

For information on
8 February 2021

**Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Welfare Services under the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Epidemic**

Purpose

This paper sets out the social welfare support provided to the elderly, persons with disabilities, children and the grass-roots, as well as relevant anti-epidemic measures adopted by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) during the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) epidemic.

Support for Service Units under the Epidemic

2. Having regard to the impact of COVID-19, the Government has adopted various measures to support service organisations and their staff to continue with their provision of services. Since January 2020, SWD has provided five rounds of special allowance¹ to service units (including Residential Care Homes for the Elderly (RCHEs) and Residential Care Homes for Persons with Disabilities (RCHDs)) for the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitising items. From February 2020 to January 2021, SWD has distributed a total of 22 million face masks to residential service units (including RCHEs and RCHDs) in 17 batches for use by their staff. SWD has also distributed a total of more than 12 million face masks to all RCHEs and RCHDs in July, August and December 2020 for use by their residents who were in need.

3. In addition, from August 2020 to January 2021, SWD has distributed more than 4.2 million face masks to service units (including day service units and residential service units other than RCHEs and RCHDs) of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for use by their service users. SWD has also distributed about 1.6 million and 2 million face masks to day service units between May and July 2020 and between December 2020 and January 2021 respectively, as well as 240 000 non-reusable face shields to home-based care service units in May 2020 for use by their staff.

¹ The first two rounds of special allowance were provided at a rate of \$5,000 or \$3,000, while the third to fifth rounds were provided at a rate of \$10,000 or \$6,000.

4. SWD launched the Anti-virus Coating Spray Subsidy in May 2020 under the Anti-epidemic Fund to support all RCHEs and RCHDs (around 1 100 in total) to apply anti-virus coating spray in their premises. To further strengthen infection control, SWD launched in November 2020 a new round of the Subsidy for all residential care homes (RCHs) and extended the Subsidy to cover around 300 day care units of elderly and rehabilitation services.

5. Furthermore, SWD provided altogether three tranches of special allowance on manpower support to RCHs and home-based care service units for arranging manpower to maintain daily operations, in the event their staff members were put under compulsory quarantine or in need of medical treatment as confirmed cases of COVID-19. In addition, SWD provided a special allowance for the staff of subsidised RCHs, amounting to 10% of the monthly salary of an employee with a cap at \$4,000, for four months.

6. SWD has provided, during the period from February to November 2020, four rounds of special allowance (at a rate of \$5,000 for the 1st round and \$6,000 for the 2nd to 4th rounds) to around 110 beneficiaries under the financial Support Scheme for Self-help Organisations of Persons with Disabilities/Chronic Illnesses and project based time-limited Community-based Support Projects or Services for Persons with Disabilities for the procurement of PPE and sanitising items. SWD has also distributed around 1.3 million face masks donated by various sectors during March to June 2020 to welfare organisations to help them to strengthen protection measures.

7. The Government provided special allowance to 136 service units providing day care services under the “Pilot Scheme on Community Care Service Voucher for the Elderly” to help them tide over financial difficulties due to suspension of service. The Government also provided special grant to around 550 child care centres (CCCs) to deal with financial difficulties arising from prolonged suspension of service. In addition, SWD implemented the “Scheme on Relief Grants for Interest Class Instructors Hired by Organisations Subvented by the Social Welfare Department” to provide relief assistance for interest class instructors who lost most of their income owing to the suspension of service of subvented welfare units, benefiting a total of over 4 000 instructors.

Social Welfare Services during the Epidemic

8. While minimising the risk of spreading COVID-19 in the community, the Government is concerned about the needs of children, frail elderly and persons with disabilities in the community. All subsidised CCCs (including Special CCCs) and After School Care Programme Centres will remain open during service suspension to serve parents/carers who have difficulty in taking care of their children. Day care centres / units for the elderly, sheltered workshops, integrated vocational rehabilitation services centres, integrated vocational training centres and day activity centres will remain open with scaled-down capacity (i.e. 50 per cent attendance), so as to address the rehabilitation and training needs of service users and to relieve the burden of carers.

9. Home-based community care services for the elderly have continued during the epidemic, including delivery of meals, escort, nursing, administration of medicine, assistance with personal hygiene and procurement of necessities, etc. Home-based community care services for persons with disabilities, including Home Care Service for Persons with Severe Disabilities and Integrated Support Service for Persons with Severe Physical Disabilities, have continued with essential services such as escort, nursing and administration of medicine, etc.

10. SWD will ensure timely payments to recipients of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme and the Social Security Allowance (SSA) Scheme (including Old Age Allowance (OAA), Old Age Living Allowance (OALA) and Disability Allowance (DA)), and provide assistance to recipients with urgent and special needs. SWD announced on 14 February 2020 that the Director of Social Welfare would give consideration to disregard absences from Hong Kong by applicants/recipients of the CSSA Scheme and the SSA Scheme (including OAA, OALA and DA) who fail to satisfy the residence requirement or the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong owing to the epidemic. In the light of the development of the epidemic, applicants for the Guangdong Scheme and the Fujian Scheme may submit their applications by post, instead of doing so in person in Hong Kong. SWD will keep in view the development of the epidemic and make appropriate arrangements.

11. To remove the concern of potentially infected persons from coming forward to take COVID-19 tests that they would suffer from financial hardship whilst being hospitalised in public hospitals for COVID-19 treatment, SWD provides a one-off ex-gratia cash allowance of \$5,000 to locally confirmed COVID-19 patients who are

eligible for the allowance. Eligible applicants for the allowance have to be Hong Kong residents who are confirmed by the Department of Health (DH) to have contracted COVID-19 locally on or after 22 November 2020, and are currently employed but not entitled to paid sick leave or are self-employed, and who would face financial hardship whilst being hospitalised in public hospitals for COVID-19 treatment. As at 24 January 2021, a total of 625 applications have been received by SWD, among which 348 applications were completed with the allowance disbursed.

