

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

Services to Support Families at-risk

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on welfare services put in place to support families at-risk.

Strategic Direction to Supporting Families At-risk

2. The Government is committed to preserving and strengthening families through promotion of family harmony and support for families which are unable to properly perform their functions through a wide range of preventive, supportive and remedial services provided under the Social Welfare Department (SWD). Based on a child-centred, family-focused and community-based service direction, a holistic, integrated and cross-sectoral service mode has been adopted to strengthen families and provide suitable services to needy families.

3. SWD provides a spectrum of services by adopting the strategy of early identification and intervention, timely support, cross-sectoral collaboration and provision of specialised services to facilitate positive functioning of families and support those at-risk.

Early Identification and Intervention

Integration of Family Services

4. SWD has adopted an integrated mode of service provision to address the holistic needs of families. In 2004-05, we re-engineered the resources for family services and set up Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) over the territory by phases with a view to providing a spectrum of preventive, supportive and remedial services through the three major components of an IFSC, namely Family Resource Unit, Family Support Unit and Family Counselling Unit. Currently, there are a total of 62 IFSCs run by SWD and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The Administration will set up three additional IFSCs in 2012-

13, bringing the total number to 65.

5. Each IFSC serves a well-defined geographical service boundary under the guiding principles of accessibility, early identification, integration and partnership. To enhance the accessibility of the services, all IFSCs have extended the hours of service twice a week to 8 or 9 pm and on all Saturdays. IFSCs provide services to individuals and families according to their assessed needs, which may include family life education, parent-child activities, enquiry services, volunteer training, outreaching services, groups and programmes, counselling services, and service referrals etc. With a view to facilitating early identification and referral of cases, IFSCs also maintain close collaboration, interfacing and partnership with government departments concerned, other social welfare service units, schools, clinics, District Councils, community organisations such as residents' groups, religious groups, etc. in the district.

Timely Support

6. SWD provides a variety of support services to assist families in facing various challenges.

Enhanced Child Care Support Services

7. To support parents who are unable to take care of their children temporarily because of work or other reasons, and assist low-income families in obtaining child care support, various day child care services, including child care centre service, extended hours service, occasional child care service and mutual help child care centre service, are available for children below the age of six. Fee subsidies are available for parents with financial difficulties. To enhance service flexibility, we have introduced the Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project (NSCCP) which provides services during late evenings, weekends and public holidays. NSCCP is delivered at the neighbourhood level, targeting needy families as well as recruiting child carers through networking and collaboration with local community groups, welfare organisations, schools, clinics / hospitals and child-related professionals and organisations. In view of the proven effectiveness of the three-year pilot project in meeting service needs, NSCCP was regularised and extended to all 18 districts in October 2011. At the same time, resources have been increased to extend the operation hours of the centre-based care group, provide escort service for needy service users, and enhance insurance coverage for child carers and service users^{Note}, etc.

^{Note} Insurance coverage is provided to NSCCP carers and users through group

8. For children below the age of 18 in need of out-of-home care due to family problems and/or their behavioural or emotional problems, a wide range of residential services are provided free of charge, including residential child care centres, foster homes, small group homes, children's homes, girls' / boys' homes, and girls' / boys' hostels. Some residential homes extend their services to the young persons till the age of 21 to meet their special needs. These residential homes provide counselling and related welfare support to the residents to facilitate their development and preparation for their discharge, including restoring them to parental care. In order to strengthen the support for families and children in need, additional resources have been secured to further increase the provision of places of the aforementioned residential child care services in phases from 2012-13 onwards. The foster care allowance, including the maintenance grant for foster children and incentive payment for foster parents, has also been raised by over 30% in 2012-13.

Provision of Various Support Services to Assist Individuals and Families in Crisis

9. We provide immediate shelters and support for those individuals encountering serious personal or family problems and those in danger of domestic violence. The Family Crisis Support Centre (FCSC) tackles family crisis at its early stage by providing a package of integrated and easily accessible services, including short-term accommodation and counselling services, to assist individuals and families in crisis or distress. FCSC also serves as a time-out arrangement in helping service users manage their emotion and seek positive solution to family problems and conflicts encountered. Five refuge centres are also in place to render protection and temporary accommodation for women and their young children who are victims of domestic violence. Furthermore, the Multi-purpose Crisis Intervention and Support Centre has been established to provide crisis intervention and other support services, including short-term accommodation and outreaching services, for victims of sexual violence and individuals or families in crisis.

personal accident insurance (covering accidental death / permanent disablement and accidental medical expenses) and public liability insurance.

