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(Urgent by fax : 2869 6794)

15 November 2004

Clerk to Panel on Public Service
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Building,
8 Jackson Road,
Central
Hong Kong

(Attn: Ms Rosalind Ma)

Dear Ms Ma,

Panel on Public Service

Submission from the Hong Kong Fire Services Department Ambulancemen's Union

I refer to your letter dated 27 October, attaching a letter from the Chairman of the Hong Kong Fire Services Department Ambulancemen's Union (the Ambulancemen's Union) dated 18 October 2004. Our response to the points raised in the letter is set out in the following paragraphs.

The working hours of civil servants, including the meal break arrangement, are determined by the Heads of Department having regard to their operational requirements. As a result, there are different meal break arrangements for different grades and work settings. Generally speaking, all members of the disciplined services are required to attend to emergency duties even during their scheduled meal breaks. The frequency of such emergency calls varies amongst different grades and different work settings.

In general, Ambulancemen are arranged in a five-watch system. Within a 24-hour period, two watches are on day shift (from 8:30 am to 8:30 pm), one watch is on night shift (from 8:30 pm to 8:30 am) and the remaining two watches are off duty for 24 hours. An Ambulanceman's normal shift pattern is "two day shifts, one night shift and two day-offs".

The meal break arrangement for the Ambulanceman grade is such that they are allowed to have a one-hour lunch break from 12 pm to 2 pm. During that period, they are also required to attend to emergency calls. If they are not able to have a continuous 20-minute meal break during the two-hour period, they will be allowed to take a 20-minute off-call (i.e. no need to respond to calls) meal break afterwards. In addition to the meal break, Ambulancemen also have two 15-minute tea breaks in each day shift, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. There are also emergency feeding kits (with biscuits and water) on each ambulance in case the Ambulancemen are too busy to have any sit-down meals.

To address the concerns raised by the Ambulanceman grade on the meal break arrangement, the management of Fire Services Department (FSD) has all along been in discussion with the Ambulancemen's Union with a view to identifying areas for improvement. In fact, a number of improvement measures have been put in place as a result of these discussions –

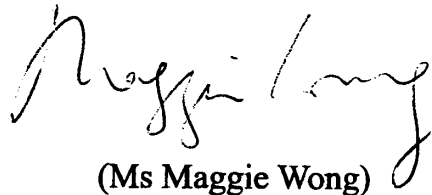
- (a) On 10 March 2001, the compensatory meal break was extended from 15 minutes to 20 minutes;
- (b) On 1 April 2003, the designated period for taking meal breaks for 22 ambulance units (out of 60) was advanced to between 11:30 am to 1:30 pm. The trial scheme was conducted to see if more Ambulancemen might be able to take meals uninterrupted during the specified hours;
- (c) The trial scheme was extended from 22 to 29 ambulance units with effect from 1 March 2004; and
- (d) Starting from 1 May 2004, all ambulance units may be granted the 20-minute-off-call compensatory meal break if they are unable to take their meal break by 1:30 pm, including those with their meal break period starting at 12:00 pm.

Statistics for the period from January to September 2004 show that most Ambulancemen were able to take a continuous meal break during the scheduled meal hours. During the said period, on average the crew members of 16 ambulances were compensated with the 20-minute-off-call meal break every day. This represents about 7.5% of the ambulance fleet.

In a recent meeting between the FSD management and the Ambulancemen's Union on 23 October 2004, a common understanding was reached about the situation facing frontline ambulancemen with regard to the meal break arrangement. The two sides agreed that the matter deserved further careful consideration having regard to the welfare of staff, as well as the operational and resource implications of any suggested improvement measures. The FSD management will continue their on-going dialogue with the Ambulancemen's Union on the subject. It will study the suggestions put forward by staff and explore other practicable measures to address staff's concern over the meal break arrangement.

Arrangements for meal break will need to take account of, among other factors, the operational requirements of the department. As such, we look to the departmental management to work with staff on an appropriate arrangement. Both Civil Service Bureau and Security Bureau have been taking a close interest in this matter, and have been in contact with the FSD management as well as staff representatives through established channels of communication. We are hopeful that with the joint efforts of the FSD management and staff, a mutually agreeable meal break arrangement will be put in place while ensuring the provision of emergency ambulance services to the public.

Yours sincerely,



(Ms Maggie Wong)
for Secretary for the Civil Service

c.c. Secretary for Security
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(Fax No. : 2868 9159)

Director of Fire Services
(Attn: Mr. David CHOW)
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