

# Deployment of Resources to Improve School Social Work Service: Issues of Concern

*The Hong Kong Council of Social Service*

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## 1. Implementation of the '1 School Social Worker per Secondary School' Policy

### 1.1 Present Situation:

According to the Social Welfare Department, 28 NGOs have deployed/ will deploy \$195M from 60 children & youth centres, 42 study and reading rooms, and 3.45 outreaching social work teams in 2000/01 and 2001/02 to create 148 social worker units, form 21 new integrated teams and expand 21 existing integrated teams. Out of the \$195M, around \$95M are deployed to improve SSW service.

### 1.2 Provision for Large ALA Schools:

- Since 1998/99, all the 154 existing ALA (Academically Low Achiever) schools are being served at the manning ratio of 1:1,000. For the large ALA schools with over 1,000 student population, they will be allocated with more than 1 school social worker. In the 1999 Review of School Social Work Service conducted by the SWD, the service demand of these schools was proven by the increase in service output and it was proposed that the current provision for ALA schools should remain.
- However, with the implementation of the 1 SSW per school policy, the SSW provision for these schools would be worse-off than before. After the strong protest from the concerned schools and the NGOs, the SWD agreed to provide 7 ALA schools with over 1,300 students with temporary resources in 2000/01 to maintain the school social work service at the 1:1000 manning ratio. According to the Department, this temporary additional resources is a tide-over arrangement to help large ALA schools to attune to using community-based services to complement the standard school social work service provision. A panel was formed under the Steering Committee on SSW to review the issue.

- **NGOs strongly view that the Government should uphold the recommendation of the recent review on SSW service and make it a permanent measure to provide additional SSW resources for large ALA schools should the service demand be again proven.** According to NGOs' experience, there is a high demand for casework service in large ALA schools. In working with these cases, stationing school social work service is not only more accessible, but also enhance the close collaboration among the social worker, the school personnel and the family. In these instances, community-based youth services can only complement, but not replace the stationing school social work service. Moreover, in pooling in community resources to serve these schools, the need for the children and youth services to meet the various competing demands in the community should be duly considered in the review.

### **1.3 Upholding a High Quality Service:**

- 148 new school social worker units are created in this exercise and there are 12 agencies which provide SSW service for the first time. To facilitate the new workers and the new operating agencies to tune in the service and to maximize their performance, an induction course was organized by the SWD and a number of sharing sessions for both supervisors and front-line workers were organized by the Council.
- The operating agencies work in close partnership with the schools and the service users and solicit their feedback to strive for continuous improvement. The Council will also conduct a survey to collect the schools' views on the service at the end of the 2000/01 academic year. The Government, NGOs and the schools should regularly review the needs of the students and ensure that the service is responsive to these needs, in both qualitative and quantitative terms.

## **2. Issues Arising from the Deployment of Resources**

### **2.1 Reduction in Community-based Children and Youth Services:**

- As stated earlier, to improve school social work service and to create/expand integrated teams, \$195M from 60 children & youth centres, 42 study and reading rooms and 3.45 outreaching social work teams were deployed. Such resource deployment resulted in the reduction in the number of centres and study and reading rooms. Some areas are no longer provided with a neighbourhood-based centre, thus affecting the service accessibility.

- As recognised in the 1994 Review on Children and Youth Centre Service, the service offers an easily accessible neighbourhood centre and plays an important role in:
  - providing guidance and counselling to young people
  - providing supportive services for young people in disadvantaged circumstances
  - enhancing personal and social development of young people, and strengthening their social competence and responsibilities to society
- The current education reform and review on school social work service indicates the need to draw more community-based resources to support the secondary and primary schools in the all-round development of young people. The Understanding the Adolescent Project, which will be extended to 40 schools according to the Government's Policy Objectives, also require the support of these community-based children and youth services.
- In view of the all the challenges facing young people in this complex society, the centre service continues to play an important role in enhancing the personal and social development of young people as well as in early detection and prevention of problems. **We urge the Government to work closely with the NGOs to regularly review the service demand and work out effective means to meet service gaps.**

## 2.2 Comprehensive Planning of Children & Youth Services:

- At present, it is noted that there is a lack of a more comprehensive and long/medium-term planning of children and youth services. The resource deployment and resource allocation in the recent years are conducted in piecemeal manner.
- For example, last year, the Government appealed to NGOs to deploy existing resources to meet the pressing need for improvement of school social work service. This year, the Government, in the Policy Objectives, planned to allocate resources to implement a three-year programme with the aim of enhancing the developmental, preventive and remedial programmes delivered in youth welfare facilities. However, it is later learnt that this will be a programme aiming at providing youth employment opportunities rather than improving the service. Service operators are quite confused by such service planning and resource allocation.

- It will be more helpful if these plans and resource allocation/ deployment are conducted in an integrated and comprehensive manner to facilitate the best use of resources to address the needs of young people. We urge the Government to work out with NGOs a blueprint for services for young people and to develop a planning mechanism and protocol which is needs-based, involves all concerned stakeholders and facilitates effective use of resources.

### **2.3 Surplus Staff Arising from the Resource Deployment Exercise:**

There are a total of 124 staff from 17 NGOs which require alternative job placement. The SWD is now providing a tide-over grant to facilitate the agencies to continue employ these staff. The Department also agreed to allocate new projects to NGOs to place their surplus staff and arrange placement of these staff in another agency through a Clearinghouse. We appreciate the Department's commitment that the surplus staff will not be lay off in this resource deployment exercise. We would like to update the number of surplus staff placed so far and the schedule for placement of the remaining staff.

### **3. Strengthening Social Work Service in Primary School**

- At present, stationing school social work service is provided in secondary schools only. The service reviews in the past year indicate that it is an effective service mode to complement the guidance services provided by teachers to facilitate early identification of problems and early intervention. The strategic alliance of the teachers and social workers also enhance the best use of professional expertise of the two sectors.
- In recent years, there is a trend of lowering of age of young people with problem symptoms. For example, in 1998/99, according to Department of Health statistics, over 10,000 primary students were screened as either having low self image or behaviour problems. Police figures indicates that the number of young people aged 7 – 15 committing crime has increased by 35% in the first six months of 2000 (comparing to the last six months of 1999). The Council's Social Development Index also indicates an alarming weakening of family solidarity and this is also negatively affecting our younger generation. All these issues reflect the need to strengthen the resilience and the coping skills of our young people at an early age.

- **As the stationing school social work in secondary school is proven to be an effective model, it is recommended that the service be extended to primary schools.** To strengthen the collaboration with Student Guidance Teacher/Officer and to best use different professional expertise, the present division of labour between school social workers and guidance teachers in secondary schools can serve as a good reference. In view of the high resource implications, pilot projects can be operated as a start and the service be extended to all primary schools by phase.