

**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB
AT THE LAUNCH OF PRESIDENT'S CHALLENGE 2020,
PRESIDENT'S CHALLENGE ENABLING EMPLOYMENT
PLEDGE AND EXTRA.ORDINARY APPRENTICESHIP
PROGRAMME,
11 MARCH 2020, 10.15AM AT THE ENABLING VILLAGE**

Mr Desmond Lee, Minister for Social and Family Development and
Second Minister for National Development

Mr Sam Tan, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Social and
Family Development

Mr Liam Wee Sin, Group Chief Executive Officer, UOL Group
Limited

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Good morning. I am happy to be here today to launch the
Extra•Ordinary Apprenticeship Programme. I am glad to also take
this opportunity to launch this year's President's Challenge.

2. President's Challenge believes in empowering persons with
disabilities. Employment helps in their social inclusion, personal
development, financial independence and overall well-being.
Employers also stand to benefit, as it is an excellent opportunity for
them to tap on the talent, skills and experience from the community

of persons with disabilities. Indeed, we already have many heartening cases of this mutually beneficial arrangement. For example, 60-year-old Wendy Seet, whom I met last year, was a production operator when she first joined Bizlink Centre. Encouraged by the SkillsFuture initiative, she decided to enrol in a computer literacy course, and has now upgraded herself to be a data entry operator at the Bizlink Data Management Centre. Another example is Hui Xin who met me at the SG Enable Training and Career Fair last year. Hui Xin, who is visually impaired, participated in the RISE mentorship programme by SG Enable when she was studying at Singapore Management University. She was paired with a mentor from Barclays and completed a six-month internship with AIG, where she gained valuable experience within the financial industry. Today, she is a trainee analyst at Johnson & Johnson, happily applying the skills learnt in school and during her internship.

3. This is why I have designated this year's focus of President's Challenge to be on empowering persons with disabilities. **I hope**

to activate a shift in our workplace culture, so that as a nation we can be more welcoming to persons with disabilities as co-workers. I am glad that since I announced this focus last July, many social service agencies have come forward to support the cause. This year's President's Challenge has received several good proposals to help persons with disabilities gain employment. Let me mention just three of them.

- a. The first example is no stranger to all of us present. Indeed, it is the very reason why we are gathered here today! The Extra•Ordinary Apprenticeship Programme (EAP) aims to help persons with disabilities through a "Place-and-Train" model. Students with special needs who are in their final year of studies are placed in actual work environments to receive training and real-life experiences, preparing them for a seamless transition from school to work. A partnership between Extra•Ordinary People, Pan Pacific Hotels Group and Samsui Kitchen, the EAP started as a pilot last year for a group of students from the Grace Orchard School. They

were trained to make the dim sum items with the support of job coaches and therapists. I am glad that four of these students are now employed with Samsui Kitchen. I look forward to tasting the dim sum made by them later! President's Challenge 2020 will be supporting the EAP this year.

b. The second programme I would like to highlight is the Muscular Dystrophy Association (Singapore) Bridge-Pro Framework – an alternative job placement and job support model for persons with muscular dystrophy. The programme will particularly benefit those with severe muscular dystrophy conditions, by equipping them with functional, academic and vocational skills and identifying suitable freelance job options. I will be funding this programme over the next three years, under the Empowering for Life Fund.

c. The third example is SG Enable's Enabling Employment Initiative, which aims to strengthen the job

support provided to persons with disabilities through a strong network of in-house job coaches. The job coaches will play a critical role in systematically shaping the workplace culture and environment, such as adjusting work processes and redesigning job roles to meet the capability of persons with disabilities. I am happy that SG Enable will be piloting this programme with the hotel industry. This programme will also be supported under the Empowering for Life Fund.

4. I am heartened that our social service agencies are responding to my call to empower persons with disabilities. However, their efforts alone will not be enough. Employers, too, play a crucial role. Employers' support is important in this national movement to build a caring and inclusive Singapore, where differences in abilities are valued and embraced. In this regard, I applaud the measures announced by the Government last week, to help employers hire and upskill persons with disabilities. I hope that our social services agencies will make use of these measures to place more persons with disabilities in jobs.

5. To signal our collective commitment to empower persons with disabilities through gainful employment, **I am launching the President's Challenge Enabling Employment Pledge** today. By signing the Pledge, employers affirm their commitment to supporting persons with disabilities at work, and can look forward to greater support in their effort to train, hire and integrate employees with disabilities. They will join a network of like-minded employers and have access to a whole suite of best practices that can be shared amongst themselves.

6. The Pledge will also serve as a useful guide to those who are new on this journey, and provide a framework on what employers can do to make the work environment and employment practices friendlier to persons with disabilities. It spells out how employers can embrace an inclusive mindset, create barrier-free workplace environments and implement supportive employment policies for employees with disabilities. It will also provide dedicated support

through programmes and services for the training and employment of persons with disabilities.

7. The President's Office and the Public Service will lead the way as the first signatory of the Pledge today. We are committed to walk the talk, and provide equal opportunities to persons with disabilities, so that more will join the public service over time.

8. I am glad that some employers from the private and people sectors are also joining us to sign the Pledge today, including **raiSE**, **NCSS** and 106 members of the Singapore Hotel Association (SHA). In particular, I want to thank the hotel industry for being the first private sector employer to embrace PC2020's focus on enabling employment for persons with disabilities, and for setting an example for other industries to follow. Despite the current COVID-19 outbreak, I am glad that we are seeing beyond our immediate issues as we understand the importance of planting the seeds for long-term inclusivity, care and support for people with

disabilities. This is the spirit that we want to see in Singapore. It is important that we unite in challenging times and plan for the future should the outbreak sustain for a long time. Indeed, SHA is already one of the forerunners in this effort. Many hotels such as Pan Pacific Hotels Group and Shangri-La already provide such opportunities to persons with disabilities. Two years ago, I had the pleasure of enjoying a delicious meal cooked by Chef Paul Simon of Shangri-La's Rasa Sentosa Resort and Spa, who is a graduate of APSN Delta Senior School. I hope to see more employers join in to sign the Pledge in the coming year.

9. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the President's Challenge. First started as a fund-raising initiative by former President S R Nathan, the Challenge was expanded in 2012 to include volunteerism and social entrepreneurship under former President Dr Tony Tan. Since 2018, empowerment has been a key theme across all these three pillars of the President's Challenge. We started the Empowering for Life Fund in 2018. Last year, for President's Challenge 2019, we focused our efforts on mental

health. I am glad that we have had some success in raising awareness of mental health conditions and destigmatising mental illnesses in the past year. For the first time, Singapore hosted the International Mental Health Conference. Platforms such as the Together Against Stigma International Conference and “Beyond the Label” anti-stigma campaign succeeded in starting conversations on mental health and how we can support persons with mental health conditions. In the recent Budget 2020 debate, I am glad that more emphasis will be placed on mental health education in schools so that students can better support one another emotionally and socially. I am also glad that the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices recently updated its guidelines, ensuring that employers no longer require job applicants to state their mental health conditions unless there is a job-related requirement.

10. In closing, let me once again thank all donors, partners and volunteers involved in President’s Challenge all these years. PC 2020 will continue to support a broad range of social causes, and

rally Singaporeans in uplifting the lives of the vulnerable in our community. **This year's President's Challenge will raise funds for a total of 72 beneficiary organisations.**

11. Let us continue to work together to build a cohesive and prosperous future for all. Even as we battle against the COVID-19 outbreak, we do not forget the long-term causes. Once again, thank you everyone for your support.
