

## **9<sup>th</sup> IAVE Asia Pacific Regional Volunteer Conference**

**jointly hosted by**

**Philippine Association for Volunteer Effort (PAVE)**

**Philippine National Volunteer Service Coordinating Agency (PNVSCA)**

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**Manila, Philippines**

**Plenary Session IV**

**Volunteer Success Stories**

**Volunteerism in Combating SARS in Hong Kong**

**presented by**

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**Hong Kong**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am much honoured to be here to present this report on volunteerism in combating the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Hong Kong. Now, I would like to share with you some stories of our volunteers during the SARS outbreak.

### Volunteers Stories

- 1) Madam Ho, aged 82, low-educated and financially dependent on assistance, lived alone in a small room in the old Tsui Ping Estate. In great fear of being infected by SARS, she dared not step out of her room for more than a week until volunteers came to comfort her and give her guidance on proper precautionary measures. Madam Ho was given face masks, sterilizers, cleaning materials and information on personal hygiene. Volunteers helped her tidy, clean and disinfect her house and also phoned her everyday to keep regular contact. Madam Ho's tension and fear was soon relieved. She was no longer lonely nor helpless.
- 2) Residents of Fu Sin Garden were panicked when they heard from various sources that several infected cases were found in their estate. At the early outbreak of SARS, when there was no formal release of information on the exact location of the infected cases, rumours did create unnecessary anxiety and suspicion among people in the neighbourhood. In view of this, four young volunteers immediately joined together to set up a website to upload the list of buildings where infected patients are located for public information. Subsequent to their voluntary action, the government soon posted the SARS affected buildings on the web. The availability of information was beneficial to the community for taking proper actions.
- 3) In St Michael Primary School, a variety of measures were taken daily to prevent the spread of SARS among young students who had close contact with each other. These included taking body temperatures of all students on arriving at school, frequent cleaning and disinfecting the classrooms, students' desks and chairs and monitoring students to wash hands after toileting during recess etc. Such daily measures given no extra resources, were hard to enforce. Fortunately, many

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parents actively volunteered to help and form a strong work force to assist the school to take care of the students' hygiene. Later when classes were suspended, some parent volunteers formed support groups to assist those families in need of child care service.

- 4) Mrs Lee was pregnant and had recently moved in a block in Amoy Garden where the nearby Block E was seriously affected by the SARS. To control the spread of the deadly disease, residents there had to be isolated for a certain period. Mrs Lee was terrified, upset and distressed by a whole range of problems. She wondered, "Would my absence from work be compensated by my employer?" "Would my early termination of the lease with the house owner exempt from penalty?" "Should I go to the hospital which is at high risk to do my pre-natal check?" In fact many people like Mrs Lee needed professional advice relating to threat of SARS. In response, some professional groups including The Federation of Medical Societies of Hong Kong, The College of Nursing Hong Kong and The Law Society of Hong Kong sent a number of doctors, nurses and lawyers to help the Professional Medical and Legal Hotline to answer enquiries from the public.
- 5) The SARS patients and their families were victims desperate for help. Their health and lives were in jeopardy. They faced financial hardship. Worse still, they had to suffer isolation and separation from families and relatives. All these created lots of pain and frustration. Medical treatment was essential, but warmth, care and emotional support were also important. Fortunately, many business groups generously made donations to support. For instance, the Lippo Group sponsored funds to a Caring Heart Express programme so that volunteers could express their love and care to the infected patients and their families and also set up links between the infected patients and their family. With the coordination of Hospital Authority, they sent cards and gifts and arranged both parties in separation to write message on cards to express warm wishes and concern so as to ease the sorrow and pain during the critical period of the crisis.

The above bits and pieces are intended to provide you some ideas on how our enthusiastic and committed volunteers fight against SARS during the toughest moments we have ever had.

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## Sudden Outbreak of SARS

In the spring of 2003, a mysterious epidemic - SARS suddenly broke out in Hong Kong, bringing a historical damaging impact to the whole community. 1755 infected cases and 299 deaths were recorded. Child care centres, primary and secondary schools were suspended for a month and half. One million students were involved. The World Health Organization has issued travel advisory for 53 days. The economy was badly hit, ended up with the closing down of around 4,000 business units and loss of thirteen thousand jobs.

