

## **Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services**

### **Support Services for Street Sleepers**

#### **Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the existing support services for street sleepers.

#### **Background**

2. The Government has always been concerned about the needs of street sleepers. We provide a wide range of support services to address their emergency needs and enhance their work motivation and skills, so as to help them give up street sleeping and become self-reliant.

3. To monitor service demand, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has set up a computerised Street Sleepers Registry (SSR) to capture street sleepers' personal data and record the services they receive. Both SWD and the services units of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialised in serving street sleepers (including the three integrated services teams for street sleepers (ISTs) subvented by SWD and the Society for Community Organisation) have to register newly confirmed street sleeper cases with the SSR on a monthly basis and deregister cases when they confirm that the street sleepers have given up street sleeping. As at February 2009, the number of registered street sleepers was 405.

#### **Support Services for Street Sleepers**

##### ***The Three-year Action Plan to help Street Sleepers***

4. Between April 2001 and March 2004, SWD had collaborated with the Salvation Army (SA), St James' Settlement (SJS) and the Christian Concern for the Homeless Association (CCHA) to carry out a "Three-year Action Plan to help Street Sleepers" (the Action Plan), with funding support from the Lotteries Fund. Parties to the Action Plan provided a continuum of services to street sleepers, including casework, outreaching, emergency and short-term accommodation, emergency funding, employment assistance, network

re-building and aftercare, etc. The objective was to assist street sleepers, particularly those who were younger, better educated, in normal health condition and have not been street sleepers for long to give up street sleeping and become self-reliant. The Action Plan was effective. There had been a significant decline in the number of street sleepers, from 1 203 in April 2001 to 785 in December 2002, and further to 529 in December 2003.

### ***Integrated Services Teams for Street Sleepers***

5. Upon completion of the Action Plan in March 2004, SWD set up three ISTs by pooling resources and re-engineering existing services. The ISTs were operated by SJS, SA and CCHA respectively, and came into operation in April 2004, providing a package of tailor-made and one-stop services including day and late-night outreaching visits, emergency shelter and short-term hostel placement, counselling, employment guidance, personal care (e.g. bathing, hair-cutting and meal service), emergency relief fund, arrangement of long-term accommodation, aftercare service and service referrals. The teams also collaborate with other NGOs such as the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers and the Society for Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention, Hong Kong (SRACP) to ensure that specialised services are effectively provided to street sleepers with special needs, e.g. drug addicts and ex-offenders.

6. As street sleepers are usually more passive and rarely take the initiative to seek help, social workers of the ISTs adopt the outreaching approach to proactively engage them. The ISTs may therefore identify their needs and provide them with suitable and timely services even though each IST has one service address only.

7. To ensure service quality, SWD and the three organisations operating ISTs have signed Funding and Service Agreements which set out various indicators and standards for the services. SWD monitors the service performance of the ISTs in accordance with the agreements and meet with the organisations regularly to review their service standards. During the period from April 2004 to December 2008, the three ISTs have helped a total of 594 street sleepers to live off the street and move into different types of accommodation including private tenement, temporary shelters and urban hostels and public housing.

### ***Urban Hostels and Emergency Shelter***

8. SWD subvents NGOs to operate five urban hostels and one temporary shelter. Together they provide 192 places of short-term accommodation and counselling services for street sleepers and other needy persons. Admission is by referral of SWD or NGOs only. Normally, the period of stay should not

exceed six months. The average utilisation rate of these hostels and shelters in 2008-09 (as at December 2008) was 84.8%.

9. On top of the government subvented hostels and temporary shelter mentioned above, there are also seven other street sleeper or temporary shelters operated by NGOs, including the Street Sleepers' Shelter Society Trustee Incorporated, on a self-financing basis. These shelters provide a total of 403 places of overnight or temporary accommodation for street sleepers. Admission is also by referral of SWD or NGOs only. Normally, the period of stay should not exceed six weeks.

10. The hostels and shelters mentioned at paragraphs 8 and 9 above are temporary accommodation. Residents are expected to move to longer-term accommodation within a reasonable period of time to make way for other street sleepers with immediate accommodation needs. The hostel / shelter operators work closely with social workers who made the original referrals to arrange longer-term accommodation for their residents.

