

Paper for Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

**“ENDING EXCLUSION” PROJECT FOR
SINGLE PARENTS ON CSSA**

PURPOSE

This paper consults Members on a set of measures entitled “Ending Exclusion” which aims at improving the social well being of single parent families receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA).

BACKGROUND

Trends

2. Over the past several years, the number of CSSA single-parent cases has been increasing significantly. The figure rose by 420% from 5 350 in July 1993 to 27 840 in October 2001. Over the same period, the total CSSA caseload increased by only 176%. As a result, the share of single parent cases amongst overall CSSA caseload has increased from 6.2% to 11.7%.

Profile of CSSA single-parent families

3. Based on the 2000 Study of CSSA Recipients, the profiles and characteristics of these single parent CSSA families are as follows -

(a) Gender and age of single parents

78% of the single parents were women. The majority of the single parents were in their thirties (38%) and forties (45%).

(b) Causes of single parenthood

The main causes of single parenthood were divorce (35%), separation (28%), and death of spouse (21%). Unmarried mothers constituted less than 1% of total single-parent families.

(c) Whereabouts of spouse of single parents

13% of the single parents had their spouses in the Mainland. Most of them (82%) were male.

(d) Educational qualifications of single parents

We do not have the complete data of educational qualifications possessed by the single parents as some 21% of the sampled families did not contain such information. Of those with available information, 79% had received primary education or below and 16% had received junior secondary education.

(e) Age of children in a household

The single-parent families contained around 44 000 children, representing 44% of all children on CSSA. 57% of these children were under the age of 12, 22% were between age 12 and 14, and the remaining 21% were of age 15 and over.

70% of the youngest child (or the only child) in the family were below age 12, 19% were between age 12 and 14, and the remaining 11% were 15 years of age and over.

(f) Number of children in a family

Majority of the cases were small families: 46% of the single parents lived with one child, and 40% with two children.

(g) Household income other than CSSA payments

84% of the cases relied entirely on CSSA. Only 1 880 families have employment earnings while 1 380 families received maintenance payments that were not of nominal amounts.

(h) Duration of continuously receiving CSSA

Analysed by periods of continuous dependence on CSSA, 68% had been receiving CSSA for two or more years, including 18% that were between five and ten years, and 3% for ten or more years. The median length on CSSA is 2.8 years.

(i) Age of the youngest child and whether single parents were with employment earnings

Single parents having employment earnings tend to have youngest child of an older age when compared with those without employment earnings. About 60% of single parents with

employment were with their youngest child of age 12 and over. The corresponding figure for those without employment earnings was only 28%.

Existing policy on single-parent CSSA families

4. Under the CSSA Scheme, single-parent families comprising all able-bodied members are entitled to monthly standard rates and special grants to cover rent, water charge, schooling expenses, child care centre fees and burial expenses. In addition, a monthly single-parent supplement (\$255) is payable in recognition of the special difficulties which single parents face in bringing up a family, irrespective of the age of the child. The monthly standard rate for single parents (\$1,965) is considerably higher than that for other able-bodied adults living in a family (\$1,610).

5. According to the 2000 Study of CSSA Recipients, for single parent families with no income at all, the average monthly CSSA payments (i.e. equivalent to their recognised needs) of 2-member, 3-member and 4-member single-parent families were \$6,490, \$8,760 and \$10,530 respectively. In actual fact, as pointed out above, only 15.8% of these families have some income other than CSSA.

6. As one of the major recommendations of the 1998 CSSA Review, a Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme was introduced in June 1999 to encourage and help unemployed CSSA recipients to re-enter the labour market and move towards self-reliance. Considering their child care need, single parents with youngest child of age below 15 are **not** required to participate in the Active Employment Assistance (AEA) Programme as are other able-bodied CSSA recipients under the SFS Scheme.

TIN SHUI WAI NEIGHBOURHOOD FAMILY SERVICES PROJECT

7. In our extensive social welfare network system, our frontline workers have come across cases of single parent families in need of support and assistance other than financial ones. There is a general feeling that because of family breakdown or other perception problems (e.g. worries about being looked down by neighbours and members of the community and classmates in schools), single parents and their children are socially more deprived.

8. Concerned with the phenomenon of social exclusion amongst single parents, we started in 2000 a Neighbourhood Family Services pilot project in Tin Shui Wai, a rapidly developing new town in Yuen Long, which had the most CSSA single-parent families among all districts. Tin Shui Wai has a high proportion of nuclear families with low income. Moving into this

remote new town from various parts of the territory, most of these families were separated from their usual social support network. They were beset with multi-personal, financial, family and social difficulties. In a survey we conducted on the CSSA single-parent families in Yuen Long in 1999, we discovered that among 756 single parent respondents, 93.3% had children aged 15 or below and 90% of these families were without support from relatives in child care. The most needed services perceived by the respondents were assistance in their children's academic work and child discipline. Other areas of service in need were social and recreational activities, re-training and supportive counseling. Despite these recognised and expressed social needs, over 82% of the respondents were not receiving any other welfare services apart from CSSA.

