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SG Secure: Fathers As Potential Advocates

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Synopsis

SG Secure calls for all Singaporeans to come together as a strong and prepared community, and play a part in the nation's enhanced counter-terrorism strategy. How can we bring the SG Secure narrative closer home to the basic institution of the community – the families?

Commentary

The SG SECURE initiative launched in March this year aims to strengthen the community's vigilance, cohesion and resilience amid the heightened threat of global terrorism that is casting its ominous shadow on Singapore. The movement constitutes one of the components in Singapore's enhanced counter-terrorism strategy, and key to its success would be effective outreach to every segment of the community. As Singapore celebrates Father's Day in June, it would perhaps be opportune to explore the potential role that fathers can play in furtherance of the goals of SG Secure.

Plans for the "SG Secure in the Neighbourhood" were unveiled on 28 May 2016 in conjunction with the revamped Emergency Preparedness (EP) Day where residents learned how to react and respond in the event of a terrorist attack in the heartlands. The theme of the simulation drills during the EP Day - terrorist attacks and hostage situations in a neighbourhood setting – not only showcased the readiness of homeland security forces and grassroots but more importantly conveys the grim and implicit message that a terrorist attack in the HDB heartlands is now highly probable.

Protecting the Heartlands & Leveraging Fathers as Advocates

The realisation that the threat of terrorism is now closer to the heartlands – our home where our families live, school and play – underscores the need for families to be supportive of SG Secure, as this would result in the downstream benefits of a more vigilant and resilient community.

Families, as the Ministry of Social and Family Development point out, “serve as an important pillar of support for the nation. At the individual level, families are the primary source of emotional, social and financial support. At the national level, they contribute to social stability and national cohesiveness as they help develop socially responsible individuals and deepen the bond Singaporeans have with the country”. As such, vigilant and resilient families give rise to a vigilant and resilient community and subsequently a vigilant and resilient nation.

There are several advantages to employing fathers as SG secure advocates. Firstly, his traditional role as family protector coupled with protective instincts make him a natural fit. Take for example, Adel Termos, a father of two who was killed when he intercepted a suicide bomber during an attack in Beirut last November. His act of heroism reportedly saved many lives. In the Singapore context, many fathers have the necessary skills to protect both the “home and nation” by virtue of their national service training and experience. In fact the Singapore Armed Forces commemorated this dual role at the SAF50 Celebrations in 2015.

Secondly, although there is now a growing acceptance of shared parenting, research such as the Fatherhood Public Perception Survey 2009 by the then Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, revealed that fathers exert a strong influence on their children. For instance, Lieutenant Julie Tan’s decision to become a pilot was influenced by her father. “Seeing what he does and, more importantly, the purpose of his job made me want to be in the SAF,” she said.

Thirdly, fathers are in a perfect position to teach life skills such as persistence. A 2013 study by Brigham Young University found that persistence “is more clearly influenced by fathers...and indeed, may be one of the mechanisms through which fathers help to protect their children”. Persistence in turn helps in the development of other useful behavioural traits such as personal resilience in facing adversities.

Fathers can act as conduits to engage families and the community at large on SG Secure in the following ways: (a) highlighting the threats facing Singapore and explaining why the city-state remains vulnerable; (b) discussing the importance of social cohesion in enhancing societal/national resilience and tangible ways the family can contribute; (c) explaining the importance of emergency preparedness and how/if the family can contribute; and (d) volunteer or participate in SG Secure initiatives (individually or as a family).

Some Operational and Policy Considerations

One of the key challenges is getting some fathers to change their mindsets about their role in defending the realm. Having gone through national service as well as refresher training as NSmen, they may feel they have contributed sufficiently to total defence. However, as today’s national security threats are complex and adaptive,

collective responsibility and active community involvement/participation is necessary. Besides they will be able to enhance existing skills/knowledge by learning about emergency preparedness and response techniques/approaches as part of SG Secure.

It is important to note that a broad whole-of-society approach would be needed to leverage fathers as effective advocates of SG Secure. Starting with a national conversation (i.e. similar to the Singapore Conversation) or a public feedback exercise (i.e. REACH), homeland security agencies could harvest public opinion on the best methods to empower fathers, both as a key family member and NSman, to involve their families in SG Secure. This could feed into an iterative process of incorporating useful feedback to the public communications on SG Secure, with the aim of ensuring the enduring efficacy of outreach efforts.

Next, there could be a whole-of-government conversation between the homeland security, military and social agencies. Drawing on the ideas distilled from public opinion, these agencies would need to work out how they could leverage existing military and social engagement efforts to reach out to fathers. For example, In-Camp training (ICT) for NSmen could incorporate a module on SG Secure as part of National Education. Similarly, the Dads for Life campaign could include SG Secure among its Fatherhood 101 resources.

Fathers can play a part in instilling the values of vigilance, resilience and social cohesion in their families particularly among the young. These values, if properly ingrained, would be carried by the young to adulthood; shaping their worldview as prepared and responsible citizens and thus contributing to the sustainability of SG Secure in the long run.

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