

Shanmugam calls for clearer rules on guide dogs

‘Supportive regulatory framework’ needed to support visually impaired

By PRISCILLA GOY

CLEARER regulations are needed to support people who are blind who use guide dogs, said Law Minister K. Shanmugam yesterday.

He called for a “more supportive regulatory framework”, adding that he came to know of some difficulties faced by those who are visually impaired who use guide dogs after meeting psychotherapist Cassandra Chiu in February.

Mr Shanmugam, who is a Member of Parliament for Nee Soon GRC, was speaking at a dinner organised by the Guide Dogs Association of the Blind (GDAB) to thank

its donors and supporters held at the Riverview Hotel Singapore.

Ms Chiu, 34, who is blind, is the second Singaporean trained to use a guide dog. There are about 4,000 people who are visually impaired and three guide dogs here.

She has been turned away by restaurant staff and taxi drivers, for instance, because she had her guide dog, named Esme, with her, said Mr Shanmugam.

He said: “I accept that there could be religious sensitivities, so it may not be possible to have a blanket rule the other way.

“But we can make allowances for religious sensitivities, then

subject to that, improve on the current situation in a regulatory way. It must be possible, and should be done.”

There have also been difficulties in getting a system in place to have proper recognition of guide dogs, Mr Shanmugam added.

He also called for a “compassionate, proactive inter-agency approach” in addressing problems faced by those who are visually impaired. This is because some problems do not fall under the purview of a single agency and are difficult to solve.

To help the community, Mr Shanmugam announced a new rehabilitation programme.

The project is a collaboration between the GDAB, Nee Soon GRC and Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. Mr Shanmugam said he will



Mr Alvin Ng (left) and his guide dog Seretta meeting guide dog Esme and its owner Cassandra Chiu (in white) before the Gratitude in Darkness dinner at River View Hotel last night. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

support Ms Chiu, who is spearheading efforts to set up a centre which will offer the programme.

While the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped also offers a vision rehabilitation programme, Ms Chiu told The Straits Times in an e-mail reply: “This centre takes a different approach – it will focus on alternative methods of adaptability

through training of the other senses.

“The intended outcome of the centre is for persons with vision loss to be integrated back into their original environment, as far as possible, rather than be limited to special environments because of their unique condition.”

It will also cater to caregivers and the community to support

those with vision loss, she said.

While details are still sketchy, the centre will be staffed by about 10 people, including Ms Chiu, and located within Nee Soon GRC.

At the dinner, about 70 guests had the experience of “dining in the dark”, with the lights turned on only when Mr Shanmugam made his speech.

✉ goysiyi@sph.com.sg