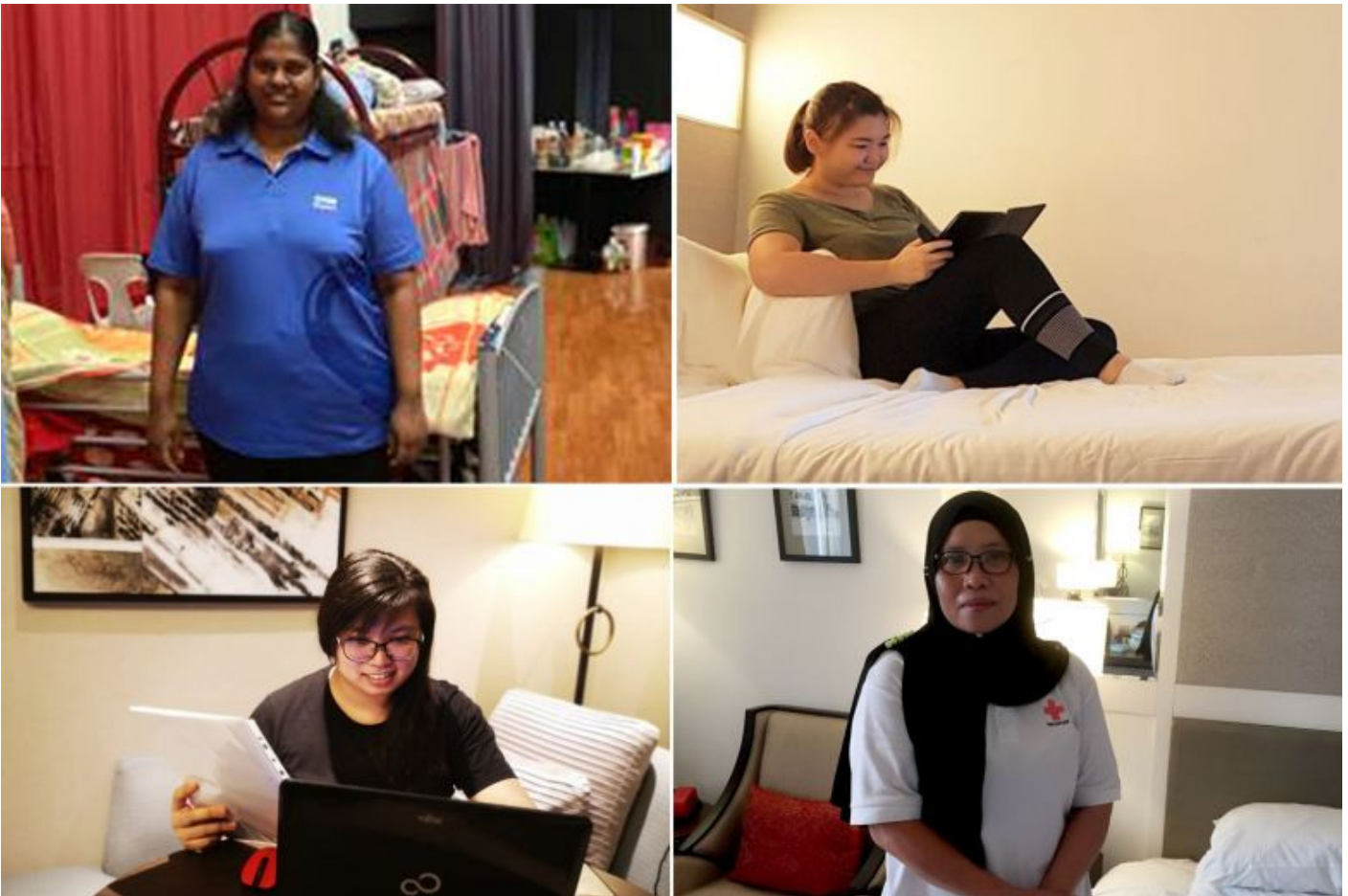


# THE STRAITS TIMES

COVID-19 SPECIAL

## Coronavirus: Living apart for the sake of others, nursing home staff miss their families



Thousands of nursing home staff in Singapore are staying in hotels, or on-site at their places of work, for the safety of their residents. Among them are (clockwise from top left) Madam Prema Manikandan, in the multi-purpose hall of Sree Narayana Mission Nursing Home; Ms Kelly Liew, in YWCA Fort Canning; Madam Noresah Zakirah, in Orchard Rendezvous Hotel and Ms Siti Nadia, in Oakwood Premier AMTD Singapore. PHOTOS: SREE NARAYANA MISSION NURSING HOME, KELLY LIEW, SINGAPORE RED CROSS, SITI NADIA

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### Nursing home staff being housed on-site and in hotels to reduce community exposure



Janice Tai Social Affairs Correspondent (mailto:jantai@sph.com.sg)

When Ms Siti Nadia checked into her Oakwood Premier hotel room in Shenton Way last week, it was like beginning a mini staycation in the heart of town.

The 28-year-old had a king-size bed to herself and could relax to her favourite pop songs from the bedside speakers every night.

She was also able to watch Netflix shows or flip through the movie channels on the wall-mounted smart television, while sitting in the lounge chair.

She recalled the welcome note on the side table that greeted her when she first entered her room. It read: "Thank you for being a front-liner and holding the fort during this challenging Covid-19 period. We hope you will feel at home with us."

