

For discussion on
12 March 2001

LegCo Panel on Welfare Service
Support Provided to Families in Crisis

PURPOSE

This paper informs Members of the current position and future development of supportive services provided to families in crisis.

BACKGROUND

2. Over the past several years, Hong Kong has faced rapid economic and social changes including economic downturn, increase of unemployment cases, new arrivals, divided families, single parent families and working parents who have to work long or irregular hours. Some families have experienced stress in coping with these changes. The Administration is committed to strengthening support to these families and provide the required assistance to help them cope with crisis and adversity in positive ways.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

3. The family unit is a vital component of society. In supporting families, the approach adopted is “prevention is better than cure” and that early identification of problems and prompt intervention is needed in handling family crisis. The main objectives of family welfare services are —

- (1) to preserve and strengthen the family as a unit so that they may provide a suitable environment for the physical, emotional, and social development of its members;

- (2) to give assistance and enhance family functioning through supportive services so that it can cope with difficulties in family life; and
- (3) to restore families in trouble so that they can regain self-reliance.

CURRENT PROVISION

4. To support families to handle difficulty and crisis, the Department has developed a comprehensive network of welfare services to cater for family needs. In 2000-01, an amount of \$1,637 M is allocated to the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide services under the family and child welfare programme. In fact, services under other programmes such as those for elderly persons and young people are also devoted to cater for the needs of the specific members of the family. In 2001-02, the estimated provision for family and child welfare will amount to \$1,747 M, representing an increase of 6.7% over that of the previous year. In service delivery, a multi-level intervention strategy is implemented through the provision of a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services.

Preventive service

5. Preventive programmes are primarily delivered through family life education (FLE). FLE aims at enhancing family functioning by helping families fulfil developmental tasks at different stages of the family life cycle, adapt to change and cope with stress, strengthen family relationship by equipping individuals with knowledge and skills in coping with changing roles and demands in life, and developing a positive attitude towards family responsibilities. Apart from public education through publicity in the mass

media, and provision of relevant information in the FLE website, educational programmes, supportive groups and mutual help groups with FLE content are conducted in co-operation with child care workers in child care centres, social workers in children and youth centres, integrated teams, school social work service units and family activity and resource centres.

Supportive service

6. Besides the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme and charitable trust funds which provide a safety net to assist families facing financial crisis, SWD and NGOs provide a wide range of services to support families, especially those at risk of dysfunctioning. These include a range of services on child care, home help, family aide, residential and community care for the elderly and the disabled, and carer support centres, etc. Social workers co-ordinate these services to meet the changing needs of individual families. To support families, other supportive services are also provided. For example, starting from September 2000, an annual subsidy of \$21 M was provided to 6,000 after-school care places operated by NGOs to enhance the service quality and assist in releasing the child care burden of parents, in particular those in disadvantaged circumstances, so that they can join the work force or attend re-training courses. With effect from early 2001, an additional annual allocation of \$16.7 M has been provided for 100 child care centres to operate an extended hours service in order to assist parents who have to attend re-training programme or work long hours. Besides, SWD also provides support and financial assistance, amounting to \$6 M in 2000-01, to assist non-profit-making organisations in operating mutual help child care centres which provide parents with a flexible form of child care arrangement to meet their special needs.

7. Some single parents and new arrival families are vulnerable groups who require focused assistance in overcoming family crisis and regain self-reliance. To strengthen support to these vulnerable groups, SWD has

provided an additional annual allocation of \$9 M for NGOs to operate four additional post-migration centres and to strengthen the staffing provision of the four existing ones. Another annual allocation of \$8.4 M has been allocated to NGOs to operate five single parent centres. These new centres serve as bases in providing tailor-made programmes to meet the emotional and social needs of the new arrivals and single parent families, widen their supportive network, and provide appropriate retraining programmes and employment assistance to help them regain self-reliance.

8. In order to provide early intervention to at-risk families who need assistance in handling stress and prevent family problems from deterioration, starting from March 2001, an additional amount of \$10 M is allocated to SWD and NGOs to operate a two-year Family Education project in the five regions. Through outreaching efforts and networking with local organizations such as schools, parent-teachers associations, local groups and other service units, these social workers will provide a package of prompt intervention to at-risk families identified, particularly those parents having difficulties in supervising their children or having children manifesting behaviour or emotional problems. Service is provided in order to help them overcome emerging family problems and develop resilience in coping with these.

Remedial service

9. At the remedial level, family casework service is provided by 65 family services centres of SWD and NGOs located all over the territory. A total number of 728 family caseworkers from these centres provide assistance to individuals and families in crisis and help them cope with adversity, restore family functioning and work out positive ways to resolve problems encountered. Social workers of SWD will reach out to families upon receiving referrals from police, the media or other sources, including cases of suicide, family violence, psychiatric emergency, disasters such as fire and

landslides. Where necessary, clinical psychologists and social workers will provide debriefing sessions for victims of disasters or persons affected by family tragedies. Apart from the departmental hotline which receives calls on a twenty-four hour basis, SWD has set up a Family Helpline (2343 2255 press 7) since April 2000 to provide immediate on-the-phone counselling to family members facing crisis. NGOs also provide a number of hotline services to assist persons in need.

