

**For discussion
on 10 January 2005**

LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES

Subcommittee on review of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance

Social Security Benefits and Other Services Provided for Needy Children in Hong Kong

PURPOSE

This paper provides information on the social security benefits and other services provided for needy children in Hong Kong.

OVERVIEW OF ASSISTANCE TO CHILDREN

2. The principle of according priority treatment to the needs of our children is well embedded in our social security policies through the non-contributory, revenue-funded and means-tested Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme. Under the CSSA Scheme, children are provided with higher standard rates than other able-bodied recipients. They are also provided with a range of special grants pertaining to their education and school-related needs. But we should recognize that CSSA is only the safety net of last resort.

3. The Administration has all along been committed to developing a comprehensive network of services, many of them highly subsidized, to take care of our children's developmental needs. For instance, we have developed a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial welfare services for families in order to provide targeted assistance to help families in need. For example, working parents in need of child care services for young children, or after school care service for their school-age children can receive highly subsidized child care and after school care

services from Social Welfare Department (SWD) or Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). Our healthcare system provides immunization for children from birth to protect them from infectious diseases and provides them with health education in school so that they can develop healthily. It is our policy that no children should be deprived of medical services because of lack of means.

4. In respect of education, children are provided with nine years' free and universal education up to secondary 3 level, and highly subsidized senior secondary and university education if they are willing and able to pursue further studies. It is also Government's policy that no children would be deprived of education for lack of means, through the provision of student financial assistance under various schemes. In addition, the Administration is also currently exploring new opportunities to provide more targeted services to particular vulnerable groups in need, including children and youth.

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS FOR NEEDY CHILDREN

5. Under the CSSA Scheme, children are defined as those aged below 15 and those aged 15-21 receiving full-time education. As at end of November 2004, there are 121 700 CSSA recipients aged under 15, and 43 833 recipients aged between 15-21 receiving children allowance.

Monthly standard rates for children

6. Different standard rates are payable to different categories of CSSA recipients to meet their normal daily needs. The monthly standard rates for able-bodied children range from \$1,275 to \$1,920, higher than those for able-bodied adults by \$130 to \$315; those for disabled children range from \$2,230 to \$4,150, higher than those for disabled adults by \$485 to \$645. The current monthly standard rates for children are provided in Annex 1.

7. Over the years, a number of real improvements were introduced since 1991 for children under the CSSA Scheme. For instance, a monthly Child Supplement of \$185 (equivalent to 25% of the prevailing basic rate for a single person) was introduced in November 1991 under the Public Assistance (PA) Scheme mainly to take account of children's developmental needs. Upon implementation of the CSSA Scheme in July 1993 to replace the PA Scheme, the Child Supplement was merged

into the PA basic rates to form the standard rates for children, which were increased in real terms at the same time by 11% to 13% for able-bodied children and by 4% to 14% for disabled children. From 1 April 1994, the standard rates for children were increased by \$100 in real terms to enable them to participate more in social, recreational and extra-curricular activities. In the next year, the standard rates for children were further increased by \$205 in real terms to provide them with more assistance to take part in social and extracurricular activities.

Special grants for children

8. Apart from standard rates, special grants are payable to CSSA recipients, including children, on an individual basis to cover rent, water/sewage charge, childcare centre fees and burial expenses.

9. In addition, school children are entitled to a full range of special grants to meet their educational expenses. These grants cover:- (i) school fees (actual fees, or a maximum of full-day kindergarten fee of \$2,260 per month or half-day kindergarten fee of \$1,279 per month); (ii) meal allowance for \$195 per month for full-time students who have to take lunch away from home; (iii) actual expenses of fares to and from school and examination fees; and (iv) a flat-rate grant for each school year, which ranges from \$1,245 to \$3,810 for school-related expenses of different education level such as books, stationery, school uniforms, and other miscellaneous expenses.

10. For families that face special hardship, expenses in providing eye glasses for children can also be met on a discretionary basis up to \$500. Disabled children are given other special grants to meet their special needs, such as fares to hospital/clinic, expenses for medical and rehabilitation appliances.

Exemption of Residence Requirement

11. To provide special care and protection for children, Hong Kong residents under 18 years of age are not required to satisfy any prior residence requirements to be eligible for CSSA.

