



**SPEECH BY MRS JOSEPHINE TEO, MINISTER FOR
COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION AND SECOND MINISTER
FOR HOME AFFAIRS, AT REACH PANEL APPRECIATION EVENT
12 NOV 2022, 1PM AT MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND
INFORMATION**

REACH Chairman Tan Kiat How

Members of the REACH Panels

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. I am very happy this afternoon to take part in this REACH Panel Appreciation Event. It's been some time since we were able to organise an appreciation event of this nature – and to be able to do so within our own building and see this set-up that features familiar ways of REACH's outreach efforts – is really a very nice thing to do.

REACH: From passive feedback to dynamic outreach

2. Some of you know this – in fact I was also a member of REACH. I was vice-chairperson in 2006 and served two terms. In some sense, I am also alumnus. So, I feel a sense of affinity with all of you.

3. If you think about how REACH has pivoted and transformed itself, it's quite a remarkable story. REACH started as Feedback Unit in 1985. And for many years, it had a certain way it conducted its activities. But over the years, there was an increasing recognition that more was needed - what was needed was no longer a passive feedback mechanism, operating in a fixed manner. Instead, we needed to pivot into something that could be more accurately described as 'dynamic engagement'. 'Dynamic' in the sense that it is responsive to the needs of the times. 'Dynamic' in terms of engaging our citizens in ways that they had become more accustomed to whether in their workplaces or in their social engagements. The

government then decided that it needed to also acquire new skills and capabilities in its engagement because such engagement built on top of gathering feedback is vital to building trust with our citizens. Trust is at the heart of everything that we do. And so, avenues for feedback increased to include dialogues, polling, focus groups discussions. Electronic modes of communication also became popularised, we now even use short messaging services, or SMS, to engage members of the public. As a result, the conversations became richer, with citizens not just giving feedback, but also stepping up to ask questions, probe more about the reasons for various policies, debate. The process of giving feedback became two-way – with citizens stepping up to ask questions, debate, give suggestions, and, in this process, participate in policy making. Once such a process was kickstarted, the government then got in a much more-timely way in making sense of which kinds of policies would work and what was not going to meet the needs of the public. Hence, this became a much more dynamic process.

4. Since this shift began, REACH has established itself as an outfit that Singaporeans consider genuine and sincere in wanting to listen to what they have to say; and in ensuring that the rest of the government was able to respond to such engagements. While there is already a high level of trust for the government, the trust-building function of REACH remains as relevant as ever today. Different segments of Singaporeans want the Government to listen to them a little more, to care for them a little more, to consult them a little more on policy matters related to their well-being. These things matter to our citizens, and so they should to the government. And citizens are increasingly asking for opportunities to engage the government.

5. Never was this more apparent than during the Covid-19 pandemic, a crisis that really tested the government's ability to lead and look after our citizens. Despite the physical restrictions, REACH continued to widen the Government's touchpoints with our citizens through innovative and digital means.

6. Working with our Supervisory Panel members, as well as public and private sectors partners, we sought out and engaged those whose concerns were less heard and whose voices could become drowned because other issues occupied the public mindshare. We spoke to vulnerable segments of the community, you saw some of them being listed, and this included workers in public transport, aviation; and in

education, parents, students and more. I really appreciate some of these engagements, and the findings that the REACH team surface to me. They are very different from the kind of insights that we have gotten in the past. And just the ability to hear those voices in a very direct manner, added something rich and helpful in terms of how the government would have to consider these issues. So it should come as no surprise to you that these kinds of feedback were systematically compiled by REACH and surfaced to government agencies including my Cabinet colleagues in the Ministerial Task Force for managing Covid.

Kicking off 2022 with a big bang

7. This year, with the easing of COVID-19 safe management measures, we welcomed the return of in-person activities, while still staying active on the digital front. Since January this year, we have held 47 Listening Points, 56 dialogues, and four digital engagement campaigns, reaching more than 200,000 people in-person and online. Let me share a couple of highlights:

- a. We worked with government agencies and citizens to imagine a better future for Singapore. For example, to promote greater gender equality, REACH conducted listening points and organised conversations on women's development. This was in conjunction with last year being SG Year of Women. We partnered organisations like Daughters of Tomorrow, Muslim Youth Forum, and the Young Sikh Association in carrying out these activities.
- b. We worked with media, social enterprises, and NGOs to raise awareness and gather feedback on supporting vulnerable segments of our community as well as issues related to sustainability and mental wellness.
- c. We are playing an active role in the ongoing Forward Singapore exercise. We organised multiple Listening Points in schools to understand youth aspirations and concerns. We often think that we understand how the youths think, but when adults are around, the youths speak a different language than when they are amongst themselves. This effort is important. We are so blessed by the fact that many of our staff members in the REACH team are themselves very young, which really adds to vibrancy and their relatability to the members of the youth public. Recently, we also held three public dialogues in English and vernacular

languages. REACH stands ready to contribute further to this important national effort.

8. What I have just mentioned are just a few examples of the many things REACH does in a year. But none of them would be possible without the strong support and contributions of our panel members.

Setting up a new Youth Panel to better support our mission

9. Let me now express my heartfelt appreciation to our outgoing panel members. You have journeyed with us through one of our nation's toughest times. You not only made "mission impossible" very much possible but worked with us to overcome the many challenges and barriers. You helped to turn what was an adversity in terms of gathering ground sentiments to many new outreach opportunities. Your support and contributions to our cause and mission was invaluable. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts, and I am sure that we will keep in touch as you join our new REACH Alumni Network.

10. I would like to make special mention of our first batch of youth members from the different institutions who joined us for the two years ago. I had the chance to interact with them, maybe half a dozen of the youth panel. Being the inaugural batch, there would always be questions about "why do this? Is it going to be worth the effort?" But as the inaugural batch, you were such an inspiration to the REACH team, and you brought with you such fresh insights and in some sense tension that kept us up to date with what would work and what would not work in terms of reaching to the youth members of the public.

11. It was because of our success with this first batch of young panel members that we decided to take the plunge and start a new Advisory Panel just for youths. So, for the very first time since the feedback unit was setup in 1985, REACH will have two panels:

- a. One REACH Advisory Panel comprising representatives from across different community, professional and social sectors as has always been the case; and
- b. A new REACH Youth Panel with members drawn from across the different Institutes of Higher Learning, including ITE in Singapore.

REACH Chairman Tan Kiat How will share more with you about that later so I shall not say much more.

12. As with all new structures, I believe you have your work cut out for you. I want to extend a very warm welcome to our new REACH Advisory Panel, as well as the REACH Youth Panel members to within our MCI family. Thank you for accepting this appointment. All of you, with your diverse backgrounds, have deep experience, domain knowledge and network we can all learn from.

13. I also thank Kiat How, Rahayu and Eric, as well as Patrick, Nadia, Cheryl and Yao Quan, who is not able to join us today, for agreeing to lead in this effort.

Building trust between citizens and Government

14. Let me now just wrap up my comments. Now, more than before, having timely, honest feedback on national issues from a broad spectrum of Singaporeans is not just a “good to have” but a “must have”. Feedback tells the government what is working, and what is not, and what are emerging issues that we must pay attention to.

15. We will very much need your help and support to shine a light on how the government can continue to gain the trust and confidence of our citizens, indeed, to strengthen it. Only then can we rise above the challenges and build a better Singapore for future generations to come.

16. Thank you.

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