



## **THE YELLOW RIBBON PROJECT SINGAPORE**

### **REACHING OUT AND TOUCHING A NATION**

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#### **AIM**

For many ex-offenders, the transition from a controlled prison environment to the society is a struggle and many would fail if left alone to do so. Therefore, it is imperative that the community actively supports the reintegration process. To achieve that, Singapore inceptioned the Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP) as a nation-wide public education campaign to prepare the community for the re-entry of ex-offenders. Its success over the last 16 years has allowed Singapore to achieve and sustain low recidivism rates of just over 20%<sup>1</sup>, and grow a strong support base of more than almost 9,000 partners and well-meaning individuals. The world-renowned campaign has since been replicated in various forms worldwide by foreign jurisdictions and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). This presentation will explain Singapore's strategy and integrated approach in unifying the nation through the Yellow Ribbon moniker for the betterment of offenders and their families.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

2. The work of rehabilitating offenders is spear-headed by the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE). Collectively, they form two of the nine departments under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). SPS is a uniformed organisation institutionalised in 1946, while SCORE is a quasi-government agency inceptioned in 1976. As lead agencies, SPS and SCORE form a symbiotic relationship in transforming the corrections landscape.

3. SPS had evolved from a traditional custodial agency faced with challenges of overcrowded prisons and manpower shortage due to high staff turnover and poor public perception. Today, SPS is a leading correctional agency characterised by effective inmate management and sustained low recidivism rates. It administers 15 institutions grouped under five Commands. They provide safe and secure custody for about 12,800 inmates and is staffed by 2,405 uniform and civilian officers.

#### **CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE YELLOW RIBBON PROJECT**

##### SPS Visioning Exercise

4. In the early 2000, SPS underwent a re-visioning exercise, which personified prison officers as Captains of Lives. This paradigm shift changed the role of prison officers from mere custodians to take on a rehabilitative-based approach. SPS's tagline: "Rehab, Renew, Restart" emphasises their

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<sup>1</sup> [www.data.gov.sg](http://www.data.gov.sg) on Singapore Prison Service's Recidivism Rate

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commitment to rehabilitate inmates who desire to change, renew and restart their lives for the better, and garner the support of the community.

5. SPS' vision and mission reads:

### *OUR VISION*

*As Captains of Lives, we inspire everyone, at every change, towards a society without re-offending.*

### *OUR MISSION*

*As a correctional agency, we enforce secure custody of offenders and rehabilitate them, for a safe Singapore*

6. The commitment to the bold and noble vision of becoming Captains in the lives of offenders laid the foundation for the launch of YRP in 2004.

### SCORE's Transformation

7. On 1 April 1976, SCORE was established as quasi-government agency under the MHA. Its status as a statutory board and separate entity from SPS enabled it to play a vital role in the Singapore correctional system by rebuilding lives and enhancing the employability potential of offenders. SCORE complements the work of SPS by focusing on the domains of skills training, work programme, employment assistance and forging community partnerships. Leveraging on its strength in partnerships and advocacy, SCORE took on the lead role in organising the YRP campaign and as its main secretariat.

### Formation of the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders (CARE) Network

8. In 2000, SPS and SCORE led the formation of the CARE Network, with the vision of 'Hope, Confidence and Opportunities for Ex-Offenders'. This alliance of the main players in the area of offender's reintegration aimsto ease the reintegration journey for ex-offenders and their families through inter-agency collaborations and implementation of aftercare interventions.

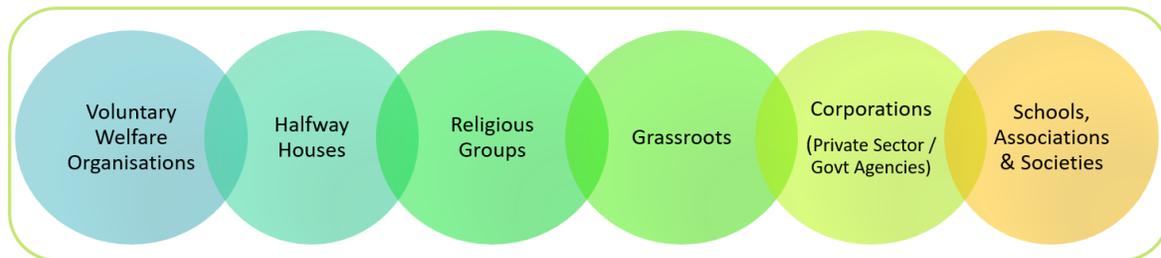
9. The CARE Network is comprised of the MHA, Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), SPS, SCORE, National Council of Social Service (NCSS), Industrial & Services Co-Operative Society Ltd (ISCOS), Singapore After-Care Association (SACA), Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) and Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF). These are all nationally accredited organisations, each responsible for the delivery of programmes and services supported by Government.