Average Payments for CSSA Families

12. At present, the estimated monthly CSSA payments for 3-person and 4-person households without income are \$7,664 and \$9,005 respectively. Households with

any member in paid work can enjoy even higher monthly disposable incomes as part of the monthly earnings can be disregarded up to a maximum of \$2,500. Annex 2 provides the estimated average monthly CSSA payments for households without income by household size.

Medical Care for CSSA Recipients

13. In addition to cash assistance, CSSA recipients are given free medical services in all public clinics/hospitals.

PARTNERSHIP FUND FOR THE DISADVANTAGED

14. The recently approved Partnership Fund for the Disadvantaged (with a commitment of \$200 million) may also give priority to applications which provide more direct benefits to underprivileged groups, including children from deprived families.

LIFEWIDE LEARNING FUND

15. In 2002, a Life-wide Learning Fund was set up with a sum of about \$140 million from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust. It aims to support needy students to participate in co-curricular activities organised by the school. Primary 4-6 or Secondary 1-3 students who are eligible for CSSA or full-rate grant from the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) are eligible to apply. The average amount of assistance is \$160 per annum for a primary school student, and \$240 for a secondary school student. Over the last two years, each year some 60,000 eligible students from more than 1,100 schools received assistance through the scheme.

IT ASSISTANCE

16. At present, each primary school has an average of about 90 computers, and each secondary school about 250 computers to facilitate students' learning with IT. To enhance access to IT facilities, laptop computers are provided to secondary school students who do not have computers at home (the "Digital Bridge" project supported by the Quality Education Fund), and grants are being provided to schools to facilitate

them to extend the opening of their computer rooms beyond school hours for use by their students. On top of this, we are working with NGOs to recycle used computers by giving them to students who cannot afford to have their own computer at home. IT facilities are also set up in public libraries, children and youth centres, community centres, etc.

FAMILY AND WELFARE SERVICES

17. SWD has put in place a wide range of welfare services provided either by SWD or NGOs to help those in need, including children and their families. The objectives of these services are to strengthen the capability of the socially disadvantaged in lifting themselves out of adversities, and to provide them with opportunities to participate in social activities.

Child Care Services

18. To cater for the needs of families with child care needs, day care services are provided by child care centres operated by NGOs in the form of day crèches (for children aged below two) and day nurseries (for children aged between two and six). As at the end of September 2004, a total of 28 661 aided nurseries places and 952 aided crèche places are provided. Low income families can apply for fee assistance under the Fee Assistance Scheme for Child Care Centres, while CSSA parents are given a special grant under CSSA to cover child care centre fees should they demonstrate a social need for child care service.

19. Apart from regular day care services, occasional child care service and extended hours child care service are provided in some of the aided child care centres so that children do not need to be left unattended at home, and to meet the special needs of working parents who need longer hours of child care assistance or parents having sudden commitment. As at the end of September 2004, a total of 700 occasional child care service places and 1 500 extended hours child care service places are provided. Again, special grants are payable to parents on CSSA to cover fees for these services. In addition, parents can make use of the flexible child care service provided by mutual help child care centres, which are run by social welfare agencies, religious bodies, kai-fong associations, etc. on a self-financing and non-profit-making basis. The service is delivered by parents and volunteers on a mutual help basis at the neighbourhood level, with each center providing care for up

to a maximum of 14 children aged below six at any one point of time. As at the end of September 2004, 20 mutual help childcare centres are being operated by NGOs and 13 by SWD.

20. In response to the declining demand for child care centre services over the past years mainly due to the low birth rates in Hong Kong, SWD has adopted a more flexible and innovative approach to the provision of child care services. A two-year pilot project on supervised child-minding service was launched by an NGO in Tung Chung in June 2003 with the support of the Lotteries Fund. The service aims at providing care and supervision in a stable and safe family living environment for children aged under three as an alternative to help parents in need of child-minding service during the daytime, and creating job opportunities for those who wish to become child-minders. It is also one of the objectives of this pilot project to assist CSSA recipients with childcare needs to rejoin the workforce. Low income families including CSSA recipients demonstrating a social need for child care and passing a means test can be granted a subsidy in part or in full to cover the child minding fee.