10. The Victim Support Programme for Victims of Family Violence provides emotional support and information on community support services for victims of domestic violence, including those undergoing legal proceedings. If necessary, social workers or volunteers will accompany them to attend court hearings and go through the legal proceedings so as to alleviate their feeling of fear and helplessness. The Family Support Programme has also been launched to mobilise volunteers to reach out to families at-risk, including those with the problems of domestic violence, active psychiatric illness and social isolation, to encourage the families to receive the assistance and services which they need. In addition, a SWD Hotline is operated by social workers on a 24-hour basis. Where necessary, outreaching services for needy cases and timely intervention for families in crisis would be offered.

Promotion of Cross-sector Collaboration

11. As a joint initiative of the Labour and Welfare Bureau, Education Bureau, Department of Health (DH), Hospital Authority (HA) and SWD, the Comprehensive Child Development Service (CCDS) aims to identify and meet, at an early stage, various health and social needs of children (aged 0 to 5) and their families so as to foster healthy development of children. It makes use of the Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHCs) of DH, the obstetric clinics of HA and other relevant service units, such as IFSCs and pre-primary institutions, to identify at-risk pregnant women, mothers with postnatal depression, families with psychosocial needs and pre-primary children with health, developmental and behavioural problems, etc.. Needy children and families identified will be referred to the appropriate health and/or social services. By the end of 2011, CCDS has covered around half of the target clientele. The service would be fully extended to all 18 districts in phases within 2012-13.

12. SWD has also set up various mechanisms to facilitate inter-discipline and inter-sectoral collaborations to address the needs of families. There are inter-departmental and cross-sectoral committees / working groups, including the Committee on Child Abuse and the Working Group on Combating Violence, to map out strategies to prevent domestic violence and sexual violence. At district level, SWD has set up District Coordinating Committee on Family and Child Welfare Services and District Liaison Group on Family Violence in each of its 11 social welfare districts to coordinate the services provided by different fronts to strengthen families and prevent domestic violence. The mechanism of multi-disciplinary case conference is also established for social workers

and other related professionals to exchange views on individual domestic violence cases and formulate appropriate welfare plans for the victims and families at-risk.

Development of Specialised Services

13. To complement mainstream family services, specialised services targeted at the special needs of high-risk families have been developed. SWD has set up 11 Family and Child Protective Services Units across the territories as specialised units to assist families with problems of child abuse and spouse / cohabitant battering in order to restore the normal functioning of these families and to safeguard the interests of children affected by custody / guardianship disputes. FCPSUs also run the Batterer Intervention Programme, a psycho-educational group which help batterers stop using violence. The Anti-Violence Programme has also been introduced for batterers who are required by the courts under the Domestic and Cohabitation Relationships Violence Ordinance (Cap. 189) to participate in the psycho-educational programme to change their abusive attitudes and behaviours.

Continuous Publicity Work and Public Education

14. Prevention is better than cure. Raising the awareness of the public on various family problems and encouraging early help-seeking behaviour will help minimize the trauma on the victims of family problems. SWD will continue the “Strengthening Families and Combating Violence” publicity campaign through which territory-wide and district-based publicity and public education programmes are organised to arouse public awareness on the importance of family solidarity and prevention of violence and to encourage people in need to seek early assistance. A website of Support for Victims of Child Abuse, Spouse / Cohabitant Battering and Sexual Violence has also been developed to help victims understand their rights, protection provided by the law, and support services available in the community.

15. SWD also operates the Family Life Education Resource Centre (FLERC) which develops resource package targeting family education and support to all related departmental units and social service agencies providing family education services with a view to promoting family functioning, strengthening family relationship and preventing family breakdown.

Way Forward

16. The Administration will continue its integrated and inter-disciplinary service mode to provide a spectrum of preventive, supportive and remedial services to meet the multifarious needs of individuals and families to achieve the purpose of raising public awareness, promoting family harmony, empowering families to solve problems by themselves, providing support to those families-in-need and building of social capital. We shall keep service demands under constant review.

Advice Sought

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

Labour and Welfare Bureau
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