

(Translation)

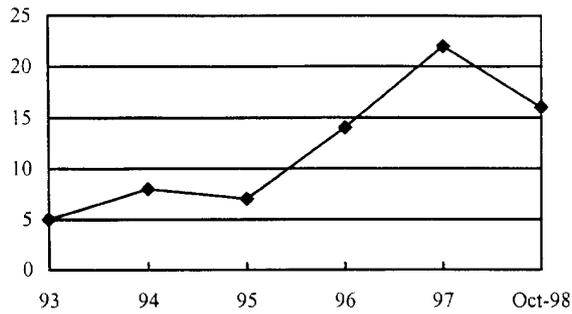
**Submission from the Group of Review of CSSA for Grass Roots of
St. James' Settlement**

No Transparency in the Review of CSSA
Sheer Absurdity in Misleading the Public

Whilst the publication of the Report on the Review of CSSA (“the Review”) has been deferred time and again, the Government has declined to set down a consultation period, neither has it provided any formal channels for public consultation. In so doing, the Government has disregarded our rights and neglected our needs as CSSA recipients. In the course of the Review, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been persistently degrading us and misleading the public into believing that CSSA recipients are lazy people. A sharp increase in the number of unemployed CSSA recipients has recently been recorded as a result of a rising unemployment rate. Against such a background, the Director of Social Welfare (DSW), Mr Andrew LEUNG, repeatedly stressed that government spending on CSSA had gone up substantially by 40% in the recent months and that such an increase in CSSA spending had led to soaring government expenditure. However, the root of the problem lies in the severe shortage of employment opportunities.

Such remarks made by the SWD have shifted the pressure of economic downturn onto those members of the public who are in need of assistance. Therefore, as a group of families that are much concerned with the Review, we set up a concern group, namely the Group of Review of CSSA for Grass Roots (“the Group”), in July 1998. Regarding the Review of CSSA, we would like to state our views as follows:

1. It is found that the percentage of the number of unemployed CSSA recipients against the overall unemployed population in Hong Kong has dropped from last year's 22% to this year's 16% (the figure for August this year), notwithstanding the fact that the unemployment rate in Hong Kong has been staying on the high side throughout this year. Such a trend has proved that DSW's allegation of CSSA system nurturing lazy people is unsubstantiated. Conversely, while more and more people are losing their jobs, the percentage of the number of unemployed CSSA recipients against the overall unemployed population is decreasing rather than increasing. We may attribute such a phenomenon to the degrading remarks made by government officials towards CSSA recipients in the recent months. Even when the unemployed are in severe financial hardship, they are still reluctant to apply for CSSA because the degrading remarks have caused them feelings of shame to live on CSSA.



—◆— The percentage of the number of unemployed CSSA recipients against the overall unemployed population in Hong Kong

2. The SWD has reportedly proposed that single parents should be required to take up full-time jobs if their youngest children are in the age group of 12 to 15. We are very worried about this proposal. Young people studying in secondary schools are in the critical stage of their growth, when parental guidance and instructions are of vital importance. If it is made a compulsory requirement for single parents to take up jobs when their children are most in need of parental care and family support, more youth problems are bound to emerge.

3. The SWD has repeatedly exaggerated the level of CSSA payment for a four-member family, stating that the monthly payment of over \$10,000 to a four-member family compares favourably with the prevailing wage level. However, the monthly payments for CSSA households have included the actual amounts of rent paid. After deducting the rent allowances, the standard rates for an adult and a child are \$1,965 and \$1,795 respectively. The standard rates however are insufficient to meet their monthly expenses.

| Light & Fuel | Household appliances | Food | Travelling | Clothing | Social activities | Miscellaneous | Total |
|--------------|----------------------|---------|------------|----------|-------------------|---------------|---------|
| \$100 | \$170 | \$1,200 | \$120 | \$100 | \$200 | \$100 | \$1,990 |

The Group's Proposal:

The Government's Two Do's and Two Don'ts and Our Two Objections What the Government should not do:

1. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government should not seek to reduce CSSA payments on the pretext that CSSA expenditure has been increasing.
2. The HKSAR Government should not perpetuate the concept of "CSSA nurturing lazy people", so that the public's negative thinking about CSSA recipients may be rectified.

What the Government should do:

1. The HKSAR Government should address the aggravating unemployment problem in Hong Kong, and set up a proper mechanism to gradually relieve CSSA recipients from poverty.
2. The HKSAR Government should overhaul the CSSA system and should take into account the views and the overall needs of CSSA applicants, so as to offer genuine assistance to CSSA recipients and enable them to lead "dignified lives".

In addition, we "strongly object" to the following two recommendations that aim at reducing CSSA payments:

1. The proposal of making it a compulsory requirement for single parents to take up full-time jobs when their youngest children reached the age of 12, instead of the originally required age of 15.
2. The proposal to adopt a broadbrush approach in capping the number of CSSA-eligible members in a household at four, and to revert to the old system of offering descending rates of allowances.

