

**For discussion
on 9 February 2015**

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

**Subcommittee on Strategy and Measures
to Tackle Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence**

Shelter Service for Victims of Domestic Violence and Sexual Violence

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the shelter service for victims of domestic violence and sexual violence.

Shelter Service for Victims of Domestic Violence

2. Refuge centres for women provide temporary/short-term accommodation and support services for women and their children facing family crisis or domestic violence. At present, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has funded five refuge centres for women which are operated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), namely Harmony House, Wai On Home for Women, Serene Court, Sunrise Court and Dawn Court.

3. Refuge centres for women serve primarily women and their children aged below 18 who need temporary refuge because of immediate risk of domestic violence or serious personal or family problems. To ensure the safety of the women and their children taking refuge, the addresses of all refuge centres for women are kept confidential.

4. Moreover, since January 2010, SWD has funded Tung Wah Group of Hospitals for establishing the Multi-purpose Crisis Intervention and Support Centre (named as CEASE), to provide short-term residential service for individuals (irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation) or families facing domestic violence or other family crisis, as well as for victims of sexual violence. Assistance will also be provided to help them deal with their

emotions and feelings, overcome the trauma, learn the skills to cope with crisis, and seek self-protection or solutions to their personal/family problems, with a view to preventing further deterioration of their problems, or even developing into tragedy.

5. At present, the five refuge centres for women and CEASE have set up 24-hour hotlines to provide help-seekers with immediate emotional support and information on community resources, as well as to handle applications for admission. Apart from 24-hour referral services from SWD, NGOs, the Police and hospitals, each centre also accepts direct applications of victims and allows admission free of charge on a 24-hour basis. To facilitate the abused women to seek assistance, a mutual referral mechanism is in place among the five refuge centres for women and CEASE. If a centre is not able to offer a placement for a help-seeker for certain reasons, it will refer the case directly to another centre where admission can be arranged immediately. Victims do not need to approach different centres one by one.

6. Those admitted to a refuge centre may generally stay for two weeks. Further extension of stay to a maximum of three months or more may be considered on a case-by-case basis. In addition, refuge centres for women will provide discharged women and their children with three-month after-care service to help them enhance their abilities in adapting to their new lives.

7. Apart from temporary/short-term accommodation, refuge centres for women also provide victims and/or their children with a series of services, including casework counselling and therapeutic/developmental groups. To meet the needs of the abused women, social workers of the refuge centres run different therapeutic groups, which include managing their emotional and stress problems arising from domestic violence and family issues, raising their self-esteem and confidence, and enhancing their positive thinking and resilience against adversity. For children taking refuge, the five refuge centres also run therapeutic groups which, by adopting approaches such as storytelling, art activities or games, help the children address emotions induced by witnessing domestic violence or other family problems, and learn to express their needs. In 2013-14, the five refuge centres for women organised a total of 64 therapeutic groups for women and 60 for children.

8. Also, the refuge centres for women organise a wide range of educational and developmental groups and programmes for women and their children who have been admitted to or are former residents of the centres, which

cover parenting skills, self-understanding, communication skills and parent-child activities, etc. The groups/programmes aim at enhancing the mother-child relationship, improving women's ability of problem solving and self-protection. In 2013-14, the refuge centres for women held a total of 122 educational and developmental groups and programmes. The centres also form mutual-support/peer groups for women to strengthen their support network and develop mutual help among women in crisis.

9. During the stay of a woman and her children in a refuge centre, social workers of the centre will maintain close contact with the referring social worker responsible for the case. They will help the referring social worker understand the needs of the woman and her children, and follow up the discharge plans. New residents who do not have a social worker designated for their cases will be referred by social workers of the centre to the appropriate service units for follow-up. Refuge centres for women also make referrals to other community services according to the women's needs.

