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4 June 2014

Clerk to Panel on Public Service  
Legislative Council  
Legislative Council Complex  
1 Legislative Council Road  
Central  
Hong Kong

(Attn: Ms Shirley CHAN)

Dear Ms CHAN,

**Panel on Public Service**  
**Submission from the Hong Kong Fire Services Department**  
**Ambulancemen's Union on Meal Break Arrangement for**  
**Ambulanceman Grade in the Fire Services Department**

I refer to your letter of 14 May 2014, referring to us the submission from the Hong Kong Fire Services Department Ambulancemen's Union (HKFSDAU) on the meal break arrangement for the Ambulanceman Grade.

As pointed out in our reply to the Panel dated 16 April 2014 with regard to the meal break arrangement for the disciplined services, meal break arrangement for civil servants is primarily a management issue within individual departments. Hence, we have referred the submission of

HKFSDAU to the Security Bureau and Fire Services Department. The responses from the Bureau and Department are set out at **Annex** for members' reference.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'W. TSE', with a large, stylized flourish above the name.

(Miss Winnie TSE)  
for Secretary for the Civil Service

c.c. Secretary for Security (Attn : Miss Bella MUI)  
Director of Fire Services (Attn : Ms Carey YEUNG)

**Responses from the Fire Services Department and Security Bureau to the  
Written Submission made by Hong Kong Fire Services Department  
Ambulancemen's Union to Panel on Public Service of Legislative Council  
on 7 May 2014**

**Issues relating to meal breaks**

- As the Administration has repeatedly explained, given the need to perform shift duties, the adoption of different shift patterns and the need to handle emergency incidents, disciplined services staff have different conditioned hours of work and meal break arrangements to suit the operational needs of individual services.
- According to the internal orders of the Fire Services Department (FSD), frontline ambulancemen in general may have meals during a designated period<sup>1</sup>. As in the cases of other disciplined services staff whose conditioned hours of work are on the gross system, the designated meal breaks of frontline ambulancemen may be interrupted because of the need to discharge emergency duties. While ensuring the provision of emergency ambulance services to the public at all times, the Department is also required to provide reasonable meal break arrangements for its frontline staff. To this end, the Department has been strictly adhering to the aforesaid policy in devising the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen, and improved such arrangements progressively where operationally practicable and resources permit.
- Since April 2003, the FSD has taken various measures to improve the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen and allocate additional resources in this regard, with a view to striking a balance between the provision of emergency ambulance services and safeguarding the well-being of ambulancemen. Under the existing arrangements of the FSD, ambulancemen may have meals during a designated period. To facilitate meal-taking and deployment of vehicles, the Department would ascertain the dispatch priority of ambulance crews according to the codes they enter while on board the ambulances. If ambulancemen are called out during the designated period before they have taken a continuous

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<sup>1</sup> In general, ambulancemen are on either day shift (8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. or 7:30 a.m. to 7:30pm) or night shift (8:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m. the next day or 7:30 p.m. to 7:30 a.m. the next day). The designated meal break periods for day-shift and night-shift ambulancemen are 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and midnight to 3 a.m. respectively (the designated lunch break period for ambulancemen who perform early day shift duties at 7:30 a.m. is 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.).

30-minute meal break, they may be compensated with another 30-minute meal break within that period. In the event that ambulancemen are unable to take a continuous 30-minute meal break during the designated period, they may take a 30-minute compensatory meal break after the period, during which they will be free from attending ambulance calls. To ensure that the provision of service will not be affected, FSD has set a quota for compensatory meal breaks in certain periods<sup>2</sup>. There is no quota restriction for other periods of time.

- The FSD has been actively discussing the matters with the staff side and has implemented various improvement measures on the premise that the provision of emergency ambulance services to the public should not be affected. For instance, the starting time of the meal break designated for early day-shift ambulancemen has been advanced to 11 a.m.; the Fire Services Communication Centre accords a lower dispatch priority to ambulancemen not having taken their meal so as to facilitate them to return to the ambulance depot for meal; ambulancemen who are unable to take a meal break during the designated period are eligible for a 30-minute off-call compensatory meal break afterwards, etc. With the implementation of the measures in recent years, there has been considerable improvement in the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen.
- In the absence of information about the actual dates or units involved, the FSD is unable to verify and follow up on the cases cited by the Ambulancemen's Union concerning ambulancemen's meal-taking situation. However, as a whole, the percentage of day-shift ambulancemen having a continuous meal break of at least 30 minutes in the designated period (including those who had a continuous 30-minute meal break for their first meal and those who had their first meal interrupted but subsequently had another continuous 30-minute meal break<sup>3</sup>) has increased from 76.3% in 2009 to 85.1% in 2013. The percentage of ambulancemen having compensatory meal break after the designated period

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<sup>2</sup> The quota system for compensatory meal breaks each day is applicable only from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. for day-shift ambulances and from 3 a.m. to 4:30 a.m. for night-shift ambulances. The quota system is not applicable to other periods of time.