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### CARE Network Members [9 agencies]

Government	Non-Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)</li><li>• Ministry of Social &amp; Family Development (MSF)</li><li>• National Council of Social Service (NCSS)</li><li>• Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE)</li><li>• Singapore Prison Service (SPS)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Industrial &amp; Services Corporative Services (ISCOS)</li><li>• Singapore After Care Association (SACA)</li><li>• Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA)</li><li>• Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF)</li></ul>

### CARE Network Partners [More than 100 agencies]



### Why the Yellow Ribbon Project?

10. The CARE Network is best known for the YRP. For many ex-offenders, the move from a controlled prison environment to society as a free man is a big struggle. Many would fail if left alone to do so. It is with this in mind that the CARE Network deliberated on the need for a public education campaign; aimed at changing public perception towards giving ex-offenders a second chance in life. In doing so, the campaign aims to mobilise community support towards a supportive and inclusive environment for the offenders' successful reintegration. The outcome is for ex-offenders to be reintegrated into society as responsible citizens and to reduce recidivism.

### Genesis of the YRP

11. Since its inception, the YRP has garnered significant community support and has even inspired community organisations to co-own the work of reintegrating offenders into mainstream society. This is crucial to achieve a safer and more secure community for all.

12. Launched in 2004 by the former President of the Republic of Singapore Mr S.R Nathan, the YRP is known globally as the only national second chance campaign for ex-offenders. Its purpose is to generate awareness of the difficulties ex-offenders face after release, encourage acceptance of their return to society, and inspire public action to support their reintegration.

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13. The inspiration behind YRP was taken from a 1970s song entitled, “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree.” The lyrics of this song aptly describe an ex-offender’s desire for acceptance and forgiveness from his loved ones and await the community to set him free:

*“I’m really still in prison and my love she holds the key,  
a simple yellow ribbon’s what I need,  
to set me free...”*

### Genesis of the YRP - Unlocking the Second Prison

14. The YRP is based on the metaphorical approach that every offender encounters two prisons; the first being the physical prison during incarceration, and the second a ‘social and psychological prison’ in the community. This key to help unlock the second prison is now held by the community through their acceptance and support. Hence, the inherent message of the campaign had been weaved into the YRP logo, as seen below.



15. The community therefore plays an important part in the creation of an inclusive social environment where ex-offenders, who displayed a strong desire to change, could find the hope to start life afresh and become contributing members of society.

16. A spin-off of the YRP was the establishment of the Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF) in 2004. The YRF was the first national charitable fund devoted entirely for the ex-offenders and their families. It is registered under SCORE and in 2018; the fund disbursed \$1,161,910<sup>2</sup>, benefitting 3,816 ex-offenders, families and children of the incarcerated. Its key focal areas are in the provision of emergency financial assistance, funding residential support programmes, administering programmes in education and training, and family support programmes. The YRF has also been conferred Institute of Public Character status, which allows them to issue tax-deductible receipts to donors who want to claim tax relief based on the amount of qualifying donations made. The status and position of the YRF are thus significantly different to similar organisations that operate in other countries; which are typically charities, formed by advocacy groups, likeminded people and or religious organisations.

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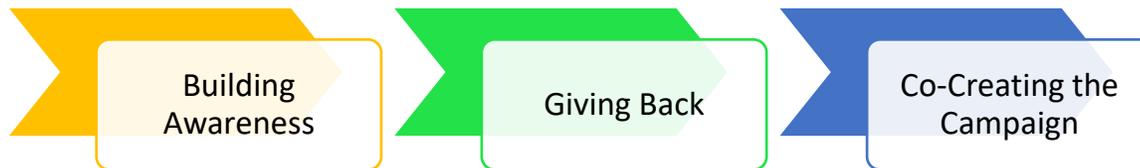
<sup>2</sup> Yellow Ribbon Fund Annual Report 2018

## ORGANISING THE CAMPAIGN AND ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

17. The YRP's success in shifting public perception can be attributed to its key strategies in touching the hearts and minds of the nation through branding, marketing communications, ease of public participation and forging key community partnerships.

### Thematic Development

18. The YRP's modus operandi is underpinned by a long-term over-arching theme. The premise of this thematic development is to augment the level of engagement upwards and build upon the successes of the preceding year. While the first few YRP campaigns focused on creating awareness, subsequent campaigns progressively widened and deepened the message by engaging the community and mobilising inmates and reformed ex-offenders to give back to society. In the recent years, the YRP has started to focus on co-creating the campaign with the community. This includes co-funding, sharing of the brand and even exporting the concept of YRP to foreign counterparts.