Shelter Service for Victims of Sexual Violence

10. CEASE provides crisis intervention and support services as well as short-term residential service for victims of sexual violence. Victims of sexual violence can seek services from CEASE through referral by the Police, medical personnel, social workers and other relevant professionals, or approach CEASE directly through its 24-hour hotline. Upon notification, the social workers of CEASE will provide immediate outreach/crisis intervention for victims in need on a 24-hour basis, and follow-up services for the cases for at least six months. Short-term accommodation of not more than two weeks will normally be provided immediately if needed be and the length of stay can be adjusted on a case-by-case basis. The location of CEASE is kept confidential for the safety of service users.

11. During the stay in CEASE, social workers of the centre will provide victims of sexual violence with individual and/or group counselling to help them address stress and emotional problems as well as work out future plans. Service referrals will be arranged where necessary. In the process, social workers of the centre and other social workers or professionals concerned will maintain close contact to follow up the case together. They will also organise therapeutic groups to help victims cope with the trauma of sexual abuse and build up their resilience against adversity through group counselling. In 2013-

14, CEASE organised a total of 21 therapeutic groups (victims of domestic violence also included in these groups). Besides, CEASE organises activities such as adventure-based training to enhance victims' self-confidence and problem-solving ability. For discharged residents, social workers of the centre will provide after-care service to help them reintegrate into the community. Moreover, the centre trains former residents to become volunteers, which can help foster a spirit of mutual help among service users. This is also conducive to helping them reintegrate into the community and expand their personal support network.

Utilisation of Shelter Service

12. The five refuge centres for women currently provide a total of 260 residential places, in addition to the 80 residential places provided by CEASE. In recent years, there is a rise in the utilisation rate of the refuge centres, and some centres may be fully occupied. Nevertheless, spare space and related support are available in some refuge centres to cater for unforeseen/transient extra service demand. Moreover, the refuge centres are flexible in admission and have set up a mutual referral mechanism to ensure that those in need will not be denied the service because a refuge centre is full. SWD will continue to keep in view the utilisation of refuge centres and the needs of victims, and review the need for additional residential places. At the same time, SWD has devoted additional resources to an array of improvement measures to strengthen the support services of the refuge centres for women over the past few years. The measures include expanding services in existing refuge centres, extending the duty hours of social workers at the refuge centres for women to better support the victims, and providing three-month after-care service for discharged cases.

Shelter Service for Victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence among the Sexual Minorities

13. The service objective of SWD is to assist all individuals and families in need by providing appropriate services regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, race or religion. If in need, sexual minorities facing domestic or sexual violence can also receive the support services of SWD. For example, same-sex cohabitants or transgender victims may seek temporary accommodation and support service from CEASE, while refuge centres for

women provide short-term accommodation for women (including women abused by same-sex cohabitants).

14. Considering the special circumstances of the sexual minorities, the centres will make appropriate arrangements to meet their personal needs during their stay. For instance, separate bedrooms with shower facilities could be specially arranged, and the use of laundry facilities could be flexibly arranged to avoid situations that may cause embarrassment. The centres will also organise sharing sessions to enhance the understanding of the needs of sexual minorities and foster mutual acceptance among residents. Internal professional training for the staff of the centres is held on a regular basis to enhance their sensitivity and techniques in handling cases involving sexual minorities.

Family Crisis Support Centre

15. In addition to the five refuge centres for women and CEASE, SWD has set up the Family Crisis Support Centre (FCSC) to assist individuals and families at risk or in crisis. FCSC provides 40 places of short-term accommodation. Urgent placement, to be considered on a case-by-case basis, will be arranged upon request by the Police, social workers, or individuals or families in need. As the address of FCSC is open to the public, only individuals and families whose safety is not under threat will be admitted to FCSC for its services. Apart from short-term accommodation, FCSC also provides a variety of services, including a 24-hour hotline, crisis intervention and other support services.

Advice Sought

16. Members are invited to note the contents of this paper.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Social Welfare Department
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