<sup>3</sup> As the FSD has been focusing more on examining the compensatory meal break mechanism and analysing the data for enhancing relevant arrangements, it has not kept separate statistics on ambulancemen "who had a continuous 30-minute meal break for their first meal" and those "who had their first meal interrupted but subsequently had a continuous 30-minute meal break". In 2013, the percentage of night-shift ambulancemen who had a continuous meal break of at least 30 minutes in the designated period was 95.4%, which was higher than that of their day-shift counterparts. The FSD does not maintain information on the meal break taken by night-shift ambulancemen in 2009.

has also dropped from 19.7% in 2009 to 9.5% in 2013.<sup>4</sup> To achieve more effective deployment of manpower and further enhance the meal break arrangements, the FSD will collect detailed data on the actual duration of meal break taken by individual ambulance crews in the designated period.

### **Manpower of the Ambulanceman Grade**

- To further improve the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen, the FSD has been closely monitoring the changes in the demand for emergency ambulance service and the manpower situation of the Ambulance Stream. While there was an increase of 11.9% in the demand for ambulance service in 2013 as compared with 2008, the establishment of the Ambulance Stream had increased by some 16.3% (i.e. 396 staff, including 373 Ambulanceman grade staff) over these 5 years. In 2013, an average of 2 227 ambulance calls were handled by each ambulance, representing a decrease of approximately 10.6% over the 2 490 calls in 2008. The response time performance also improved significantly from 92.19% in 2008 to 94.43% in 2013, which was about 2% higher than the pledged performance of 92.5%. This apart, the FSD will also create 64 additional posts in the Ambulance Stream (including 61 Ambulanceman grade posts) in 2014-15.
- The FSD established the Special Support Unit (SSU) in early April this year to enhance the efficiency and capability of the emergency ambulance services to cope with the demand arising from festive occasions and major incidents. The SSU covers two operational Regions, namely the Hong Kong & Kowloon Region and the New Territories Region. Its establishment also helps relieve the workload of other ambulance units. The FSD will review the operational efficiency and manpower requirement of the SSU in due course.

### **Communication between FSD and AU**

- The FSD has always recognised the work and contribution of its staff of all streams and treated them on an equal basis. Adopting an open and pragmatic approach in its communication with staff unions and staff representatives, the FSD has also positively responded to their requests where operationally practicable and resources permit so as to meet the genuine needs of its staff.

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<sup>4</sup> A small number of ambulancemen who could not have a continuous 30-minute meal break chose not to take compensatory meal break voluntarily. The relevant percentages for day-shift ambulancemen are 4.0% and 5.4% in 2009 and 2013 respectively.

When formulating major policies or handling matters affecting its staff, the Department has always given due consideration to the views of staff and maintained close communication with them through various channels including regular Departmental Consultative Committee meetings, regular meetings with individual staff unions, etc. In fact, the existing flexible meal break arrangements for ambulancemen were introduced by the Department to address the situation after consulting the staff side. The FSD understands that the staff side still has demand and views on the meal break arrangements. It will therefore continue to explore the scope for further enhancing the meal break arrangements and introduce improvement measures as appropriate.

### **Emergency rescue and emergency ambulance services**

- The Security Bureau (SB) fully recognises the work and contribution of staff of different streams of the FSD. In fact, the respective professional functions discharged by the fire and ambulance personnel and their cooperation in all types of emergency incidents are crucial to the effectiveness of frontline rescue operations and the provision of emergency ambulance services. As emergency rescue and emergency ambulance services are closely related, the SB considers the current arrangement (under which both streams come under the FSD) appropriate from the perspectives of management, resource utilisation, as well as operational requirements and efficiency. There are established mechanism and procedures in the Government for senior appointments. The SB will continue to keep in view the demand and development of the fire and emergency ambulance services to ensure that the management, organisation and resource utilisation of the Department are in line with government policies and cater for community needs.

Fire Services Department  
Security Bureau  
June 2014