Ms Siti is one of thousands of nursing home staff who are being housed in hotels or on-site at the nursing homes where they work, in order to reduce community exposure during the circuit breaker period.

Such arrangements ensure that staff who interact with elderly residents have a protected living environment to minimise their chances of contracting the virus and taking it into the nursing homes.

— ADVERTISEMENT —



Singapore has about 9,000 staff working in 80 nursing homes.

At least six nursing homes have been hit by the coronavirus, including Lee Ah Mooi Old Age Home in Thomson Lane, where 16 residents and staff became infected, and three died.

Acacia Home in Admiralty, a welfare home for the destitute, has also been affected.

The authorities are providing funds for accommodation, meals, dedicated transport and daily necessities for the staff who have had to move into hotels.

The Health Ministry is providing support for nursing homes to increase on-site accommodation capacity as needed.

Affected employees are getting a \$500 allowance to help them with the transition.

## LEARNING TO ADJUST

Despite the comforts of the hotel room, Ms Siti could not sleep well on the first night.

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She had never spent time away from her family up to that point in her life. So the next day, her brother dropped off some home-cooked food for her at the gate of the nursing home.

"I miss my family, but this helps me to be more independent. More importantly, this is to protect our residents and families," said Ms Siti, who lives with her parents and brother in Yishun, and works as a nurse at Thye Hua Kwan Nursing Home in Hougang.

## WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT

**I miss my family, but this helps me to be more independent. More importantly, this is to protect our residents and families.**

MS SITI NADIA, a Thye Hua Kwan Nursing Home nurse, on staying at a hotel.

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The home has been housing 70 foreign staff on-site and another 36 staff, of whom seven are local, at Oakwood Premier AMTD Singapore and Oakwood Studios Singapore.

Meals for those living in the hotels are collected from the hotel restaurants and served in bento boxes. If the nursing home staff wish to leave the hotels to purchase personal items, they have to get permission from the staff nurse-in-charge first.

Towels are changed for them every day and housekeeping is done once a week.

Ms Siti said she is looking forward to going back home after the circuit breaker period ends on June 1.

For Ms Kelly Liew, 33, nurse clinician at NTUC Health Nursing Home in Geylang East, home has been a spacious room in YWCA Fort Canning in Dhoby Ghaut since May 10.

After work, she gets to the hotel by booking a Grab car using her company's corporate account, so charges are billed directly to her employer.

When she is hungry, she either orders her meal directly from the hotel or uses a food delivery app, as she has been provided with a \$20 daily meal allowance. If she is working at the nursing home, a buffet is provided.

As she has a room to herself, she usually spends her free time reading books or doing exercises by watching fitness coaches online.

"I definitely miss being around my family... But I get to rest better after work and can continue to give my best to the residents every day," said Ms Liew, who has two daughters, aged three and 1½ years.

Her husband has to take over her usual duty of ferrying their eldest daughter to and from childcare now, but she has video calls with all of them every night before bedtime.

Ms Janice Tan, the residential care (nursing home) head at NTUC Health, said more than 200 of its staff are living in on-site dormitories converted from existing spaces such as training rooms, gyms and multi-purpose halls.

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About another 100 care staff have moved into hotels such as Genting Hotel Jurong and YWCA Fort Canning. One in every five of its staff is local. "Staff working in the same wards are allowed to share twin rooms, while others without a suitable colleague to share with live alone," said Ms Tan.

Being away from her two sons during the Ramadan fasting period has been particularly tough for single mother Madam Noresah Zakirah, 53.

She is a kitchen helper at the Red Cross Home for the Disabled and has been staying with a colleague in a twin bedroom in the Orchard Rendezvous Hotel since May 8.

"My sons are grown-up already, but I will call and wake them up early in the morning to eat before fasting, and when I video-call them at night, they will say they miss me," said Madam Noresah, whose sons are aged 26 and 28. She has asked her sister-in-law to cook and send food over to them during the upcoming Hari Raya Aidilfitri.

"I cannot mix with other colleagues in their rooms as everything needs access cards here, so it can be boring. But our health and safety are important," she added.

The Red Cross home has 41 staff staying on-site and 17 residing in Orchard Rendezvous Hotel.

At Sree Narayana Mission Nursing Home in Yishun, all 103 staff have been staying on the premises since the start of this month.

Beyond using its own existing dormitories, it has also converted its senior care centre, physiotherapy room and multi-purpose hall into accommodation spaces for its staff.

Said its spokesman: "Our staff understand that this is part of their job scope and have coped positively during this period."

Three of its staff, including Madam Prema Manikandan, 40, are Singapore residents while the rest are foreigners. Madam Prema's bed is in the home's multi-purpose hall. She also has a locker and table beside her bed.

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All 11 beds for female staff there are separated from one another by thick curtains. The women take turns, at scheduled times, to shower or do their laundry.

The hardest part of living on the nursing home's premises for Madam Prema is having to face a crying daughter whenever she makes a video call home. Her 11-year-old daughter is counting the days when her mother can finally return home.

Meanwhile, Madam Prema is also learning how to relax. She has been playing carom and chess with her colleagues during her free time, games she has not had a chance to play for more than 10 years.

"I am still learning to adjust to life here, but being able to continue to see the smiling faces of my residents, who are like my mother and father, makes my heart happy," she said.

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