Funding scheme to cover more disabled people

Those of all ages to benefit from fund that lowers cost of assistive devices

By PRISCILLA GOY

A FUNDING scheme to help people with disabilities pay less for devices that help with daily functioning will be enhanced from August, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday.

The Assistive Technology Fund (ATF) is currently only for disabled students and workers to buy assistive technology devices, such as Braille typewriters, for use at school or in the workplace. It subsidises up to 90 per cent of the cost of the equipment.

The fund will be extended to help people with disabilities of all ages pay for devices for all uses, including those that help with daily living. It can also be used by people in therapy who are not working.

Said Mr Tharman, who is also Finance Minister: “There is scope for persons with disabilities to make much greater use of assistive technologies, not just in education and jobs, but also for rehabilitation and daily living.”

He was speaking to about 500 guests at a charity dinner to mark the 63rd anniversary of the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH).

Two other enhancements will be made to the scheme.

To help more middle-income families benefit, the monthly household income per capita cap for eligibility will be raised from $1,500 to $1,800.

In addition, each beneficiary can get up to $40,000 of subsidies in his lifetime, double the current $20,000 maximum.

Mr Tharman said the lifetime cap will be increased as people may need money to replace assistive devices. Their needs also change as they move through different life stages, from education to employment to retirement.

With the latest enhancements, the number of ATF beneficiaries is expected to double to 400 each year.

All the changes will take effect from August.

Mr Tharman said he hoped more people with disabilities can benefit from technology and gain independence.

“The technologies are advancing, (becoming) much more user-friendly, much more customised to the needs of individuals with disabilities.”

Mr Sadik Ishak, who has been blind from the age of 12, agreed. “Technology can open up many opportunities,” he said.

The 25-year-old part-time SAVH administrator hopes to use the fund to buy optical character recognition software, which can convert text into audio files. It costs about $1,000.

He also welcomed the increase in lifetime cap for ATF subsidies.

“There’s wear and tear, and technology can get obsolete quickly over time, so we’d need to get new devices. The items are not cheap.”

Mr Sadik Ishak, who has been blind from the age of 12, hopes to use the Assistive Technology Fund to buy optical character recognition software, which can convert text into audio files. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG