

立法會 *Legislative Council*

LC Paper No. CB(2)921/19-20(05)

Ref : CB2/PL/WS

Panel on Welfare Services

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 11 May 2020**

Arrangements made and support measures provided by the Social Welfare Department for the homeless

Purpose

This paper provides background information on arrangements made and support measures provided by the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") for the homeless and summarizes the major views and concerns expressed by members during previous discussions on the subject.

Background

2. At present, SWD subsidizes three non-governmental organizations ("NGOs"), namely the Salvation Army, St James' Settlement and the Christian Concern for the Homeless Association, to each operate an Integrated Services Team for Street Sleepers ("IST"). The integrated services, which aim at helping street sleepers (including homeless people) give up street sleeping and re-integrate into the community, include day and late-night outreaching visits, counselling and group activities, personal care (e.g. bathing and hair-cutting), employment guidance, escorting, emergency fund ("EF") to cover various expenses (e.g. short-term payment of rent and living costs, rental deposit and removal expenses), emergency shelter/hostel placement and service referral. Besides, the Integrated Family Service Centres/Integrated Services Centres of SWD and NGOs also provide outreaching, counselling, financial and accommodation assistance, referral for treatment and other support services for street sleepers.

3. SWD has set up a computerized Street Sleepers Registry ("SSR") to capture street sleepers' personal data and record the services they receive. Both SWD and services units of NGOs specialized in serving street sleepers have to register newly confirmed street sleeper cases in SSR on a monthly basis; and de-register the cases when it is confirmed that the street sleepers have given up street sleeping. As at end-February 2018, the number of street sleepers registered in SSR was 1091.

Deliberations by members since 2012-2013 session

Statistics on street sleepers and homeless people

4. Some members expressed concern that the number of homeless people recorded by SWD under SSR was much smaller than that provided by some community organizations in the same period. Some other members called on the Administration to streamline the procedures and review the criteria adopted by SWD for registration of street sleepers, so that the data collected would reflect accurately the magnitude of the problem of street sleeping and facilitate the Administration's planning of the work in addressing the problem.

5. The Administration explained that SSR covered only those who were sleeping in the streets while the surveys conducted by some community groups had included homeless people who were sleeping in the streets, living temporarily in hostels for street sleepers or urban hostels for single persons, staying temporarily in fast food restaurants which operated 24 hours a day, etc.

Accommodation needs of street sleepers

6. Some members considered that the imminent accommodation need of street sleepers could not be addressed promptly by the emergency shelters or urban hostels for single persons as the waiting time for admission to these shelters/hostels was at least six months. The Administration advised that as at the third quarter of the 2017-2018 financial year, the utilization rate of the aforesaid hostels/emergency shelters was about 80%. SWD subsidized six NGOs to operate urban hostels for single persons and urban emergency shelters, providing a total of 222 subvented places in the 2016-2017 financial year. Together with 418 accommodation places operated by NGOs on a self-financing basis, there were a total of 640 subvented and self-financing accommodation places for providing temporary accommodation for street sleepers and

people on the verge of becoming homeless. The Administration would keep in view the situation and, subject to availability of resources, consider providing additional hostel places.

7. Noting that the average utilization rate of emergency shelters/hostels operated by NGOs had not yet reached their full capacity, some members enquired about the reasons why some street sleepers were not willing to move into those hostels or shelters, and why some street sleepers had reverted to street sleeping after they had been arranged for living in emergency shelters/hostels.

8. The Administration advised that while street sleeping was personal choice of many street sleepers, reasons for not moving into emergency shelters/hostels included "street sleeping was more convenient", "to save money", and "preferred street sleeping to living with others". The Administration stressed that the hostels and shelters for street sleepers subsidized by SWD were temporary accommodation, and the ultimate goal was to help the residents move to longer-term accommodation. For street sleepers who had genuine and pressing housing needs on social/medical ground but were unable to solve the problems themselves, SWD would recommend them to apply to the Housing Department for public rental housing units under the Compassionate Rehousing arrangement.