### Branding

19. Effective brand positioning has been instrumental for the success of the YRP campaign. The simple icon of a yellow ribbon and the meaning associated with it is easily identifiable and recognisable by all strata of society. The success of the brand also lies with the consistency and discipline of the message each year. Although the events and activities may change with each YRP year, the inherent message to be relayed across remained the same – the universal values of acceptance, forgiveness and second chances.

20. The iconic Yellow Ribbon was intentionally sustained over the years before evolving to its current form. In the initial years, inmates took part in hand-making the Yellow Ribbons; twirling a 20 centimetres long yellow strip into a ribbon. The annual production output averaged at about 300,000 ribbons. The shape was modernised in 2009 before it evolved into the form of a Yellow Ribbon magnet pin. This consistent branding helped build mindshare in the initial years of brand-building.

### Harnessing the Media

21. The YRP has also captured the hearts and minds of a national audience by leveraging on various media outreach strategies through film, advertising and social media. The media strategies complement the efforts of larger-scale community activities as it establishes project as a recognisable brand with presence throughout the year. This strategy gives the Yellow Ribbon Project opportunities and feedback to shape the perspectives surrounding ex-offenders, build empathy, and suggest tangible supportive actions the community can undertake.

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22. Complementing its extensive marketing communications effort, the YRP enjoys wide media coverage from the Singapore media. It constantly provides the media with a fertile spread of interesting story angles ranging from human interest, ex-offender reintegration issues and heart-warming stories on how community has stepped up to take lead in the campaign.

### Community Partnerships and Outreach Activities

23. The YRP stages a few events a year to bring the campaign alive. In 2003, the idea of organising a large charity concert was conceived and the former President of Singapore Mr S.R. Nathan launched the YRP in 2004. Since then, a series of different events are organized to shape and nudge the perceptions of the public attitudes towards ex-offenders.

24. In the early years, the YRP campaigning climaxes in September. During the month, the YRP will organise a series of events and outreach activities including a month-long Wear-A-Yellow-Ribbon campaign to encourage members of public to publicly demonstrate their support for ex-offenders and their families through the simple act of donning a Yellow Ribbon. Over the years, more than two million Yellow Ribbons had been distributed.

25. As the YRP campaign progressed on, it has evolved into a year-long movement with a peak in September. Every September, the YRP's signature event – Yellow Ribbon Prison Run is organised. The event is the culmination of all the YRP elements manifested in the form of a national sporting event. It features inmates volunteering to perform at the event, volunteers helping with logistics and is the only event where participants pay an entrance fee to show their support for the movement. The run is mostly sold-out with about 10,000 runners annually and sees participation from corporations, ex-offenders and well-meaning individuals. Through the YRP branding, SCORE has seen a 10-fold increase in number of employers in its job bank from 1,344 in 2004 to about 5,600<sup>3</sup> in 2019. The model was so successful that counterparts also reiterated the Yellow Ribbon Prison Run concept in Czech Republic, Hong Kong and Philippines.

26. Inspired by the message of second chances, many well-meaning individuals were inspired and had offered to serve and personally help the beneficiaries. Harnessing that strong support, the SPS initiated the Yellow Ribbon Community Project (YRCP) in 2010. The YRCP is an upstream intervention programme, where volunteers are recruited, trained and forward-deployed in the residential areas of offenders. In doing so, the YRP is able to effectively deploy volunteers to provide first-hand assistance by reaching out to families of newly-admitted offenders. This involves helping them link up with relevant government and NGOs for social assistance and support. Annually, more than 400 volunteers are mobilised to assist over 8,000<sup>4</sup> youths, ex-offenders and families.

27. To maintain mindshare and to build greater community goodwill, the YRP collaborates with community partners in the co-creation of secondary Yellow Ribbon activities. One example is the Yellow Ribbon Song-Writing Competition. It is a collaboration with the Composers and Authors

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<sup>3</sup> Singapore Prison Service Statistics Release 2019

<sup>4</sup> Singapore Anti-Narcotics Associations

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Society of Singapore (COMPASS). As part of COMPASS' mandate to promote the production of local music, they fund songwriting workshops and music competitions for offenders. Albums of original compositions were produced to provide exposure for offenders keen to pursue a career in the music industry.

28. Besides collaborating with industrial partners, the YRP recognises the importance of nurturing the future leaders of Singapore. To do this, the YRP annually partners with schools and outreaches to about 12,500 students a year through student-led projects. In a collaboration with tertiary institution; Lassalle College of the Arts. This collaboration saw students producing social media videos to highlight the reintegration struggles faced by ex-offenders and how the role of the community in helping them.

### Involvement of Inmates and Ex-offenders

29. Inmates and ex-offenders formed an integral part of our campaign. This was reflected in production of the Yellow Ribbons. The inmate's effort symbolically represented their desire for acceptance from the community and their willingness to change. They pitch in efforts by providing transportation and logistics assistance in events, distributing Yellow Ribbons, performing at events. Many were not afraid of stepping out in the open to reveal their past on national press or television to be an encouragement to others and to thank the community for the support given to them and their families.