9. The result of the survey reflected that most of the single parents were passive in seeking appropriate assistance. To overcome this, we have to change the approach of traditional service, i.e. waiting for our needy customers to come up to ask for service. There was also a need to collaborate with local organisations, including other government departments as well as NGOs, to fill service gaps and develop a more integrative approach in the provision of welfare services.

10. Having regard to the welfare needs of single parent families in Tin Shui Wai, the Yuen Long District Social Welfare Office pioneered a Neighbourhood Family Services pilot project. The team adopts a proactive approach in reaching out to these vulnerable families, matching them with appropriate services and building up a support network among themselves. In August 2001 when Phase I of the pilot project completed, an effective referral and service network with local organisations has been built up and among a total of 320 single parent families targeted, we have successfully contacted 278 of them. By 30 September 2001, 276 out of 320 (about 86%) of the CSSA single-parent families have received services under the project in one form or another. Besides, the project has pulled single parents together to form a mutual support network that provides mutual child care, home visits to other single parents, and assistance in programme activities. Altogether they have performed over 1 500 hours of volunteer service.

11. We are encouraged by the positive responses and attitude changes of these single parents. The pilot project demonstrates their potential towards leading a more valued way of living through social participation. In our contacts with them, many express the wish to find work as a means of furthering their social integration and improving their self-reliance especially when their children are growing up.

12. To extend the strategy of promoting social inclusion of CSSA single parents, we propose to implement an "Ending Exclusion" Project targeting to meet their aspirations and needs.

MEASURES UNDER THE “ENDING EXCLUSION” PROJECT

13. The Project is intended for CSSA single parent recipients whose youngest child is aged under 15. Considering that new CSSA single parent cases generally require a period of time to settle from changing circumstances (e.g. bereavement, post-separation violence, etc.), only those who have been on CSSA for six months or more will be invited to join. As a start, we intend to invite about 2 000 single parents to join the project in the first year of implementation. Priority will be given to the following groups -

- (a) single mothers aged below 50, whose youngest child is aged 10 to 14, as they normally have a lesser burden in child care and the current profile shows that this is the group that has a higher motivation to look for jobs;
- (b) single mothers of younger age (e.g. the unwed mothers) as their chance of getting a job are relatively more promising; and
- (c) single fathers aged below 50 because they may enter the job market more readily if not engaged in child caring.

Single parent recipients who do not fall into the priority groups will also be informed and they may join the Project if they wish.

Advice-focused Interview

14. The first entry point to the Project is a supportive and advice-focused interview for the single parents. Aimed at opening up possibilities of an improved life for the single parents and their families, Employment Assistance Co-ordinators (EA Co-ordinators) will introduce to the target participants information on employment assistance, help with child care, and other supportive services. Through these interviews, single parents will learn about the range of measures that can help them move into work, and continued availability of CSSA support if they do not earn enough to support their families. It is important to note that unlike the current AEA Programme, the single parents are not obliged to take part in any employment assistance programme immediately as a condition of receiving CSSA. **No** sanctions or compulsory elements exist. They will be assisted to understand and consider the options they have.

15. Single parents who do not feel ready for employment will be referred to the five Single Parent Centres for counseling and other supportive services as appropriate (see paragraph 23 below).

Employment Assistance Programmes

16. AEA Programme for single parents is a proactive service to help them find jobs. Unlike the AEA Programme for other able-bodied CSSA recipients, single parents' participation in the Programme is **voluntary**. EA Co-ordinators as facilitators will assist the single parents to access up-to-date labour market information and employment training opportunities through free on-line services, and to develop personalised action plans to find work and monitor their progress where necessary.

17. Single parents in need of assistance in adjusting to work life will be matched with Special Job Attachment Programmes (SJAP) run by NGOs and projects under the Intensive Employment Assistance Fund (IEAF), especially those designed for single parents. SJAP provides participants with opportunities to gain real working experience through on-the-job-training. IEAF projects are innovative employment assistance projects tailor-made for CSSA recipients to help overcome the barriers they are facing.

Improved work incentives

18. Disregarded earnings under the CSSA Scheme are to provide an incentive to work so that taking up paid job would not make the family financially worse off. As single parents on CSSA are given the choice to remain a full-time parent until their youngest child reaches 15 years of age, we need to make work more financially rewarding if we are to attract CSSA single parent recipients with young children to participate in paid employment. Allowing this group of recipients a more generous amount of disregarded earnings will not only increase the single parents' incentive to work but also improve the quality of life for their children.

19. At present, CSSA recipient's monthly earnings can be disregarded up to a maximum of \$1,805. As part of the voluntary employment assistance programme for CSSA single parent recipients with young children, we will seek the approval of the Finance Committee to allow this group of recipients a higher level of monthly disregarded earnings up to a maximum of \$2,500 until their youngest child reaches 15.