21. Another new initiative is a two-year pilot day foster care service launched by an NGO in Tuen Mun in April 2003 to provide an alternative mode of daytime child care for families in need. These families will be matched with day foster homes in their living vicinity. The service is free for needy families with social needs, including those on CSSA while payment in accordance with a means test is applicable for other non-social need cases.

Children and Youth Services

22. Children and youth should be given opportunities and motivations to develop themselves and to move up the social ladder. Assistance is provided to help the less-privileged children and youth to lead a normal and healthy lifestyle. In this connection, after school services and other recreational and extra-curricular activities are provided for them.

23. The target beneficiary of young people services under the schedule of SWD are children and youth aged six to twenty-four. NGOs are subvented to provide core young people services, namely integrated children and youth service centres, children and youth centres, community support service scheme, outreaching social work service, school social work service and services for young night drifters for the above target group. Since 1994-95, resources for young people have been pooled together

to form integrated children and youth service centres with a view to providing holistic services for contemporary young people. These include guidance and counseling services, supportive service for young people in disadvantageous circumstances, socialization programmes and programme for developing their social responsibility and competence. The aim is to train up our young people to become responsible and contributing members of the society.

24. After School Care Programme (ASCP) provides supportive services for primary pupils aged six to twelve whose parents are unable to provide proper care for them after school hours due to work or other reasons. Services of ASCP include homework guidance, parental guidance, meal service, skills learning and other social activities. With effect from September 2000, SWD has been allocating subsidy to ASCP centres to help working parents who are unable to take care of their children after school as a result of being engaged in low income jobs and/or attending employment-related retraining/attachment programme. Eligible parents, including CSSA parents, would be granted full fee waiving or half-fee reduction places for the service as appropriate.

Family Services

25. Children are part of a family, and family is the vital component of our society. A family which functions well in discharging its responsibility contributes to the well-being of its members and stability of society. To support the family, we have developed a comprehensive network of welfare services to cater for different family needs.

26. There is an extensive network of Family Service Centres/Integrated Family Service Centres (FSCs/IFSCs) operated by SWD or NGOs over the territory to provide family support services to the needy, including children and their family members. Services include counselling service, supportive groups and programmes, aiming at assisting individuals and families build up self-confidence and develop proper values, enhance parents' parenting skills and strengthen their skills in problem solving and stress management. Where necessary, social workers of these FSCs/IFSCs also refer needy children (e.g. those suspected to have malnutrition or delayed development) to the Maternal and Child Health Centres or Student Health Service of the Department of Health for follow-up, arrange clinical psychological service for emotionally disturbed children or those with special needs, etc. Various charitable/trust funds may also be arranged to assist individuals or families to tide

over their temporary financial hardships. In addition, for families facing genuine and imminent housing problems with social and/or medical reasons and warranting housing assistance, SWD may also recommend them to the Housing Department for ‘compassionate rehousing’ so as to provide the children with a stable home environment.

27. For individuals or families facing family violence or other life crises, various specialized and crisis intervention services are available. These include the regional-based Family and Child Protective Services Units of SWD specialized in handling child abuse, spouse battering and child custody cases, refuge centres for women providing round-the-clock admission, a Family Crisis Support Centre providing 24-hours time-out facility, including a 24-hour hotline to help persons facing crisis to manage their emotions and seek positive solutions to their problems, and a Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre which provides round-the-clock outreaching, crisis intervention/intensive counselling to persons in crisis situation and at high/moderate suicide risks.

HEALTHCARE SERVICES

28. Government-run dental and health services are also made available to children through a network of services in the Department of Health (DH) to ensure children have a healthy development from birth.

29. DH’s Family Health Service provides a comprehensive range of free health promotion and disease prevention activities to children from birth to 5 years. An integrated child health and development programme is implemented to promote children’s holistic health and wellbeing. The programme comprises immunization to protect children from nine childhood infectious diseases, child health and developmental surveillance, as well as parenting activities to equip parents and caregivers with the necessary knowledge and skills to bring up healthy and well-adjusted children.

30. The Department’s Student Health Service (SHS), which is also free, aims to promote and maintain the physical and psychological health of school children through a two-pronged approach. Firstly, all primary and secondary day-school students can enroll in annual health programmes designed to cater for their different health needs at various stages of development. Services include health screening and

assessment, physical examination, individual counseling and health education. Students found to have specific health problems will be referred to Special Assessment Centres and/or specialists for further management. Secondly, an outreaching Adolescent Health Programme was introduced in 2001 to promote the psychosocial health of adolescents. Multi-disciplinary teams will deliver health promotion programmes to secondary school students, their teachers and parents in the school setting. This programme aims to equip participants with the knowledge and skills which can help them to improve their psychosocial health and enhance their resilience against adversities.

