

立法會
Legislative Council

Meeting of LegCo Panel on Welfare Services on 10 June 2002

Background paper prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat

Support services for street sleepers

Purpose

This paper gives a brief account of past discussions on support services for street sleepers held by Members since 1999.

Chronological account of past discussions

Discussions held by the Panel on Welfare Services

Surveys on street sleepers by the Society for Community Organization (SOCO) and the Hong Kong Council of Social Services (HKCSS)

2. At its meeting on 8 November 1999, the Panel discussed the findings of surveys on street sleepers conducted by SOCO and HKCSS. The surveys found that there had been a sharp increase in the number of street sleepers, in particular, those aged between 20 to 39 and there had been a significant increase in those who had completed secondary school education. It was found that 60% of these young, able-bodied persons decided to sleep on the streets because of unemployment and financial problems. It was also found that the abolition of the special grant for rental deposit under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme was the main reason which had forced the street sleepers to stay homeless.

3. Representatives of the two organisations urged the Administration to -

- (a) review its provision of support services to street sleepers which had remained unchanged for the past three to four decades;
- (b) review its methodology in data collection and conduct the official survey on street sleepers more frequently instead of at two-yearly intervals;

- (c) strengthen the manpower of outreach services for street sleepers and consider contracting out its outreach services to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs);
- (d) reinstate the special grant for rental deposit, removal allowance and emergency grant under the CSSA Scheme, and address the unemployment problem of the street sleepers; and
- (e) increase the number of shelter/hostel places, improve the condition of such shelters, and relax the age restriction for admission to hostels.

4. During the meeting, members unanimously supported that rental deposit should be provided to unemployed able-bodied CSSA recipients who had difficulties in paying such deposit as they needed a more permanent address in their quest for employment. Members therefore urged the Administration to reinstate the provision of the special grant for rental deposit under the CSSA Scheme.

5. Members may wish to refer to the Administration's paper for the Panel meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2)286/99-00(05)), submissions to the Panel (LC Paper Nos. CB(2)158/99-00(01) and CB(2)350/99-00(01) and (02)) and minutes of the meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2)1584/99-00) for further details.

Territory-wide survey on street sleepers by the Social Welfare Department (SWD)

6. At its meeting on 10 April 2000, the Panel discussed the territory-wide survey on street sleepers conducted by SWD in January 2000 and the progress of work in improving facilities in shelters and hostels for street sleepers. Representatives of SOCO and HKCSS who attended the meeting made the following comments on the survey -

- (a) as the official survey ending at 11 pm did not cover the small hours, many street sleepers had not been reached by the SWD outreach teams;
- (b) the survey method should be improved so that it could gauge more accurately information on street sleepers and include those who were not listed in the Street Sleepers Registry (the Registry); and
- (c) the various reasons for street sleeping should be explored in the survey so that assistance could be provided to meet the specific needs of the street sleepers.

7. In addition, the representatives urged the Administration to take the following actions -

- (a) to reinstate the provision of special grant to street sleepers who were CSSA recipients in order to help them meet payment for rental deposit;
- (b) to relax the age restriction so as to enable street sleepers of younger age groups to be admitted to temporary hostels and further improve the basic facilities of the temporary shelters; and
- (c) to address the problem of the heavy workload of NGOs engaged in handling street sleeper cases.

8. As the Administration had not conducted any full review of its policy on street sleepers, members requested the Administration to review its policy on street sleepers in light of the rapid increase in the number of street sleepers of a younger age, address the specific problems of street sleepers, such as their need for housing and employment assistance, and provide appropriate services to them. Members agreed that the problem of street sleepers was a multi-disciplinary one and requested the Health and Welfare Bureau (HWB) to collaborate with other policy bureaux and NGOs concerned to work out an action plan to meet the specific needs of street sleepers.

9. Members may wish to refer to the Administration's papers for the Panel meeting (LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1612/99-00(05) and CB(2)2194/99-00(01)), SOCO's submission (LC Paper No. CB(2)1612/99-00(06)) and minutes of the meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2)1975/99-00) for further details.

Three-year action plan to help street sleepers

10. At the meeting on 9 April 2001, the Panel discussed a three-year action plan to help street sleepers. As the number of street sleepers in the Registry had risen rapidly from 819 in January 2000 to 1399 in February 2001, SWD had, in consultation with three NGOs specializing in street sleeper services, worked out a three-year action plan to tackle the specific needs of street sleepers, in particular, to assist those younger, able-bodied and unemployed street sleepers to re-join the work force.

11. As part of the action plan, three projects would be undertaken by NGOs to work on respective target areas in different regions which had the highest concentration of street sleepers and to provide a continuum of services, including mid-night outreach visits, provision of emergency funds and emergency placements, assistance in seeking job placement and long-term housing, and counselling. To assess the effectiveness of the three new projects

and the existing services in tackling the problem, the three-year action plan included an in-built evaluative research to be carried out by the City University of Hong Kong.

12. During the meeting, members requested SWD to submit a mid-term review of the effectiveness of the three-year action plan which should include how the policies of other government departments had affected the efforts made by SWD and NGOs in helping street sleepers.

13. Members may wish to refer to the Administration's paper for the Panel meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2)1228/00-01(03)) and minutes of the meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2)1461/00-01) for further details.

Question raised at Council meeting

14. An oral question raised by Hon Michael MAK at the Council meeting on 12 December 2001 was related to the progress of the Administration's three-year action plan to enhance services for street sleepers. Mr MAK enquired about -

- (a) the operation and effectiveness of the action plan;
- (b) the causes of the increase rather than decrease in the number of street sleepers over the half-year period after the action plan was launched and the corresponding measures taken; and
- (c) the number of mentally ill persons among the street sleepers and services to assist them.

15. The main points of the Administration's reply to the questions are as follows -

- (a) an in-built evaluative study would be conducted at the end of the three-year action plan to assess the effectiveness of the projects;
- (b) the three-year action plan implemented by the three NGOs in May 2001 had reached a total of 542 street sleepers by the end of November 2001, of whom 268 were willing to receive assistance, 158 were accommodated in shelters/hostels, 83 were matched with a job placement. In addition, 297 of the 1179 street sleepers responding to the survey questions said that their reason for street sleeping was due to personal choice, 261 said it was due to unemployment and financial problem, and 158 due to inability to afford rent; and

- (c) of the total of 1340 street sleepers, 98 were suspected to be mentally ill. In this regard, outreach teams of SWD and NGOs, medical social workers and the Community Psychiatric Teams of the Hospital Authority would provide counselling and referral services, emergency outreach services, and mental health services when needed.

16. Members may wish to refer to the oral question by Hon Michael MAK and the Secretary for Health and Welfare's replies to Mr MAK's question and to supplementary questions asked by other Members at the Council meeting on 12 December 2001 at the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
3 June 2002

Rising Number of Street Sleepers

1. **MR MICHAEL MAK** (in Cantonese): *Madam President, to address the upsurge in the number of street sleepers, the Administration allocated \$8.73 million in April this year to three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for implementing a three-year action plan to provide a series of services to street sleepers, including midnight outreaching visits, the provision of emergency fund, temporary accommodation, employment advice and job placement. However, the number of street sleepers has continued to rise from 1 203 by the end of April to 1 305 by the end of September. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:*

- (a) of the operation and effectiveness of such services since their commencement;*
- (b) whether it has investigated the causes of the increase rather than decrease in the number of street sleepers over the half-year period after the above services were launched, and the corresponding measures in this regard; and whether it will consider allocating additional funds with a view to minimizing the number of street sleepers; and*
- (c) of the number of mentally ill persons among such street sleepers, and the services that have been provided to them?*

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): *Madam President, our overall policy is to help street sleepers leave the streets, achieve self-reliance, and re-integrate into the community.*

In addition to mainstream welfare services provided by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and NGOs, specific services are also available to street sleepers. These include Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, five subvented residential hostels, two subvented day relief centres, and three dedicated Outreach Teams which also work with this vulnerable group.

- (a) Moreover, in response to the changing characteristics of street sleepers, the Administration has obtained \$8.7 million from the Lotteries Fund to implement a three-year action plan to help street*

sleepers through a continuum of integrated services, with a view to augmenting the above services. Since May 2001, the three NGOs commissioned to operate the action plan have conducted outreach visits three to four nights per week between 10 pm to 2 am in order to contact street sleepers, especially those who return late to the places where they sleep. The three NGOs have reached 542 street sleepers by the end of November, and will continue to reach more in the remaining period. Of the 542 street sleepers reached, 268 street sleepers were willing to receive services.

Of the 268 street sleepers, 189 are aged 49 or below, 242 are in normal health, 240 have received formal education, and 197 have been sleeping on the streets for less than one year.

Clients are provided with a package of integrated and tailor-made services to cater for their residential, social, psychological, employment and financial needs.

On accommodation, 158 have been helped to move to private tenement, temporary shelters/urban hostels, singleton hostels or to other accommodation. The round-the-clock emergency shelter for street sleepers is also up and running with an occupancy rate of over 90%.

On employment assistance, 83 clients have been successfully matched with a job placement, through referrals to specialized employment units, the Employees Retraining Board, NGOs' Special Job Attachment Programme as well as with the private sector.

An in-built evaluative study will be conducted and its outcome will shed light on the effectiveness of the Plan, at the end of the three-year project.

- (b) According to the SWD's Street Sleepers Registry, the number of street sleepers has risen from 1 223 at the end of May 2001 to 1 340 at the end of October 2001.

Of the 1 340 street sleepers registered, 1 179 have given reasons for street sleeping. The major reasons are — "personal choice" — 297;

"become unemployed and had no income to pay rent in previous accommodation" — 261; and "could not find accommodation with affordable rent" — 158, and so on.

We will continue to closely monitor the number and profile of street sleepers, and the implementation of the three-year action plan. The Plan, we believe, is providing concrete assistance to this group and helping them to leave the streets.

- (c) Of the 1 340 street sleepers registered, 1 318 have given information about their health. Ninety-eight were suspected to be mentally ill.

In addition to the comprehensive range of services already mentioned, the SWD and NGO outreach teams counsel them and refer them for medical treatment and other assistance, as appropriate. For those street sleepers who exhibit behaviour harmful to themselves or others, medical social workers with specialized psychiatric training provide emergency outreach service and professional social work support.

Health professionals from the Hospital Authority (HA) diagnose whether they are suffering from mental illness and provide appropriate psychiatric treatment ranging from medication, psychological assessment, counselling to psychosocial rehabilitation. These can take place in various settings, including hospitals, out-patient clinics or in the community. Community Psychiatric Teams of the HA provide a comprehensive range of mental health services in the community setting, mainly for discharged psychiatric patients, to facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

MR MICHAEL MAK (in Cantonese): *Madam President, since Hong Kong is an international metropolis, has the Government ever assessed the negative impact of street sleepers, in particular those who have not fully recovered from mental illness, on the outlook and tourism of Hong Kong? If so, what is its target? If not, what are the reasons?*

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Mr Michael MAK, is your supplementary question about the impact of street sleepers on the outlook of Hong Kong, and is this directly related to your main question?

MR MICHAEL MAK (in Cantonese): *Madam President, yes it is. The Secretary pointed out that according to the Registry, 98 street sleepers were suspected to be mentally ill. Street sleepers whose illnesses are not under control will definitely have a negative impact on the outlook of Hong Kong.*

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Mr Michael MAK, I am sorry. I think your supplementary question is not directly related to the main question, so I would not allow you to ask this question.

MR CHAN KAM-LAM (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the Secretary mentioned in his main reply that according to the Registry of the SWD, there are currently 1 340 street sleepers; but the three NGOs can only reach 542 street sleepers, out of whom only 158 are offered accommodation. Having seen these figures, I think that resources allocated by the Government in this area are still inadequate for only less than half of the total number of street sleepers have been reached, and an even smaller proportion offered accommodation. May I ask whether the Government will increase its funding so that more street sleepers can be reached as soon as possible, in order to have a better understanding of their difficulties and help them move into proper housing?*

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): Madam President, apart from such special outreach services, there is also a unit in the SWD specially tasked to deal with the problem of street sleepers. The staff of this unit contact street sleepers on a daily basis, but some street sleepers are unwilling to move to other places. At present, about 30% of the street sleepers sleep on the streets as a personal choice. We will take into account the wishes of street sleepers to see whether they are willing to accept our services. If there is a need to increase resources, then this is definitely not a problem. We have now got hostel places especially for street sleepers, but sometimes they may find the location of those hostels inconvenient and request to have a choice of location.

Therefore, they may be unwilling to move into our hostels. At present, the occupancy rate of our hostels only ranges from 70% to 80%. However, for some temporary hostels, street sleepers are not allowed to stay during the day and can only spend the night there. We also have some singleton hostels where street sleepers can stay, but sometimes they may want to choose the location and may not move into those referred by us. At present, the three-year action plan of NGOs are making very good progress and has offered assistance to many street sleepers, but we will continue to contact the street sleepers.

MR LAW CHI-KWONG (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the Secretary pointed out in part (c) of his main reply that of the 1 340 street sleepers registered, 98, that is about 7%, were suspected to be mentally ill. This is comparable to the percentage of mentally ill persons, which is also about 7%, among the general public, and that is not particularly high. Some social workers have to come into direct contact with these mentally ill street sleepers. The Secretary mentioned in his main reply that social workers with specialized psychiatric training would provide social work support. However, will the Government consider offering training to social workers who take positive actions in contacting mentally ill street sleepers, so that they can provide more effective and direct assistance to the mentally ill street sleepers?*

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the proposal of Mr LAW is very good. We will consider whether we can help mentally ill street sleepers by doing so, that is, by offering training to social workers who take positive actions in contacting mentally ill street sleepers and help them to refer such cases to the professionals.*

MISS CHAN YUEN-HAN (in Cantonese): *Madam President, I support the Government in allocating \$8.7 million to implement a three-year action plan, because I believe most people now support that street sleepers should be granted assistance. However, the Government pointed out in its main reply that, of the 268 street sleepers who are willing to accept its services, 189 are aged 49 or below. A large number of these people sleep on the streets because they do not have jobs or places to live. May I ask the Government, under the circumstances where there are cases of younger street sleepers with an incentive to work, when*

it uses public funds, will it consider the factor that some street sleepers sleep on the streets because of unemployment and financial difficulties? Will it look into the possibility of adopting proactive and positive measures in helping street sleepers to seek employment before they make the streets their home, so as to solve this problem? Has the Government considered this approach?

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): Madam President, we certainly do not wish to see anyone becoming street sleepers. According to the information gathered during our annual surveys, we find that street sleepers take on street sleeping for many reasons. Some may have problems in getting along with their families; some have got used to sleeping on the streets and do not wish to change their lifestyles. Nowadays, there are more cases of younger people becoming street sleepers because they cannot find jobs and have financial difficulties. Our current action plan is targeted at such people. I have provided some figures earlier showing that the successful rate of this plan is quite high, for about 30% of the street sleepers found jobs with our assistance. Therefore, we will continue to work hard in this area. As for preventive measures, I think this is a problem for the community as a whole. How are we supposed to know who will become street sleepers and who will have financial difficulties? All these fall within the mainstream services of the SWD. In this regard, I believe the SWD can help.

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Miss CHAN Yuen-han, has your supplementary question not been answered?

MISS CHAN YUEN-HAN (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the Secretary has not answered my supplementary question.*

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Miss CHAN, which part of your supplementary question has not been answered?

MISS CHAN YUEN-HAN (in Cantonese): *The main reply of the Secretary says that street sleepers have taken on street sleeping for the major reasons of*

"become unemployed and had no income to pay rent in previous accommodation" and "could not find accommodation with affordable rent". If the Government can offer unemployment assistance to these people before they become street sleepers, then they do not have to sleep on the streets. My supplementary question asked whether the Government had plans to do so, but the Secretary has not given me an answer.

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): Secretary, do you have anything to add?

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): Madam President, I did answer this supplementary question. In fact, this is what we have been doing with our mainstream welfare services. We have provided a lot of services to help those people in financial difficulties, in order to save them from sleeping on the streets.

MR WONG SING-CHI (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the Secretary pointed out in part (c) of his main reply that 1 340 street sleepers have already registered. It has been widely reported that this group of street sleepers is younger in age. May I know, of the 1 340 street sleepers, how many of them are under 25? Has the Government tried to find out why these young street sleepers are sleeping on the streets, and how it can solve their problems?*

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): Madam President, according to the survey conducted by us in 2001, 45 out of the 1 150 street sleepers were under 29. However, we do not have any information on why these street sleepers are sleeping on the streets.

MR WONG SING-CHI (in Cantonese): *Madam President, does it mean that the Secretary cannot answer my supplementary question? Will the Government follow up on this issue so as to study the profile of such young street sleepers and find ways to help them? My supplementary question asked if the Government had done so? Is the Secretary telling us that the Government has not done so?*

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): It is not that we have not done so, but rather we have not got a breakdown on age.

PRESIDENT (in Cantonese): This Council has already spent 16 minutes on this question. Last supplementary question.

MISS LI FUNG-YING (in Cantonese): *Madam President, the Secretary pointed out in part (a) of his main reply that the Government has done quite well in job referrals and 83 of its clients have found jobs. May I ask the Secretary to provide us with more specific information the kind of jobs these 80-odd people are engaged in and their income level, so that we can have a better understanding?*

SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE (in Cantonese): Madam President, I will answer Miss LI's supplementary question in writing. (Annex I)

WRITTEN ANSWER**Written answer by the Secretary for Health and Welfare to Miss LI Fung-ying's supplementary question to Question 1**

Of the 83 street sleepers concerned, 19 are engaged in restaurant work, 16 in cleansing work, 15 work as security guards, while eight are engaged in clerical work. The remaining 25 work as couriers, factory workers, transportation workers, and so on. As regards their income levels, two earn less than \$2,000 per month, 15 between \$2,000 and \$4,000, 54 between \$4,000 and \$8,000, eight between \$8,000 and \$10,000 while four have monthly earnings in excess of \$10,000.