STRENGTHENING SOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH BEFRIENDING

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social support is a crucial factor in helping ex-offenders to reintegrate into community and mitigate their risk of re-offending (Bonta & Andrew, 2106; Sampson & Laub, 2011, 2003). Singapore After-Care Association (SACA) implemented the Befriending Programme to provide social support to ex-offenders through volunteers.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To explore how social support for ex-offenders can be strengthened through SACA's befriending programme.
- To examine:
  - What are the systems and processes in befriending that have been helpful?
  - How befriending has benefited the clients?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a case study approach (Yin, 2018), focusing on SACA's Befriending Programme as the unit of analysis. The research design incorporates the following methods to gather comprehensive insights:

Quantitative
- Programme outputs (e.g. no. of clients matched, no. of completion)
- Ratings given by volunteers and clients through feedback forms

Qualitative
- Individual interviews with 4 volunteers and 5 clients
- Clients' written feedback
- Secondary data (e.g. befriending reports by volunteers)

Logic model for the befriending programme was reviewed and referenced to guide both the qualitative and quantitative data collection
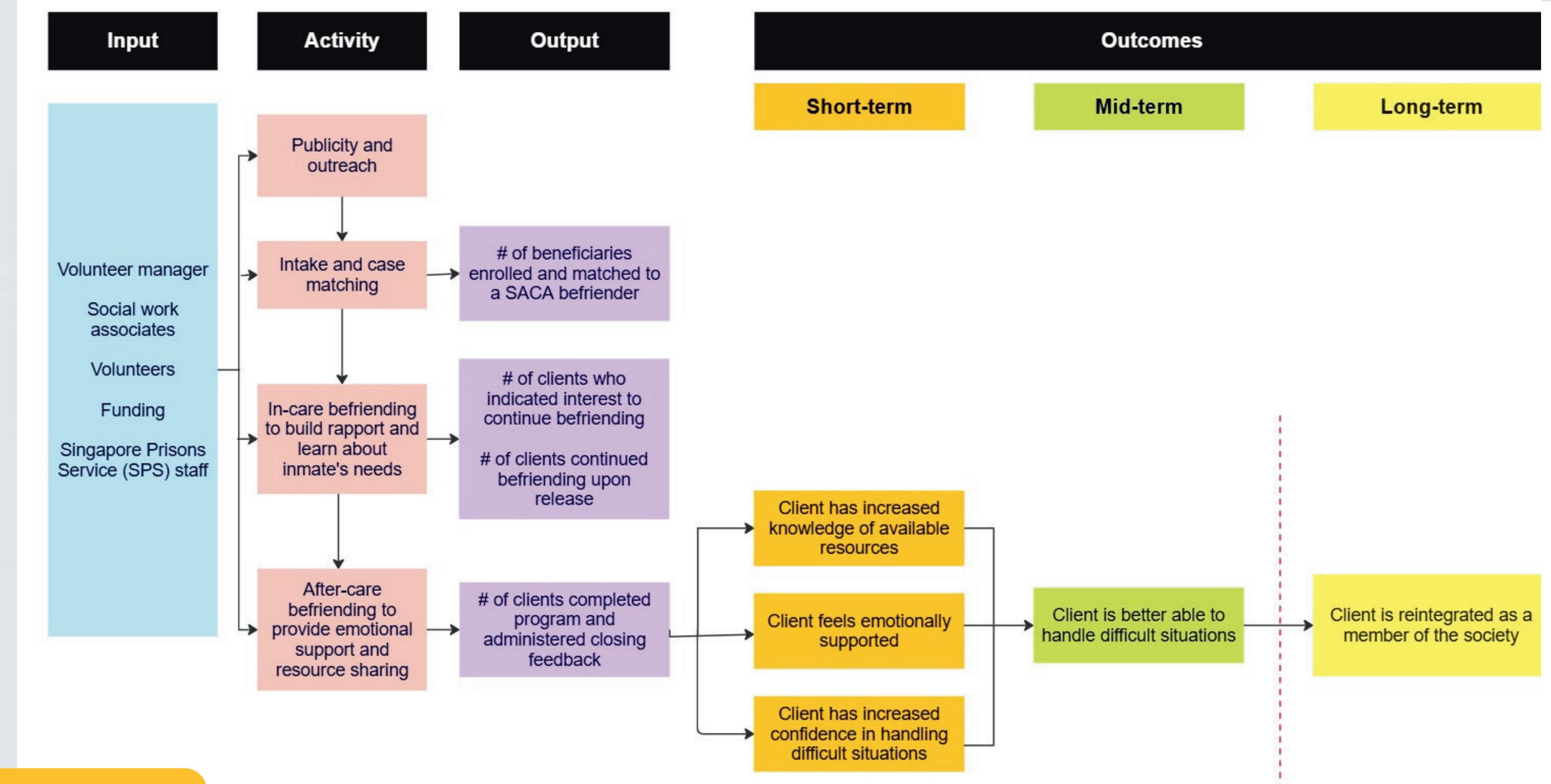
4. FINDINGS
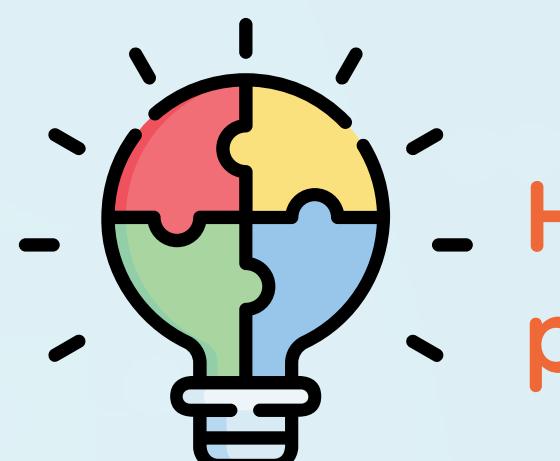
Helpful systems/ processes