30. Last year, the YRP reciprocated the strong community by celebrating the state's 54<sup>th</sup> birthday. 30 inmates volunteered to pack 50,000 packs for the National Day Parade. This act of giving back was curated to publicly demonstrate that prisoners can make worthy contributions to society whilst serving custodial sentences.

31. Over the years, the YRP had generated positive response from ex-offenders, some of whom were mobilised to contribute further towards the cause.

### Engagement of Influencers and Rehabilitation Ambassadors

32. Influencers, celebrities and rehabilitation ambassadors formed an important part of the engagement strategy in the initial years. With their popularity and influence, they are well positioned to spread the YRP message, serve as crowd-pullers, and more importantly act as ambassadors in support of the campaign.

33. A key strategy deployed by the YRP to gain public traction is the engagement of key political office holders as influencers. The strong political support has amplified the message of second chances at the highest levels. A key highlight was the engagement of the 8<sup>th</sup> President of the Republic of Singapore Mdm Halimah Yacob as the Guest of Honour at the Yellow Ribbon Community Art Exhibition 2018. Other key politicians engaged include Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and key cabinet ministers in the domains of Defence, Law, Home Affairs, Manpower, Transport, Social and Family etc.

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### THE IMPACT

34. The YRP has generated a lot of interest and support since its inception. Its positive outreach and message of “*Help Unlock the Second Prison*” had permeated into all levels of society. The logo of the Yellow Ribbon is now synonymously recognised as a symbol of giving hope and second chances to ex-offenders in Singapore. The Singaporean public, community leaders, ex-offenders and their families have publicly embraced the philosophy of YRP and shown their support by participating in our activities.

35. A public perception survey was commissioned in 2018 to elicit the Singaporean public’s attitudes towards ex-offenders and their awareness of the YRP. Findings showed that at least 9 out of 10 of the respondents were aware of the YRP, indicating that our outreach and media efforts have largely been successful in creating awareness of the YRP cause. The findings also showed that about 65% of respondents indicated that they were ready to accept ex-prisoners in the domains of school, work, family and community.

36. Beyond its success as a publicity campaign, the YRP has also supported efforts in reducing the recidivism rate. Alongside strong rehabilitative programmes and the combined community effort, the two-year recidivism rate has been kept low by international standards. The two-year recidivism rate for the 2016 cohort was 23.7%.<sup>5</sup>

37. The Registration of Criminals (Amendment) Act was amended in May 2005 to help deserving ex-offenders reintegrate into society. The amended Act would allow an ex-offender convicted of a less serious crime to have his record considered spent if he met the specified criteria and stayed clean for a five-year period. Following this, the Singapore Civil Service amended their job application form on 1 April 2006. Candidates with spent records could now indicate that they did not have any criminal records, thus increasing their opportunities in their job search. In 2006, the Ministry of Transport, Land Transport Authority reviewed the guidelines for issuance and renewal of vocational licences for drivers of public service vehicles to make it more flexible for ex-offenders to get the license.

38. In recognition, SPS was awarded the UN Honourable Mention in 2007 by the United Nations Department of Public Information, in conjunction with the International Public Relations Association, for its achievement in driving awareness, acceptance and action for ex-offenders through the YRP. The International Corrections and Prisons Association also presented the YRP a Certificate of Special Commendation (2012) to formally acknowledge the high standard of work that the project has accomplished. Locally, YRP’s media campaign received the Public Relations in the Service of Mankind (PRISM) Excellence Award under the Public Service Campaigns category. It has successfully established itself as a national brand in Singapore, and was featured in the book, *50 things to love about Singapore*<sup>6</sup> commemorating the 50-year anniversary of Singapore’s Independence in 2015.

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<sup>5</sup> Singapore Prison Service Statistics Release 2018

<sup>6</sup> 50 things to love about Singapore by Long, 2015

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39. Beyond the shores of Singapore, the movement has touched the hearts of foreign jurisdictions based on the principles from Singapore's YRP. It is replicated in various forms in Fiji, Czech Republic, Australia, Hong Kong, United States of America, Nigeria and Philippines.

### CONCLUSION

40. Ex-offenders need the support of their families and the community for them to reintegrate into society successfully. Rehabilitation programmes would help to reform and prepare the ex-offender for release. However, what is equally critical is to prepare the community to accept the reintegration of these ex-offenders. A concerted effort is required to effect a mindset change. Only with the close partnership and commitment between the government, community partners and civil society as a whole, will we succeed in truly building an inclusive and forward-looking society.

41. Thus creating a safer and more secure Singapore.