## SARS Prevention Volunteer Campaign

No doubt, fighting the SARS at the forefront were our dedicated health care teams who had demonstrated their professionalism and strong perseverance to treat the infected patients, and social workers providing counseling and soothing assistance to the distressed families and the vulnerable. However, at such turmoil when the community was pretty down, volunteerism based on the value of freewill, human concern and commitment would definitely be crucial to bring all people together and build community synergy to face the adversity. In recognition of this, Agency for Volunteer Service (AVS), dedicated to its mission to mobilize volunteer actions, launched a SARS Prevention Volunteer Campaign (The Campaign) with Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) at the wake of SARS outbreak. In view of the risk of infection, the response to the recruitment was pretty doubtful. To our amazement and encouragement, just in a few days, over 6,000 volunteers had willingly signed up for the Campaign. They came from all walks of life ranging from university students, working adults, professionals, retired persons to housewives. All of them were eager to help for a meaning cause, self-motivated by a strong passion for the community or a sense of social responsibility.

Over the three months of SARS outbreak, on record more than 45,000 volunteers had selflessly participated in the fight against the deadly disease. Their work could be grouped into three main streams, namely information and public education, caring for the under-privileged and support to community organization and projects.

### Information and Public Education Team

In the early days of the outbreak, the public were quite ignorant about the disease. They heard that the disease is incurable, once you got it, it could be fatal. And there seemed no way to identify the sources and detect the disease in advance accurately. To reduce the anxiety and fear of the community, information and public education was imperative. During the Campaign, volunteers helped the Department of Health distribute 400,000 SARS leaflets within three days at railway stations, piers and focal points. They set up Anti-SARS education booths at public housing estates, dispatching hygiene bags and SARS prevention kits to residents. They also assisted to organize health talks in the 18 districts all over the community, promote Hygiene Charter issued by the Operation Unite and collect subscriptions at large shopping centres. A medical and legal advisory hotline to answer public enquiries related to SARS, supported by lawyers, health workers and professional bodies like The Federation of Medical Societies of Hong Kong, College of Nursing Hong Kong and The Law Society of Hong Kong, was set up.

### Caring for the Under-privileged Team

The elderly were reported as having the highest infection and death rate caused by SARS. Those under-privileged elderly who lived alone, in poor living condition were one of the most vulnerable groups deserved care and attention. To protect and help the under-privileged groups, in collaboration with The Hong Kong Council of Social Service and the Operation Unite, thousands of volunteers paid visits to the singleton elderly, chronically ill and the disabled, assisting with house disinfection and cleaning. Many other volunteers provided “A day a call” service to the elderly living alone to give comfort and information related to virus prevention. Under the sponsorship of Lippo Group, another group delivered caring cards and gifts to support the infected patients and their families.

### Support to Community Project Team

In fact, volunteers were urgently needed in many community projects. A noteworthy one was the school cleaning campaign launched jointly by AVS and the Family School Cooperation Unit (FSCU) of the Education & Manpower Bureau.

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Large number of parent volunteers participated in the cleaning campaign whereas many looked after students in need during the suspension of schools. And other volunteers also actively took part in organizing health talks, fund-raising activities, manning hotline service, packing hygiene bags, delivering meals, conducting health survey, visitations and on-line tuition programme to students at home.

### Reflections of Volunteerism

To our great relief, with concerted efforts of all, the SARS attack was eventually cracked down. Looking back, we still felt sorry for the loss of lives, the pain of the victims and the damage done to our economy brought by the jolt of SARS. Nevertheless, we were all impressed by the spirit of volunteerism and solidarity of Hong Kong citizens reaching at a height ever so. All sectors and organizations had entirely no hesitation to contribute what they could, in cash or in kind; and volunteers courageously gave time and talents to fight the battle. Those critical moments surely would leave an extremely unforgettable experience to the people of Hong Kong. To AVS, the mobilization of volunteer forces to fight SARS was a historical event provoking insights and reflections in further promoting volunteerism.