① **Volunteer selection and training is crucial**
- Befrienders are the key agent of change
- Training is crucial regardless of years of volunteering

② **Structured, consistent & multiple ways of monitoring service delivery**
- Mitigate programme drift and ensure that service quality is maintained
- Random audit of befrienders, regardless of experience

③ **Programme team is responsive in addressing challenges faced by volunteers**
- Volunteers feel supported when their concerns are addressed by staff promptly

"A beneficiary overstep boundary. Find it difficult to tell the person off in a professional way. I shared with (Volunteer manager) and she took over"

(Interview with volunteer)

### Helpful practice by befrienders

- Focus on rapport-building
- Engage clients regularly, using multiple modes of communication
- Express care & concern and being attentive to clients' needs
- Empower clients to take ownership of their own problems and change (e.g. clients making their own decisions)

"I note that his mood was down during this meeting."

(Befriending report)

"We explored the pros and cons about these two places. At the end, client decided his best option to live with his parents as he can look after them."

(Befriending report)
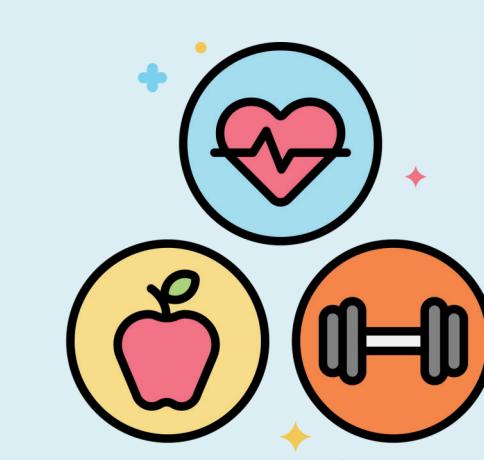
Benefits experienced by clients

- Felt encouraged and emotionally supported
- Learnt about the relevant community resources
- Given professional help based on befrienders' expertise
- Provided with guidance to navigate life challenges
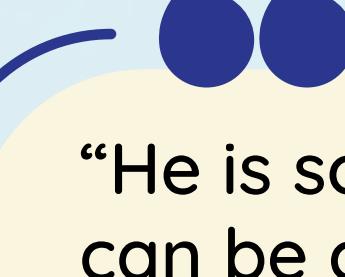
"He is someone I can relate to, very motivating, can be casual and speak to him, doesn't judge, very open to what he wants, feel like he really means it. Even after I leave, he is still with me."

(Befriending feedback form)

5. DISCUSSION & RECCOMMENDATIONS

Caution is needed to generalise the findings
- Current study had limited data and small sample size
- Research team was unable to find out first-hand accounts of clients who have dropped out of the programme.

The findings have highlighted SACA's efforts in strengthening social support through befriending:

- Adopts a systemic approach, consisting of volunteer selection, training, management, and service delivery monitoring, for more effective befriending
- Emphasises the importance of volunteer-client relationship in prosocial support e.g. showing care and concern, attending to clients' needs, and empowering them

- Findings align with Relational Theory of Reflexivity (Donati, 2019, 2011), in particular the concepts of solidarity and subsidiarity.
- Future research: (1) Examine how befriending relationship develops and impact on client's desistance from crime. (2) Compare the effects of volunteer help versus professional help.

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References list:
https://tinyurl.com/SACAposterCNS2025