Testing Arrangements for Staff and Service Users of Social Welfare Organisations

12. The well-being and lives of the elderly and persons with disabilities residing in RCHs could be under serious threat if they have contracted COVID-19. To facilitate early identification and treatment of infected persons, arrangement of quarantine for close contacts and strengthen the protection of residents of RCHs, SWD has conducted seven rounds of voluntary tests for staff members and/or residents/service users of RCHEs, RCHDs and Nursing Homes (NHs) from July 2020 to January 2021. Since the fourth round, voluntary testing has also been arranged for some residents/service users of the aforementioned homes, namely (i) newly admitted residents; (ii) residents who need to go out for medical purposes, rehabilitation training, work or other reasons; (iii) service users of day care/rehabilitation services units attached to RCHs; and (iv) other residents who are willing to undergo testing.

13. SWD has also provided free-of-charge voluntary COVID-19 testing service for the staff of welfare service units with a higher risk (including staff of day care units, home care and day training services for the elderly/persons with disabilities). The first two rounds of tests were conducted from September to November 2020 and in January 2021 respectively, whilst the third round will be conducted from late January to early February 2021. Besides, SWD provided a special grant in January 2021 to the service providers of professional outreach services for private RCHEs and RCHDs to cover the cost of conducting combined nasal and throat swab tests for their outreach staff, so as to reduce the risks of infection and spread of the virus while providing services at the RCHs.

14. In order to further safeguard the health of residents and staff members of RCHs, the Secretary for Food and Health issued six compulsory testing notices in accordance with the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain

Persons) Regulation (Chapter 599, Subsidiary Legislation J) from November 2020 to January 2021, requiring staff members of RCHEs, RCHDs, NHs and day service units attached to the premises of RCHEs and RCHDs to undergo compulsory testing. The samples must be collected by using combined nasal and throat swabs and must not be taken by the persons to be tested. To provide greater flexibility for RCHs in testing arrangements, RCHs are allowed since the second round of compulsory testing to arrange a healthcare professional or a trained personnel to take samples of combined nasal and throat swabs from their staff members and arrange with government-recognised laboratories for testing services. SWD will provide a special subsidy for RCHs on reimbursement basis according to the actual number and cost of tests completed (the subsidy is capped at \$240 per test).

Guidelines and Measures on Strengthening Infection Control

15. For RCHs to closely follow the development of the COVID-19 epidemic as well as the latest information and guidelines related to infection control, SWD has since January 2020 forwarded a total of 10 letters from the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of DH, and reminded RCHs from time to time to step up various infection control and personal and environmental hygiene measures with reference to the “Guidelines for Residential Care Homes for the Elderly or Persons with Disabilities for the Prevention of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)” issued by CHP. In late October 2020, SWD, in consultation with DH and the Hospital Authority, issued contingency guidelines to facilitate RCHs in making appropriate responses to tie in with the necessary follow-up for quarantine of residents when there is a confirmed COVID-19 case of resident or staff.

16. In addition, in consultation with DH, SWD has provided a checklist on infection control measures to RCHs so as to render support to private and self-financing RCHEs and RCHDs for stepping up their anti-epidemic measures. From mid-August to early September 2020, SWD arranged Visiting Medical Practitioner Service Teams to visit RCHs and give expert advice on improving infection control in situ, as well as teaching RCH staff about anti-epidemic knowledge and skills.

17. To further enhance infection control measures and improve ventilation of RCHEs and RCHDs, SWD launched a time-limited programme in December 2020. NGOs operating the Visiting Medical Practitioner Service are subsidised to arrange

nurses to conduct on-site assessments on infection control for private and self-financing RCHEs and RCHDs, as well as contract homes operated by private operators, teach RCH staff about anti-epidemic knowledge and skills, and arrange technical engineering teams to conduct on-site ventilation assessments for these RCHs and make recommendations on ventilation improvement. For NGOs operating subvented RCHs and contract homes, special funding will be provided to implement the recommended measures. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust will also offer a one-off allowance (subject to a capped amount) for RCHEs and RCHDs to purchase equipment, so as to improve the ventilation of the RCHs and strengthen the support to the residents.

18. As regards home care services, CHP formulated the “Guidelines for Home-based Services for the Prevention of COVID-19” and “Guidelines for Centre-based Services for the Prevention of COVID-19”, so as to remind all staff providing services to take precautionary measures to minimise the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19.

Setting up of Quarantine Centres

19. Having regard to the development of the epidemic, the Government needs to set up quarantine centres for residents of RCHEs and RCHDs who are identified as close contacts of confirmed cases. From April to July 2020, SWD has set up quarantine centres at the Hong Kong PHAB Association Jockey Club PHAB Camp, Cheung Muk Tau Holiday Centre for the Elderly (Holiday Centre) and AsiaWorld-Expo respectively, providing a total of 740 beds with personal care, nursing and health services for the residents during their quarantine period. As at 22 January 2021, the quarantine centres have provided service for a total of 974 residents. The quarantine centre at the Holiday Centre ceased operation on 29 October 2020 upon expiry of the lease agreement. At present, the other two quarantine centres provide a total of 680 beds. In addition, SWD has since 23 January 2021 operated another quarantine centre at Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village, providing 10 beds for unaccompanied minors who are close contacts of confirmed cases.

Advice sought

20. Members are invited to note SWD's welfare services during the COVID-19 epidemic and relevant anti-epidemic measures.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Social Welfare Department
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