10. Moreover, to strengthen protection to victims of child abuse and spouse battering, the Department has expanded the 3 Child Protective Services Units into 5 regional-based Family and Child Protective Services Units since April 2000. Senior social work practitioners of these Units adopt a co-ordinated and proactive approach in protecting and assisting victims and their families facing crisis of domestic violence with a package of counselling, financial, medical, accommodation, psychological and legal assistance. A multi-disciplinary approach is adopted by concerned government departments and professionals in providing this package of services.

STRATEGIES AND NEW INITIATIVES IN SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

11. In order to strengthen services to support families in crisis, the following initiatives are undertaken :

(a) **To set up a Family Crisis Support Centre**

In order to fill a service gap and assist family members suffering from intense emotional stress or family conflicts to cool down, SWD will commission an NGO to set up a Family Crisis Support Centre in 2001-02. The Centre will act as a focal point to tackle family crisis at an early stage by providing hotline service, short-term, emergency intervention with overnight accommodation

and temporary retreat. Family members facing marital crisis or relationship breakdown are encouraged to seek early assistance. The Centre will provide an integrated package of one-stop service to help them manage the crisis or trauma and work out the way forward in solving problems. Services provided will include a hotline, crisis intervention and focused counselling service provided by social workers, programmes in managing stress and enhancing problem-solving skills, group work to enhance resilience and coping skills, training-up of ex-residents to serve as peer counsellors, etc. The Centre will also link up with psychological, medical and other community back-up services in crisis management, and will adopt a reaching-out and networking approach to identify families at risk.

(b) Enhanced public education

As prevention is better than cure, SWD has stepped up public education effort to promote public awareness of services available to help families in crisis through ongoing release of Television and Radio Announcements of Public Interest and wide distribution of publicity materials. In 2001-02, a publicity campaign on “empowering families to face challenges” will be launched to encourage families in distress to seek early professional assistance and promote positive ways to cope with adversity. Promotion of concern and awareness in the community by encouraging families in need to seek early help is important in minimizing family problems from deteriorating into tragedies.

(c) **Early Identification and Intervention**

Besides outreaching and networking, an integrated service approach will help address the difficulties faced by vulnerable families at an early stage. An example is a pilot project implemented by SWD, NGOs and Department of Health in providing parent education in ante-natal and post-natal programmes in thirteen Maternal and Child Health Centres. Upon evaluation of the project, it will be extended to all fifty Maternal and Child Health Centres with effect from April 2001. Besides providing parents and parent-to-be with essential knowledge on parenthood from the psycho-social aspect, the collaborative efforts will help detect signs of stress among parents for early intervention in order to reduce the occurrence of family problems.

(d) **Enhanced multi-disciplinary collaboration**

Multi-disciplinary collaboration has proven to be effective in helping families in crisis as in handling the child abuse problem, the same approach is adopted to help other individuals and family members facing crisis of spouse battering and sexual violence. In strengthening parent education, the approach of multi-disciplinary collaboration is also adopted. With the setting up of a Steering Committee on Parent Education, the Education Department, SWD, Department of Health, Home Affairs Department, Parent-Teacher Associations, other professionals and parents are making joint efforts to co-ordinate parent education presently provided by different government departments and organizations, and develop a strategy in enhancing parent education in Hong Kong. Parents are the first teachers of children, greater support provided to parents to help them

guide their children and foster a closer parent-child relationship, and providing pro-active outreaching to hard-to-reach parents, are required to minimize occurrence of family problems in the long run.

(e) **Community involvement and district planning**

Like individuals and families, community has strengths which can be tapped to create a caring environment in meeting the needs of its members. A well-networked community through mutual help will minimize family tragedies from happening. Taking this forward, through its mechanism of District Co-ordinating Committees, SWD will encourage the development of district-based services and programmes to involve the participation of NGOs, local residents and organizations to promote local networking, volunteerism and formation of mutual help groups, targetted at district needs to assist families in crisis. In the service provision level, instead of adopting rigid planning standards, SWD is moving towards a district planning mechanism. Based on strategic needs assessment on a district and territory-wide basis, resources will be used flexibly and in a focused manner in meeting district needs and emerging family needs identified.

WAY FORWARD

12. Despite the above provision and initiatives, the Administration is well aware of the impact brought about by social and economic changes on families. There is a need to re-prioritize service provision, and develop a practical and cost-effective service delivery mode so that family needs can be met in a holistic and effective manner. SWD has commissioned the University of Hong Kong to carry out a consultancy review on family services. The review, involving a wide spectrum of stakeholders, has started in August

2000 and will be completed by the end of April 2001. Besides reviewing the service delivery model of family services, recommendations on a long-term strategy and future directions will be made by the consultants with a view to pointing the way forward in creating a family-friendly environment for families in Hong Kong.

*Social Welfare Department
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