

Ex-convicts spruce up home of needy man for Chinese New Year



Mr Koh Hock Choon (second from left), receiving a token of appreciation from Head of Jamiyah Halfway House, Mr Mohamad Faizal Abas. With them is Mr Chee Hong Tat (second from right). TNP PHOTO: MARCELLIN LOPEZ

Ex-convicts spruce up man's flat as part of Project Happiness, organised by Jamiyah Halfway House



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Jan 28, 2020 06:00 am

He has not had visitors to his flat for Chinese New Year since his elderly mother died four years ago.

But last week, Mr Koh Hock Choon opened his doors to about 20 guests, including Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry Chee Hong Tat, who also tossed yusheng with Mr Koh, wishing him good health and prosperity for the new year.

A beneficiary of the Jamiyah Halfway House's Community Outreach and Development Department, Mr Koh, 52, who is single, had his home spruced up for the first time since he moved into his Toa Payoh flat 22 years ago.

He said, in a mix of Mandarin and English: "I'm very happy there are people out there who are willing to help me.

"I've never renovated my flat before... I try to paint my house every five years, but it would take me about four days."

He was deemed medically unfit for work in 1996 due to heart-related issues.

Mr Koh's two-room rental flat was given a new look with a fresh coat of paint, newly installed lights, two ceiling fans, a water heater, a new refrigerator and new furniture.

The home makeover project, called Project Happiness, is now in its fourth year. This year's edition is sponsored by Tan Chin Tuan Foundation and Cosy Cool and organised by the Jamiyah Halfway House (Darul Islah) as part of its community outreach engagement programme. Six residents of Darul Islah took part in the week-long spring cleaning.

One of them, 33-year-old Nasri (not his real name), said: "Seeing how the flat is all nicely painted makes me feel hopeful.

"We may be ex-convicts with a past, but we can still contribute to society if people give us a chance."

Mr Mohamad Faizal Abas, head of Darul Islah, said the effort was organised to provide ex-prisoners an opportunity to re-integrate into society.

He said: "They may be shunned by society because of their tattoos or their background, we want to change that perception."

Mr Chee said the initiative showed how Singapore is a caring society regardless of race or religion.

He said: "I am very heartened to see the residents of Darul Islah taking the extra step to do something for the community and putting their skills to good use.

"Efforts like these help our ex-offenders re-integrate back to society."