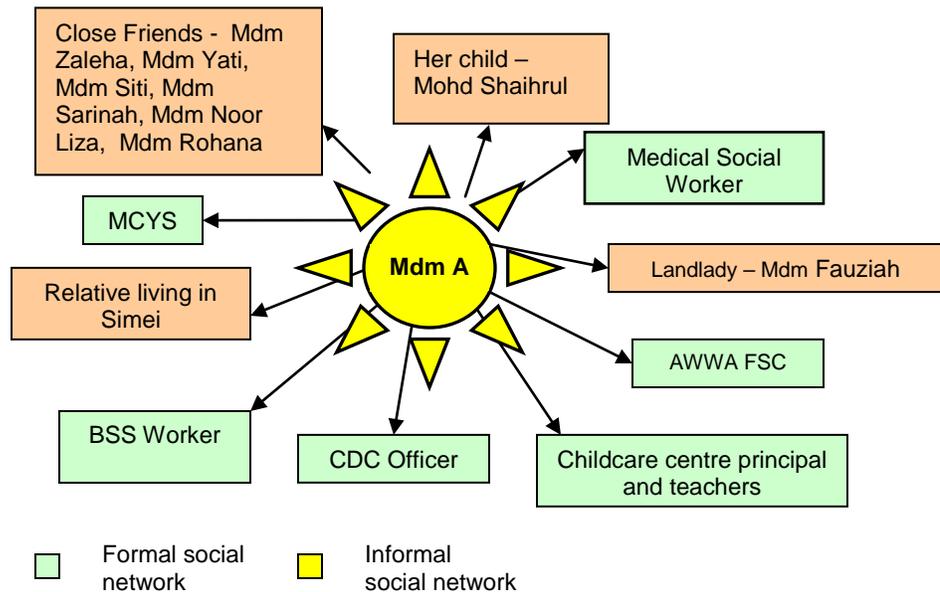
- She has stopped entertaining her ex-boyfriend's call and he is not aware of her new address. She has

changed her mobile no. She will start attending counseling with AWWA Family Service Centre next month. I will get an update from AWWA on her progress.

5) To attend parenting Programme eg. Triple P organized b Beyond Social Services to help her understand her son’s growing needs and learn new ways of parenting him.

- Mdm A will attend Triple P in March 07. I have prepared an undertaking for her to sign as all other clients attending Triple P so as to make a commitment to attending the 3 sessions to graduate. This is a requirement by MCYS for parents support by Healthy Start Programme

As part of the evaluation, I used the eco-map to see how her social network has grown with the new developments and community assistance. The updated Eco-Map as follows:



Her new partners/resources in her 2nd Eco-Map include the childcare centre Principal, teachers and her landlady, Mdm Fauziah. The childcare centre Principal and teachers have been supportive of her case. They pay close attention on her son Shaihrul and also give regular updates to Community Worker. Her landlady has been a good support especially when she needs to work late. Her landlady, Mdm Fauziah will help pick up her son from the childcare centre.

These new partners in the community have been a positive change for Mdm A who has been experiencing a lot of difficulties the past 2 years since the birth of her son. With the linking up with community resources, Mdm A's social capital resources have increased tremendously. Seeing it in writing made it clear to her that she was not alone but rather supported by a network of people. She was given a copy of the above for her keeping and as a reminder of her social support network.

Personal Reflection & Evaluation

I felt that using this method for my intervention has increased my ability to trust my clients more. Previously I would be skeptical of trusting my client as I had a few bad experiences. As I shared my experiences with others, they are also encouraged. The experiences learnt can also be used in my personal life – in my interactions with my family and friends and more importantly using it for my own growth as a friend, daughter and mother. I am learning to be focused on my potentials rather than on my limitations. It also reminds me not to be trapped in a “savior syndrome”. They are expertise of their field and they have been surviving long before I came into the picture. I am merely giving them clarity to their vision or

dreams, much like a guide who walks with you on your journey. There will come a time when you will have to walk on your own.

Areas that require follow-up in the next 6 months

- **Accommodation**

Mdm A still needs to look at long term accommodations. Her current lease is for 6 months and after the lease period, she may need to look for an alternative place. One possibility - to advocate on her behalf to Housing & Development Board. As she is an unmarried mother, she is not eligible for rental flat as current policies only permit intact families to rent. We will need to meet up with the Member of Parliament for Whampoa to seek his assistance in Mdm A securing a 1 or 2 room rental flat. This process could take months and both Mdm A and community worker will need to work together to get her goal to have her own place achieved.

