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People

She helps ex-inmates get back on their feet



Non-profit group's new executive director wants to do more for dads and their children

Seeo BeYI

They sat together in an open area, but were quiet and awkward with one another. But by the end of the visits, there were often smiles, with inmates hugging their children. Scenes like these moved Ms Lisa Lim when she was a superintendent at Changi Prison Complex.

Ms Lim, the newly appointed executive director of Iscos (Industrial and Services Co-operative Society), a non-profit group that helps ex-inmates and their families, hopes to do more to support them.

Offering help in education, for example, is important to lower the risk of children in such families falling into crime.

Citing a news report, Ms Lim said the odds of offending for children with parents who are offenders are on average 27 times higher than the odds of those whose parents are not.

"I came from a very poor family and can understand the struggles of growing up in a low-income family," the motherly Ms Lim, now 50, told The Straits Times.

The oldest of five children grew up in a three-room flat with her parents and siblings, and worked for extra income during university. "Growing up, I've always been taking on the role of caring for others - my brothers and sisters, and now, my parents," said Ms Lim.

Now a mother of a 21-year-old son, she lights up when speaking about her hopes for the next generation. "I consider the children under Iscos' Fairy Godparent Programme as my own as well, and want to give them the support I can to help them realise their dreams," she said, referring to the scheme which pairs children of ex-offenders with mentors. She hopes Iscos can help these children through bursaries.

In latest collaboration, started in January, is with the Tan Ean Kiam Foundation, which has given \$100,000 to support students for their polytechnic or Institute of Technical Education (ITE) studies.

But what the children of former inmates need is not just financial aid.

Ms Lim recalled interviewing a 17-year-old girl who was hoping to apply to ITE with assistance from the scheme. Besides worrying about money, the girl feared that her father, a repeat offender, might reoffend.

"I can see that she loves him, and looks forward to him coming home in one to two months," she said, noting it is tough for the families of ex-inmates. "This is why I want to come up with more initiatives for families and, in particular, for fathers."

For example, by this year, she intends to set up a support group for Iscos members whose fathers that will meet each month. Ms Lim hopes to work with the Centre for Fathering to provide talks and activities for this group, helping them to focus on their roles at home.

Based on her 27 years working in the prison service - her first employer - Ms Lim knows that family support can be a huge motivation for change, she said.

Ms Lim, an arts and social sciences graduate from the National University of Singapore and a former National Police Cadet Corps member, initially wanted to be a police officer. But in an interview with the Public Service Commission, she was offered a job with the prison service instead. She took it up, realising it could put her "in the right place to help people".

She ended up spending a decade with Changi Women's Prison. In her last four years with the prison, she served as a superintendent at Institution AS, which houses inmates due for release in three to five years.

There, inmates can receive vocational training with Soco Laundry, a service run by the statutory board Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises. They can also

support or are estranged from their families. "They feel very lost" as their needs had been taken care of by prison officers, she said.

Isicos, which recruits around 800 former inmates as members each year, conducts regular pre-release briefings to inform inmates of support schemes.

Of members who seek help, about 20 per cent turn to Iscos for skills upgrading, while 20 per cent seek help with job placements.

Ms Lim hopes to take this a step further by introducing an "orientation" scheme for those who have been jailed for at least three years. "Singapore changes at such a rapid pace," she said, adding that inmates could be updated on changes to the transport network and on the locations of social service offices.

"We want to extend the friendship and support to ex-offenders, right from the day they are released," she said.

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Text:

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Non-profit group's new executive director wants to do more for dads and their children

By Seow Bei Yi

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Offering help in education, for example, is important to lower the risk of children in such families falling into crime.

Citing a news report, Ms Lim said the odds of offending for children with parents who are offenders are on average 21/2 times higher than the odds of those whose parents are not.

"I came from a very poor family and can understand the struggles of growing up in a low-income family," the motherly Ms Lim, now 50, told The Straits Times.

The oldest of five children grew up in a three-room flat with her parents and siblings, and worked for extra income during university. "Growing up, I've always been taking on the role of caring for others - my brothers and sisters, and now, my parents," said Ms Lim.

Now a mother of a 21-year-old son, she lights up when speaking about her hopes for the next generation. "I consider the children under Iscos' Fairy Godparent Programme as my own as well, and want to give them the support I can to help them realise their dreams," she said, referring to the scheme which pairs children of ex-offenders with mentors. She hopes Iscos can help these children through bursaries.

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There, inmates can receive vocational training with Score laundry, a service run by the statutory board Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises. They can also take part in activities at the performing arts training centre to learn singing or how to play musical instruments such as the guitar.

It is tough for ex-offenders when they are released from prison, especially for those who have no family support or are estranged from their families. "They feel very lost" as their needs had been taken care of by prison officers, she said.

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