20. As mentioned above, the single parents are usually not yet job-ready during the initial period of their receipt of CSSA, and we are therefore targeting those who have been on CSSA for six months or more. Accordingly, the higher level of monthly disregarded earnings would initially be made available only to single parents who have been on CSSA for six months or longer.

Help with child care

21. Inadequate child care support are often seen by single parents as a major obstacle to work. Under the CSSA Scheme, a special grant is payable to single parents to cover the child care centres fees for children aged 0 to 6. To enable single parents to rejoin the workforce, SWD has strengthened the extended hours service in child care centres and provided additional occasional child care service. From September 2000, SWD has subsidised 6,000 After School Care Programme (ASCP) places run by non-profit making NGOs for children aged 6 to 12, with 10% (600 places) to be provided on a half-fee or no-fee basis. CSSA families who need ASCP service in order to work may approach any one of these NGO-run centres to seek a full fee waiver or half-fee place.

22. We intend to try out another mode in meeting the single parents' need for ASCP. Without changing the current provision of 6,000 subsidised ASCP places, SWD has identified savings to fund initially 300 additional ASCP places at no cost to the service users. These places will be made available to eligible single parent CSSA recipients in the form of a ASCP coupon. The single parent may then use the coupon to obtain a free place in a list of NGO-run centres with ASCP. We believe that this arrangement would give single parents more flexibility and more choices and most importantly, a certainty of a free place. SWD is inviting those NGOs currently running the 6,000 subsidised ASCP places in 134 centres to apply to join the scheme. These centres would be reimbursed the cost of the ASCP places provided on coupon basis at a value of \$930 per place per month. To start with, we will provide coupons for ASCP places when the single parent is attending employment retraining programmes, being engaged in activities under the SJAP or IEAF projects, or actively seeking jobs. However, continued provision of ASCP service would be subject to review to ensure that the support is given to those most in need because of their taking up paid job.

Enhanced supportive services

23. Since February 2001, five Single Parent Centres (SPCs) targeting specifically at single parent families have been set up to provide support and services. These Centres aim at providing one-stop service and support to single parents in need. There will be enhanced referral mechanism between the EA Co-ordinators in the Social Security Field Units and the Single Parent Centres. Each of these Centres will be provided with at least one additional Programme Assistant to help out on this work.

24. For CSSA single parent recipients who are not ready for employment because, for example, they have been away from the labour market for some time or have difficulties in child care, SPCs will provide the necessary support. The single parents will receive a range of services in the SPCs to overcome problems arising from single parenthood, restore resilience,

build up a social and mutual help network, and improve their capability for self-reliance. Services provided by SPCs include stress management, family education, parent education programme, supportive groups, counseling, child-minding skills, soft-skills and other job skills training, outreaching and referral services. Where appropriate, the SPCs will outreach to the single parents to offer early intervention.

25. Single parents who have gained readiness towards employment after receiving services at SPCs will be arranged to receive employment assistance through the EA Co-ordinator or employment services at the SPCs, depending on individual situation.

Public housing support

26. Single parents who are receiving rental subsidy under CSSA to cover private housing rental are currently not eligible for compassionate rehousing. Following initial discussions between SWD and Housing Department, active consideration is being given to assisting single parent CSSA recipients who have found paid jobs in meeting their permanent housing needs through compassionate rehousing. This would give them better assurance of achieving complete self-reliance through work.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

27. To help deliver the services under this Project, we will train up a team of EA Co-ordinators. We estimate the need to engage 30 extra EA Co-ordinators. Together with the 300 ASCP coupons and the extra Programme Assistants to be allocated to the five SPCs, the total requirement of implementing the “Ending Exclusion” Project is estimated at about \$8.5 million per year. SWD will be meeting this requirement through redeployment of existing resources.

EVALUATION

28. As with other SFS schemes, we will closely monitor the progress of the Project and evaluate its effectiveness in terms of the following areas of outcome -

- ◆ Improved awareness of the need for “social participation”;
- ◆ Improvement in psychological well-being (e.g. self-esteem);
- ◆ Improved awareness of the need to establish self-reliance;
- ◆ Understanding on the importance of employment
- ◆ Success in gaining employment.

29. Apart from making use of information in administrative records of the Computerised Social Security System, we will commission a tertiary institute to conduct a longitudinal study to gauge the psychological, attitudinal and behavioural changes of the single parents and their children over time. We expect that the evaluation may spread over a period of two years to fully assess the impact of the Project on the single parents and their children.

IMPLEMENTATION

30. We are in the stage of consulting concerned Advisory Committees. Subject to views collected, we will approach Finance Committee of the Legislative Council in January 2002 for approval of the proposed higher level of disregarded earnings for single parent CSSA recipients. We aim to implement the Project by March 2002.

ADVICE SOUGHT

31. Members are invited to comment on the proposals contained in this paper.

Social Welfare Department
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