9. Members expressed concern that many upper bunk beds in hostels for single persons were unoccupied as many street sleepers were aged or had mobility problems. They called on the Administration to review the service quality of such hostels and their placement arrangements, such as their opening hours and utilization of upper bunk beds. The Administration responded that some NGOs would reserve lower bunk beds for street sleepers with special needs and allocate upper bunk beds to street sleepers with better physical conditions. Although some NGOs had set opening hours for hostels, flexibility would be given to hostel residents who had to work odd hours or late shifts.

Support services for street sleepers

10. Some members called on the Administration to consider allocating additional resources to expand the services of ISTs and increase the annual allocation to EF from \$90,000 to \$150,000 for each IST. The Administration advised that apart from the three ISTs, there was another NGO assisting the vulnerable groups (including street sleepers) in West Kowloon to re-integrate into society through various services. The Integrated Family Service Centres/Integrated Services Centres of SWD and

NGOs also provided services to needy individuals and families (including street sleepers). SWD had no plan to allocate additional resources to expand ISTs' services, but would take into account the utilization of EF and consider the need for further allocation of funds to EF.

11. In response to members' enquiry about specific measures to address the problem of homeless people staying overnight in 24-hour fast food restaurants, the Administration advised that the number of homeless people staying overnight in these restaurants might increase because of hot weather. To improve the living conditions of hostels, air-conditioning had been provided in all subvented hostels and a self-financing hostel.

12. Some members were concerned that some street sleepers were facing the problem of not being able to provide prospective employers with prerequisite information such as address and telephone number, thereby hindering them from finding jobs. The Administration advised that street sleepers could use the addresses of the three ISTs and borrow from ISTs second-hand mobile phones for finding jobs. Some members, however, considered such arrangement unworkable as using an IST's address as a job applicant's correspondence address would reveal the identity of the job applicant as a street sleeper who was receiving IST's assistance.

Formulation of policies on street sleepers

13. Some members considered the existing support measures for street sleepers piecemeal and ineffective in tackling street sleeping problem. These members held the view that the Administration should formulate a holistic and comprehensive policy to balance the interests of both street sleepers and the residents affected by street sleeping. Some other members called on the Administration to set up an inter-departmental task group, which comprised government officials, Legislative Council ("LegCo") Members and street sleepers, to identify improvements to support services for street sleepers. The Administration was also requested to commission a study in the future to find out more about the problem of street sleepers.

14. According to the Administration, individual government bureaux and departments ("B/Ds") played their specific roles to address the emergency needs of street sleepers and help them give up street sleeping and become self-reliant as far as possible. In addition, relevant B/Ds would continue to monitor closely the situation and work out inter-departmental action plans and strategies in the light of actual circumstances and needs of street sleepers. Appropriate measures would also be taken to jointly assist street

sleepers having regard to their changing service needs.

15. Some members were concerned that the bedding of some street sleepers was wetted and their personal belongings were removed during some weekly cleaning operations conducted by the Administration at pedestrian subways. These members requested the Administration to notify street sleepers in advance of such operations, so that street sleepers could remove their bedding and personal belongings before the operations. These members also called on the Administration to formulate policies to ensure that the rights of street sleepers were protected and all relevant government departments would treat street sleepers with respect.

16. The Administration stressed that it would continue to treat street sleepers with respect. The Administration also advised that during the aforesaid cleaning operations, fenders were used to avoid wetting the beddings of street sleepers as far as possible. Regarding joint operations to deal with problems arising from unlawful occupation of Government land by street sleepers, environmental hygiene of street sleeping locations, etc., relevant government departments would post notices at prominent locations prior to the joint operations, so as to inform street sleepers of the date and time of the relevant operations. The relevant departments would also deploy staff to remind street sleepers of the joint operation at least one day in advance. In the morning of the operation day, the relevant departments would designate an area for street sleepers to dispose of their articles.

Relevant papers

17. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

Appendix

Relevant papers on arrangements made and support measures provided by the Social Welfare Department for the homeless

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Welfare Services	10 June 2013 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Home Affairs Services and Panel on Welfare Services	22 July 2013 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Subcommittee on Poverty	16 February 2016 (Item I)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	13 February 2017 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	27 March 2017 (Item II)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Welfare Services	9 April 2018 (Item V)	Agenda Minutes
Legislative Council	2 May 2018	Official Record of Proceedings (Pages 55-63)
	4 July 2018	Official Record of Proceedings (Pages 22-31)