### Interactive Platform for Volunteer Participation

According to the Study on Public's Reception and Perception of Volunteer Service conducted by AVS in 2001 International Year of Volunteers (IYV), it was found that over 66 % of the population had participated in volunteering in one form or another. The pretty high participation rate was concretely proved in the fight against SARS this time. In view of the enormous and powerful volunteer forces, one major concern is on how to tap, mobilize and channel their talents and potentials for proper and constructive use for community benefit. To address this, AVS has established a professional volunteer IT team and solicited the largest tele-communication group PCCW to set up an integrated web-based system, aiming to provide an efficient and effective interactive platform for volunteers to act on demand, and at the same time to enable the networking and mobilization of volunteers for community projects urgently requiring volunteer support.

## Quantity, Quality and Diversity of Service Opportunities

To increase the quantity, quality and diversity of service opportunities for volunteers is also an important agenda. Volunteers are always looking for meaningful jobs that can benefit the community and lead to self satisfactions. Notwithstanding the resource constraints, AVS has initiated a number of innovative projects for volunteer involvement in recent years. Among the projects are Cultural Services Volunteers Scheme, Hopeful Primary School Volunteer Service Project and Family Volunteering Scheme. SARS Prevention Volunteer Campaign was a typical instance. Though SARS has come down, however, no one knows if it will return in winter soon. Therefore we see a need to continue the SARS prevention campaign at all levels. The improvement of public hygiene and health standard should involve concerted efforts of all and the cultivation of social responsibility is fundamental. AVS is networking with different sectors to explore new frontier of volunteering in building Hong Kong as a hygiene city and a better place to live.

## Proper Management of Volunteer Involvement

In the SARS Prevention Volunteer Campaign, one of the greatest challenges was on how to provide adequate protection to ensure the safety of volunteers. We all understand that any new infected case would cause a whole family in crisis and put on extra burden to our already overloaded health care teams. In this regard, AVS tried its utmost to secure resources in providing volunteers with all necessary protective items like face masks, hand gloves, eye masks, protective gears and caps, etc. In addition, pre-service briefing and training were given to equip volunteers with adequate knowledge, skills and guidance required for the service. And constant communication, sharing and support to encourage volunteers throughout and after the service process were also vital to maintain their confidence and morale. Managing volunteers is not a simple task. Though volunteers are non-paid, volunteer service is absolutely not free. We need to inject resources in developing and enabling volunteers to achieve and produce quality results. AVS has set up the first Volunteer Training and Development Centre in Hong Kong early this year. It aims to promote good quality and excellent services by volunteers and address their needs for continuing growth and development.

## Volunteering as a Way of Life

We firmly believe that volunteerism is a way of life. Volunteers constitute part of the social capital of our society. Volunteering benefits both the helped and the helpers, pertaining to building of a caring community. Volunteerism exists in every society in the forms unique to its social and cultural context. Hong Kong people are generally regarded as sensible, pragmatic, instrumental and even materialistic and money-minded. However, it is evident that we also have loving hearts and passion to the community, and ready to help the needy. Once there is a need visibly coming up, we will never fail to give a hand. The SARS battle has witnessed such a unique volunteerism. Even though the economy has been in so poor shape, billions of dollars could still be raised just over weeks of time. Incredibly true was the pouring of volunteers to join forces for the SARS Prevention Campaign. That is a way of life of Hong Kong people. As some post-SARS studies reveal, people tend to have greater appreciation of the values of life and family, demonstrating increased volunteer spirit, solidarity and sense of belonging to the community.

## Our Pride and Special Thanks

We are proud of our volunteers! Salute to all organizations and individuals who have contributed much in the battle. In particular, AVS would like to pay special tribute to the Radio Television Hong Kong, Baleno Kingdom, Lippo Group, PCCW, FSCU of Education & Manpower Bureau, Department of Health, Home Affairs Department, Hospital Authority, Housing Department, The Hong Kong Council of Social Service, Operation Unite and Hong Kong Photographer Association for their collaboration and unflinching support throughout the SARS Prevention Volunteer Campaign. Dedicated to taking a pivotal role in promoting volunteerism, AVS will commit to its mission to develop partnership with all sectors to mobilize and facilitate individual and groups to provide quality and value added volunteer service in building a caring community and civil society.

Thank you.

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