When to ease curbs on dorm workers? Experts differ

Some say it is time to ease the strict restrictions on their movement, but others urge caution

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Nearly three weeks have passed since a Covid-19 case was last reported in foreign worker dormitories, and some health experts say the authorities can consider easing the strict movement restrictions on residents there.

They have remained subject to mass antigen movement curbs in Singapore, following the rapid and massive outbreak of the virus in dorms that began in March.

Apart from going to work or to run essential errands, workers are still largely restricted to their dorms, but can visit specified recreation centres on their rest days.

Several health experts The Straits Times spoke to noted that the Covid-19 situation in dorms has abated, though they differed on when restrictions on migrant workers should be lifted.

Infectious diseases specialist Leong Hoe Nam said the authorities can now consider allowing the workers more freedom to move in the community, given that Singapore crossed the 14-day mark without infections in dorms last Wednesday. The last infection in dorms was reported on Nov 10.

There are already many safeguards in place to prevent another outbreak in dormitories, such as routine screening of workers, mandatory mask-wearing and social distancing rules, he said.

While it would take 28 days, or two incubation cycles of the virus, to fully ensure that dormitories are free of Covid-19, Dr Leong said this timeline can be shortened because of the extensive measures in place.

Even if an infected person goes out into the community, the disease should not spread if everyone abides by the mask-wearing, measured social distancing rules, he added. “With this argument in place, it makes sense for foreign workers to have some normalcy,” he said.

Professor Tan Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said workers should be allowed back into the community when Singapore crosses its next phase, as that would mean the whole community is ready for rapid contact tracing and testing.

The authorities have said Singapore will enter phase three of its reopening only when about 70 per cent of the population participates in TraceTogether, a technology-enabled contact tracing programme.

“With the widespread use of TraceTogether, it is much more possible to halt an outbreak quickly through aggressive contact tracing, testing and quarantining,” said Prof Tan.

Dr Ling Li Min, an infectious diseases physician, urged caution, noting that there are “pockets of asymptomatic infections lurking around.”

This is evident by new cases that emerged after 15 days of no infections in the community, she said.

These cases came after they were reported since last Thursday.

She added that it is expected that the authorities would take a “steady and gradual approach” in relaxing these measures.

In response to queries from ST, the Manpower Ministry said it will further ease the restrictions on dorm residents if infection rates are “sustained at low levels.”

It has also worked with community groups to arrange for organised excursions for residents.

Meanwhile, workers said they hope the rules can be relaxed soon.

Mr Siddat Mohammad, 27, a Bangladesh carpenter who stays in a purpose-built dormitory, said his life revolves around work.

He said he reports to work almost everyday, even though he resides in a dormitory straight after.

If he is able to venture out again “because I’ve been bored in the dorm”, but employers ST spoke to said that not all their workers could be allowed back into the community when Singapore moves to its next phase, as that would mean the whole community is ready for rapid contact tracing and testing.

A migrant worker wearing a contact tracing device issued by the authorities.

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