31. The Child Assessment Service (CAS) of DH helps to maximize the potential of children with special needs, and to promote rehabilitation services for them. To achieve these goals, CAS serves children from birth to 12 years by providing comprehensive assessment service to children (including their families) with special developmental needs, followed by rehabilitation prescriptions and management, and empowerment of these children and their families through proactive education programmes. In addition, CAS plays an active role in the promotion of professional standards in the field through development of clinical benchmarks and research. It also provides health education programmes for the public on children's developmental problems and their management.

32. The School Dental Care Service of DH provides basic dental care for primary school children at an annual enrolment fee of \$20. The scope of activities includes oral health education, preventive therapy, dental fillings, prophylaxis and dental extraction.

EDUCATION SERVICES

Free Education

33. Children aged six to 15 are provided with nine years' free and universal education up to Secondary 3 level. Thereafter, students who are willing and able to continue with their study are given the opportunity to receive subsidized senior secondary and university education. For students with special educational needs or academic low-achievers, intensive remedial teaching programmes are offered in primary schools, and school-based remedial support/curriculum tailoring programmes in secondary schools. Free assessment and follow-up services are provided for

students suspected of having physical/sensory disabilities, speech and language impairment and behavioral problems. Those who cannot benefit from ordinary school education may attend special schools.

Student Guidance Support Services

34. In addition, a comprehensive and developmental guidance system is put in place in primary schools, which forms an integral part of education. The student guidance officers in primary schools work in close partnership with teachers and parents, conduct developmental and preventive guidance activities as well as provide case-work and/or group-work service to help individual students overcome their personal and social problems. Students in need of welfare services are referred to NGOs or the SWD. School social work services in secondary schools are overseen by the SWD with a view to identifying and helping students with academic, social and emotional problems, maximizing their educational opportunities, developing their potential and preparing them for responsible adulthood.

Financial Assistance

35. Primary and secondary students from low-income families not receiving CSSA are eligible for financial assistance under various means-tested schemes administered by the SFAA in the form of travel subsidy, textbook assistance, tuition fee remission and public examinations fee remission. Eligible full-time local students of publicly-funded and self-financing programmes at post-secondary level may apply for financial assistance in the form of grants and/or low-interest loans to cover tuition fees, academic and living expenses, where applicable.

36. Financial assistance is also provided to eligible non-profit-making kindergartens through reimbursement of rent, rates and government rent and the Kindergarten Subsidy Scheme to alleviate the impact of rental and teachers' salary respectively on kindergarten fees. We also provide financial assistance in the form of fee remission to kindergarten students from low-income families through the means-tested Kindergarten Fee Remission Scheme.

Way Forward

37. We believe that through the CSSA scheme, and through the above highly subsidized family and welfare services, healthcare services, education services, and

various funds set up to assist the needy, we have provided a basic safety net which meets the basic and special financial needs of disadvantaged children, and targeted assistance to address the other developmental needs of children. We will continue to review our CSSA scheme and other services to ensure that needy children are provided with the appropriate assistance that they need to develop into healthy individuals.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau/Social Welfare Department
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CSSA Standard Rates for Children

<u>Category</u>	<u>Standard Rates</u>			
	(\$ per person per month)			
	Single <u>person</u>	In a family comprising not more than 2 able-bodied adults/ <u>children</u>	In a family comprising 3 able-bodied adults/ <u>children</u>	In a family comprising 4 or more able-bodied adults/ <u>children</u>
Able-bodied child	1,920	1,595	1,435	1,275
	<u>Single person</u>	<u>Family member</u>		
<u>Disabled child</u>				
50% disabled	2,560		2,230	
100% disabled	3,040		2,715	
Requiring constant attendance	4,150		3,835	

**Estimated average monthly CSSA payments
for households without income**

Household size	Estimated average monthly CSSA payment from 1 October 2004 (\$)
1	3,424
2	5,737
3	7,664
4	9,005
5	10,662
6 or above	13,296