11. For individuals or families with genuine and pressing housing needs but are unable to solve the problems themselves, SWD will recommend them to the Housing Department which will consider allocating public rental housing units to them under the compassionate rehousing arrangement.

### ***Free Meal and Food Assistance Service***

12. The three ISTs also provide free meals to street sleepers at their day centres in Yaumatei, Sham Shui Po and Western District. In addition, the five NGO-operated short-term food assistance service projects, which started operation on 27 February 2009, provide food assistance to needy persons, including street sleepers. From 27 February 2009 to 15 March 2009, a total of 31 street sleepers have been assisted by these service projects.

### ***Financial Assistance***

13. Street sleepers with genuine long-term financial hardship can apply for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) to meet their basic needs for living. Regardless of whether an applicant is a street sleeper, upon receipt of an application for CSSA, SWD will contact the applicant for an interview to verify the applicant's circumstances and information provided by the applicant. Under normal circumstances, and if the applicant can produce all the necessary information, the application process can be completed within four weeks.

14. An allocation of \$50,000 is included in the annual subvention for each of the three ISTs as emergency fund to cover eligible users' expenses such as

payment of rent, rental deposit, other removal expenses and short-term living costs, etc. Individual ISTs can, having regard to service needs, flexibly deploy their operation resources for use as emergency fund. If necessary, SWD will consider increasing the provision for the emergency funds.

15. If other resources are not available, social workers of SWD or NGO service units will, having regard to individual circumstances, provide temporary cash grants to individuals and families (including street sleepers) to help them tide over financial difficulties arising from emergencies. Funding for cash grants comes from allocations to SWD from four charitable trust funds – namely, Li Po Chun Charitable Trust Fund, Tang Shiu Kin & Ho Tim Charitable Fund, Kwan Fong Trust Fund for the Needy and Brewin Trust Fund. With reference to the individual financial cycles of the four charitable trust funds (i.e., financial year starting from April for Tang Shiu Kin and Ho Tim Charitable Fund and Kwan Fong Trust Fund, and from July and September for Brewin Trust Fund and Li Po Chun Charitable Trust Fund respectively), their total allocation to SWD in 2008-09 was \$7.15 million. As at the end of February 2009, the utilisation rate of allocation was 71.4%.

16. In addition, since March 2007, SRACP has been implementing a two-year pilot scheme with subsidy from SWD to provide a maximum of two months' rental assistance for non-CSSA newly-discharged rehabilitated offenders, in order to help them meet their imminent accommodation need.

### ***Services relating to community development***

17. Besides the aforementioned support services, SWD also subvents the Society for Community Organisation to run a Care and Support Networking Team. Through the provision of outreaching support, casework and group work services, the team aims at helping street sleepers and other vulnerable groups reintegrate into the community, thus contributing to the Home Affairs Bureau's policy objective on community development.

### **Way Forward**

18. SWD and NGOs providing support services for street sleepers plan to enhance their services in 2009-10. Details are as follows –

- (a) CCHA, with the assistance of the Administration in securing suitable premises, has planned to set up two self-financing hostels, one each in Yaumatei and Sham Shui Po. SWD has also taken the opportunity to consider enhancing the emergency shelter service of the IST of CCHA;

- (b) SWD will allocate an additional \$20,000 as emergency fund for each of the ISTs;
- (c) in view of a possible rise in demand, the total allocation to SWD from the four charitable trust funds mentioned at paragraph 15 above will be \$8.5 million in 2009-10, representing an increase of \$1.35 million as compared with the allocation for 2008-09; and
- (d) as SRACP's pilot scheme to provide short-term rental assistance (paragraph 16 above) was effective in addressing the accommodation need of ex-offenders, it has become a regular subvented service of SWD since April 2009.

19. SWD will, in collaboration with the ISTs and other parties concerned, closely monitor the demand for and operation of street sleepers services and introduce further measures if necessary.

### **Advice Sought**

20. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

**Social Welfare Department**  
**April 2009**