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16 November 2004

Clerk to Panel on Security
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central
Hong Kong

(Attn: Mr. Raymond Lam)

Dear Mr. Lam,

**Panel on Security
Meal Breaks for Ambulancemen**

Thank you for your letter of 26 October 2004 requesting the Administration to provide information on the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen. Our response to the points raised in the letter is set out in the following paragraphs.

Existing lunch break arrangements for ambulancemen

Under the Civil Service Regulations, the conditioned hours¹ and meal break arrangements for disciplined staff are governed by operational needs and are determined in relation to the total responsibility of each service, its complement, and the actual manpower at any time. Ambulancemen are disciplined staff and it is for the Fire Services Department (FSD) to make arrangements for their meal breaks taking into account all relevant considerations, including operational needs and staff concerns.

¹“Conditioned hours” means hours of duty which salary is calculated to cover and the hours which must be worked before overtime work is counted for.

At present, ambulancemen are allowed a meal break not exceeding one hour from 1200 to 1400 hours in each day shift (from 0830 to 2030 hours). During the designated meal break, they are required to attend to emergency calls. If they are unable to take a continuous meal break of 20 minutes during the two-hour period, they will be given a compensatory meal break of 20 minutes afterwards, during which they will be “off-call”, which means that they do not have to respond to emergency calls. In addition to the meal break, ambulancemen are also given two 15-minute tea breaks in the morning and afternoon respectively in each day shift. Emergency feeding kits (with biscuits and water) are also provided on each ambulance in case the ambulancemen are too busy to have any sit-down meals.

Average length of meal breaks of ambulancemen

The FSD does not maintain statistics on the average length of meal breaks for ambulancemen. However, statistics for the first nine months of 2004 show that the majority of ambulancemen were able to take a continuous meal break during the scheduled meal break. During the period, there was a daily average of 16 ambulances whose crew members were compensated with the 20-minute off-call meal break, representing 7.5% of the establishment of the ambulance fleet.

Change in the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen in the past three years

In response to the suggestions and concerns of ambulancemen regarding meal break arrangements, FSD has put in place a number of improvement measures-

- (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) were advanced to between 1130 to 1330 hours. The trial scheme was conducted to see if more ambulancemen might be able to take meals uninterrupted during the specified hours. The trial scheme was extended from 22 to 29 ambulance units with effect from 1 March 2004.
- (c) 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.

The Administration's position

Our duty to the public is to maintain emergency ambulance services at all times. Such unique requirement on ambulancemen is one of the reasons why they are disciplined staff. At the same time we recognize the need to give ambulancemen a reasonable arrangement for them to have lunch. To that end FSD has introduced the improvement measures mentioned in paragraph 5 above with the aim of striking a balance between the provision of emergency ambulance service to the public and the welfare of ambulance staff.

FSD has been engaging in on-going discussions with ambulancemen about their meal break arrangements. At a recent meeting between the FSD management and all committee members of the Ambulancemen's Union on 23 October 2004, the two sides agreed that the matter deserved further careful consideration having regard to the welfare of staff, as well as operational and resource implications of any improvement measures. FSD will continue discussion with the staff side to explore feasible alternatives to improve the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen on the premise that the provision of emergency ambulance services to the public will not be adversely affected.

Yours sincerely

(Charles Wong)
for Secretary for Security

c.c.

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