- **Parenting Programme**

As Mdm A works over the weekends, she may find it difficult to attend our parenting sessions on Saturday afternoons. As parenting programmes are organized in a set of 3 sessions and conducted twice a year, I will check with her on a suitable period and ensure she blocks out the Saturdays for the parenting programmes.

- **Case Discussion with MCYS**

To meet up with MCYS Child Protection & Welfare Officer to update on the case progress.

iv) Positive Impact of Strength Modeling on Client and Community Worker

I believe that the strengths model approach allows for new and creative ways to work with clients. We are able to harness on their skills, competencies, and talents as opposed to their deficits. When we learn to look outside the box, we cease to be trapped by red tape or bureaucracy that may hinder our creative juices.

I believe that it also has a positive impact on the community worker who has the liberty to tap on varied external resources which may not have been considered in the past e.g. Last year while based at Ghim Moh Outpost, I linked up with a local bakery. By raising awareness of the needs of the families in our area, the local bakery decided to collaborate with me by contributing bread once a week towards Kids United in Alexander. As a community worker, I was deeply encouraged by the positive signs that the community spirit is still very alive. People are often busy with their lives and businesses. It is important for community workers to raise awareness on the needs of those who are disadvantaged in our society. Life in Singapore is so fast paced that its easy for those who are struggling to be left behind. The simplest task maybe daunting and without support, the children of these families may never have the opportunities that they so deserve.

I find that in allowing clients more freedom to discover their inner resources, I am able to explore options which are at times even little unconventional. Most of my clients have a narrow perspective of life and see no other life than what their own

parents had experienced. The lack of education cuts some of them off from experiencing life to the full and of being aware of opportunities available. This is where I feel as a community worker I can use my expertise to be a weak ties specialist to link my families with resources and specialized groups who would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

In my interactions with Mdm A, I see that she has grown from an insecure woman who felt life was hopeless to one who is more confident of herself. It is a small step forward. She has been able to hold on to her job for a longer period of time when compared to her job hopping days. She tries to manage her finances better as she needs to pay her rent timely and pay for childcare fees.

She is more focused as she is aware the she is accountable to her son, herself and her formal social support groups like CDC, MCYS and Beyond Social Services. She is happy that she has been given the opportunity to build a new life for herself and child. She can also see that with the community's support, she can slowly turn her life around and be contributing towards society.

2.2 **Bridging Social Capital**

Part of a Community Worker's role is to help bridge the client with networks/organizations that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. I see the bridging of social capital as an essential aspect of social work. We are the experts in our field (as clients are experts of their lives), and it's easier for us to link our clients with relevant groups to help them achieve their goals. In engaging the community, we raise awareness of the needs of

low income families living within a housing estate. A good example of bridging social capital – Linking up Muslim families with the nearest mosque during Ramadan period. The identified low income families received food ration during the fasting month. The religious group is not only meeting the families' basic needs but as well as their spiritual needs as many of the families have stopped attending religious classes etc. The families felt more accepted by their faith community and not cut off from ties that are so essential to binding a community.

Another example I could quote is where a group of colleagues from a private organization decided to organize an outing to Singapore Science Centre for the children living in the estate. It was done on a personal capacity and cost of the trip was covered from their personal funds. The leader of the group had a vision to help children from needy families and she requested that I share my work with her colleagues. When we shared the needs of the families in Whampoa, they were moved to provide more for the families. They may consider sponsoring school pocket money for some of our children. The link up has created an opportunity for a child to receive some support for his education.

In a multi-racial country like Singapore, social capital is an important part of maintaining racial harmony and our sense of identity as One Nation, One Singapore. The government is seen encouraging more volunteerism and participation by citizens in the day to day matters of the country. The younger generation is invited to open dialogue and participation in public debates on changes that impact the whole society. This is a positive change as Singapore moves in the direction of been a 1st World Economy. Even as we pursue standards of a 1st

world country, we must not disregarding the need to maintain an inclusive society where every member of the country matters whether you are a rich or poor, you will have an equal opportunity of housing, employment and education.

3 **Strengths Model vs Client Dependency approach**

One of Social Work “Values“ as defined by the International Federation of Social Work states - *“Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion.”*² We can see that the strengths perspective has always been a key component of social work practice.

Even the late Pope John Paul II wrote *“every human being is a person, namely, endowed with intelligence and free will... and therefore has rights and duties”*³ Man should not be denied his right to decide on his life’s direction as long as it does not lead to harmful behavior that affects him and those around him. Every human person has a God-given dignity from birth. Even from the time he is an embryo in his mother’s womb, he has the right to equality, worth and dignity.

