

# Singaporeans answer call to help foreign workers with donated phones



About 50 3G phones were distributed to foreign workers by TWC2 on Tuesday (21 March) evening. (PHOTO: Nicholas Yong)

Rashid Mamunur, 33, calls his family in Bangladesh for a few minutes on his 2G mobile phone every day.

“It’s very important because if I don’t call, they will worry,” said Rashid, who is married with a three-year-old daughter. He came to Singapore in 2008 to become a construction worker.

Sitting in the New Shapla Restaurant in Desker Road, a regular haunt for South Asian workers, he told *Yahoo Singapore* – with the help of an intermediary – that he has been unable to work since July 2016 due to a work injury.

Rashid was left with a broken ankle that required two metal implants, and now walks with the aid of a crutch. He also experiences persistent pain in his hip and lower back, and is waiting to be assessed for permanent incapacity.

But there was a bright spot for Rashid on Tuesday (21 March) evening, as he was one of about 50 recipients of 3G mobile phones donated by members of the public to migrant worker advocacy group Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2).

TWC2 is giving out the phones to its clients who are unable to work or who have not been paid by their employers, with a points system to help prioritise workers according to their needs.

While many blue-collar foreign workers in Singapore use 2G or second-generation mobile phones – which provide voice calls, SMS and basic Internet access – telcos will be shuttering the 2G network by April.

But a mobile phone is essential for such workers, to both keep in touch with loved ones back home and to call for help if they are involved in workplace disputes.

There were raucous scenes at New Shapla Restaurant, as Bangladeshi and Indian workers were assigned random numbers and then waited to be handed their gift-wrapped phones. The recipients excitedly ripped the boxes open and immediately began trying out the new phones, as volunteers assisted them in changing their SIM cards and navigating the devices.

A beaming Rubel Mohammad Hazrat Ali shows off his new 3G mobile. (PHOTO: Nicholas Yong)

One recipient was Ashadul, 37, who injured his hand and back in a workplace accident last September. He cannot tell his wife, whom he calls every few days, about his injury as “she will cry many many”, said Ashadul.

Asked how he felt to be receiving a new 3G phone, Ashadul smiled and said, “Happy.”

TWC2 treasurer Alex Au said that the group has collected about 300 phones since September 2016, of which half were in working condition.

The group also raised \$11,458 and bought an additional 100 phones. These will be given out in batches, while the extra phones will be shared with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Home and HealthServe, and kept in reserve for clients who do not own a phone.

## **Filling a gap**

Au said that of the estimated 1,000 clients under TWC2's care, who include maids and construction workers, about one in five do not own a 3G mobile phone.

“The condition of the donated phones varied a lot. Some had scratches, or cracked screens, or no charger, but most were in serviceable condition. It's quite gratifying that we have pulled it off because it proves that there is a generous and sympathetic side of Singaporeans vis-à-vis the foreign worker,” Au added.

One of the donors is Samantha Choo, 26, who rallied her friends and colleagues to donate a total of six mobile phones.

“I've always been quite interested in the migrant worker issue, so I am quite familiar with their difficulties and loneliness, being so far from home. If they don't have access to their families and friends, they can't talk to them and it's quite depressing,” said Ms Choo, who works at a non-profit NGO.

Beneficiaries like Rashid Mamunur are certainly grateful. “I am feeling very happy that so many people came and gave the phone to us. I'm very touched,” he said.

## **Other efforts**

Other organisations such as the Lasallian Youth Network are also collecting 3G mobiles for foreign workers.

According to its youth coordinator Ed-Lind Lee, it has amassed 20 phones since February and has also raised some \$2,500 to purchase phones. It hopes to collect 100 phones and raise \$4,000 by April as it has identified 105 needy individuals.

TWC2's donation drive has ended but those who wish to donate to the Lasallian Youth Network's efforts can find out more at [sgprojectcope165.weebly.com](http://sgprojectcope165.weebly.com).