Istana Open House features inclusive employment for the first time

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President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and his spouse Jane Ittogi speaking to Fathima Zohra, an inclusive employment recruiter at social enterprise Inclus, at the Istana open house on Nov 1. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY



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Summarise

SINGAPORE – Inclusive employment for people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups took centre stage at the Istana open house, which was held on Nov 1 ahead of Deepavali.

It was the first time the open house – usually focused on live performances and family-friendly activities – had showcased such efforts.

At the event, visitors learnt more about the communities in need of help, as well as the employment barriers faced by such job seekers.

Also present were President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and his spouse Jane Ittogi who interacted with community organisations and inclusive employers who had set up booths there.

These included social enterprise Inclus, which helps people with disabilities gain meaningful employment, and New Hope Community Services, which provides shelter and employment support for the disadvantaged.

New Hope, for instance, worked with two hotels – Novotel Singapore on Stevens and Mercure Singapore on Stevens – to secure employment for disadvantaged individuals.

Leslie Lenus, who is area director of people and culture at both hotels, said that rather than searching for the perfect candidate, the hotels started from what each role requires, and matched it to individuals' strengths.

They also broke roles into clear, manageable tasks, and provided structured onboarding, consistent routines, and regular guidance from supervisors and peers.

"Inclusive hiring does not mean lowering standards. Inclusive hires are held to the same expectations for performance and service," he added.

The community marketplace at the Istana was organised by the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) Foundation, the social impact arm of SBF.

Yap Su-Yin, the foundation's chief executive, said: "For some individuals, the barriers to employment begin long before they reach the job interview, and may continue after they are hired."



Visitors taking part in activities during the Istana open house on Nov 1. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Job seekers might be rough sleepers, distressed women facing family challenges, or those recovering from mental health conditions. All these groups could benefit from tailored coaching, skills preparation, confidence-building and support to navigate the job market, she added.

“Employers, in turn, may need guidance to redesign roles, adapt workplace practices and support employees as they settle into work. These are areas where collaboration between businesses and community organisations can make a real difference”, said Yap, who is also the federation’s chief social sustainability officer.

Earlier in the day, the President – who is also the patron of SBF Foundation – flagged off the EmployWell: Walk for Work 2026.

More than 1,000 participants from over 110 companies took part in the 1.6km charity walk – held for the first time at the Istana – through various points around the premises.



President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and his spouse Jane Ittogi flagging off the EmployWell: Walk for Work 2026 charity walk at the Istana on Nov 1. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

The walk raised more than $1 million, which will go towards the foundation’s community partners and job seekers, including strengthening partnerships with social service agencies.

Yap said the EmployWell programme has helped over 2,700 individuals get employability support since 2022, of whom more than 1,250 managed to secure jobs with over 200 inclusive employers.

SBF Foundation intends to scale up the programme to include mature workers, as there is a growing need to support them and create “meaningful pathways for continued purpose, employment and contribution”.

Another first was live narration during the changing of the guards ceremony, for visitors to understand the significance of the longstanding military tradition.

The open house also featured a dedicated reading space by the National Library Board as part of its ReadSG initiative, including a selection of books recommended by the President and Ittogi.

Visitors also enjoyed various music, dance and cultural performances, featuring local singer-songwriters Ahmadul Amin and Heema Izzati, and students from Singapore Polytechnic.

The open house is being held until 8pm on Nov 1, with the last entry at 6.30pm. Entry to the Istana grounds is free for Singapore citizens, permanent residents, and migrant domestic workers accompanying families. Other visitors are required to pay an admission fee.

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