Now taking a look at traditional social work practice, it was usual that clients would approach an agency for help and community workers would then try to “solve” their problems by being directive and in problem solving mode. Sometimes clients were labeled as weak, delinquent,

irresponsible, incompetent etc and this sort of labeling has led to stereotyping of people who came from low income families. A classic example would be the stereotyping of single parent families who often labeled as dysfunctional. Children from such families were labeled by society and even in schools that they would grow up with juvenile delinquency tendencies. I disagree with stereotyping as I believe that single parent families or intact families have an equal chance of raising great children if given the right skills and opportunities.

When we were taught about strengths model, I was resistant to accept a strengths perspective of case management. Embracing a new method would mean that I had to apply a more “think out of the box“ method and work in collaboration with my clients. This can be quite a challenge for a community worker especially when faced with difficult clients who refuse to co-operate. In this instance, it would seem easier to use a top down approach and be directive. Using a strengths model would also mean that as community workers, we had to steer away from “text book” answers/solutions to problems.

One would agree that it's possible that clients would follow through with the solutions given for a short while and revert back to their old ways. As the advice was given with a top down approach, it's likely that client would initially adhere to it in order get what they wanted e.g. financial assistance, free vouchers or food ration. Once the interim support is stopped, client is likely to stop following up with community worker's advice. This form of problem solving approach is one sided and client is not collaborating with the community worker to resolve his crisis. It creates a dependency and client's feel that they are not equipped to solve their own problems or get help from community resources to resolving their immediate crisis.

While using the strengths model, we are not saying that we are ignoring the problems and family issues of our client. We are looking to identify the positive attributes and resources of clients in order to better tackle the presenting problems. At the end of the day, the client is accountable to himself and his family. His decisions affect him and those around him. If he is unwilling to cooperate then a community worker could look at working with another member of the family. This person could be the bridge in helping the family move forward despite the uncooperative member.

Just as society is ever changing, I believe that a community worker needs to embrace new methods and discard what is no longer working or redundant. As she takes on new challenges, she embarks on a learning journey, opens her mind to new ways of viewing what would be recurring scenarios at her workplace. In collaborating with the disadvantaged families, we are working in solidarity with them while maneuvering them in their desired direction.

4 **Conclusion**

“It takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, to embrace the new. But there is no real security in what is no longer meaningful. There is more security in the adventurous and exciting, for in movement there is life, and in change there is power.” Alan Cohen inspirational writer and author..

I agree with the above statement that there is *power in change*. In adopting a strength perspective in case management, we harness the potential for change from within our clients. But only the client has the power to change and we cannot force this change to happen. They must be willing to co-operate with the process of discovery and fully embrace the change in their lives. In Mdm A's case, she was open and

participated actively in change for the sake of her son and she made commendable progress.

Change is also evident in the community worker as she engages the client and community into casework management. She discovers that it takes a many helping hands approach to raise the standard of living of a family. Even if she initially struggles with new methods, she will gain a sense of achievement as she sees progress in her cases.

In Singapore, the government is also working towards an inclusive society, to enable individuals to have equal opportunities and access to various aspects of everyday living. This is a strategic move to ensure that Singapore remains a cohesive & harmonious society as we have grown from a seaport into a 1st world economy. In the light of the changing and competitive times, positive family ties, sense of identity, racial harmony, loyalty and commitment to the country are important social capital elements. This is important to Singapore, an island state that is dependent on human resources, networks and solid infrastructure to ensure that we move forward to become a 1st world country.

Beyond's vision is that by 2025, every child and youth in Singapore, despite a disadvantaged background has the opportunity to refuse a lifestyle of delinquency and welfare dependency.

I believe that every child must have an equal opportunity to receiving an education. Education is one of the gateways to opportunities and gaining a sense of self-actualization. Parents need to be encouraged to move away from a culture of dependency to a culture of self-sufficiency.

Families assisted under Healthy Start Programme have an opportunity to break free from the cycle of poverty. Are they ready for change? Change is the only constant in life. It may be painful to have to face the truth of their situation. Strength Model helps them come face to face with the truth

- good or bad, it is the only way forward. You either live in denial in your impoverish state or chose to venture out of your comfort zone and experience growth in a positive direction.

End Notes :

¹ Triple P Positive Parent Programme for every Parent

<http://www.triplep.net/>

² International Federation of Social Work – Definition of Social Work

<http://www.sasw.org.sg/public/>

³Holy See - Justice Rests on Respect for Human Rights
by Jean-Louis Tauran

<http://www.vatican.va>