Lastly, the Group would like to put forward five requests in relation to the Review:

1. Increased and expeditious supply of public rental housing (PRH) flats

The Government should expedite the supply of PRH flats with a view to reducing the waiting time for applicants. This serves to lower the housing expenses to be borne by the parents when they rejoin the workforce, thereby enabling them to make ends meet.

2. The provision of child care services with flexibility

It is imperative for the Government to provide flexible child care services at low costs to cater to the needs of different age groups, so as to enable CSSA recipients to set their mind at ease when they opt to rejoin the workforce. Meanwhile, it is imperative that additional child care centres be set up and extended service hours be provided to cater to the needs of those parents who have to work longer hours or those who have to work on shifts.

3. Retraining courses must meet the needs of the market

To provide tailor-made courses that suit the needs of the market, the Government and the Employees Retraining Board should revise the contents of a number of training courses which no longer meet the needs of the market.

4. Stop importing labour

In order to safeguard the employment opportunities of local workers, the Government should cease the operation of labour importation schemes as soon as possible.

5. The provision of various protection schemes

We urge the Government to formulate a proper social security system incorporating retirement protection and unemployment relief, with a view to coming up with a security system that can offer protection appropriate to different needs of the public.

In the face of persistent economic downturn and declining government revenue, the Government is still generous enough to put in enormous amount of public money to encourage the public to purchase properties by way of introducing a number of interest-free loan schemes. On the other hand, the Government is prepared to cut its overall expenditure at the expense of those who are living on CSSA. Such a practice has reflected the Government's total indifference to our needs for basic protection.

In view of the prevalence of cases involving domestic violence and the immense pressure of economic depression upon the grassroots, we urge the HKSAR Government to take a square look at the genuine needs of CSSA families and to show more concern about our predicament, if further family tragedies were to be averted.

Residents' representatives:

WONG Sau-ping (黃秀屏), CHAN Shun-ching (陳舜清) and WU Woon-mei (鄔煥美)

Social workers' representatives:

CHENG Shuk-ching (鄭淑貞) and CHIU Lai-chun (趙麗珍)

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**Current situation regarding the number of CSSA cases involving
the unemployed and the single-parent households in Hong Kong**

| Year | Unemployment rate in HK | | | CSSA cases | | | | |
|--------|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--|--|---|--|
| | (%) | No. of unemployed | Annual growth rate (%) | Total no. of cases | No. of cases receiving CSSA on the grounds of unemployment | Percentage of CSSA cases in the category of "unemployment" (%) | Total no. of single-parent households in HK | No. of CSSA cases involving single-parent households |
| 93 | 2 | 56300 | 2.9 | 85738 | 3233 | 5.7 | | 5676 |
| 94 | 1.9 | 56200 | -0.2 | 99249 | 4268 | 7.6 | | 6846 |
| 95 | 3.2 | 95600 | 70.1 | 116838 | 6559 | 6.9 | | 7477 |
| 96 | 2.8 | 86100 | -9.9 | 145756 | 11760 | 13.7 | 77979 | 11172 |
| 97 | 2.2 | 71300 | -17.2 | 175331 | 15708 | 22 | | 15308 |
| 98 Jun | 4.4 | 142600 | | 207124 | 22622 | 16 | | 18899 |
| 98 Aug | 4.8 | 158000 | 10.8 | 215028 | 25116 | 15 | | 20248 |
| 98 Oct | 5 | 174900 | | 222699 | 28083 | 16 | | 21423 |

Source: Social Welfare Department

Response to the Group of Review of CSSA for Grass Roots' submission
(I) Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme

Objective

The scheme, which is means-tested, is intended to bring the income of needy individuals and families up to a prescribed level to meet their basic and special needs.

Eligibility

Persons who have lived in Hong Kong for not less than one year may be eligible if their income and other resources are below the prescribed levels. In cases of genuine hardship, the Director of Social Welfare has the discretionary power to waive the above-mentioned residence requirement. An able-bodied unemployed person aged 15-59 who is available for work is required to register with the Labour Department for employment assistance in order to qualify for CSSA.

Types of payment

Payments can be broadly classified into three categories:

- Standard rates - To meet the recipient's basic and general needs.
- Special grants - To meet the special needs of individuals or families such as rent, school-related expenses, extra diet, cost of medical and rehabilitation appliances.
- Supplements - An annual long-term supplement for those who have received assistance continuously for 12 months for the replacement of household goods. A monthly single parent supplement for single parent families to recognize the special difficulties which single parents face in bringing up a family.

For details of the CSSA Scheme, please refer to the "Guide to Comprehensive Social Security Assistance" attached.

(II) CSSA Review

An inter-departmental Steering Group chaired by the Director of Social Welfare started the review on the CSSA Scheme in late 1997, with the focus on how to encourage and help employable CSSA recipients to re-enter the labour market. The Steering Group also looked at ways and means to safeguard public expenditure against fraud and abuse. The review is now near completion. The findings and recommendations of the Review are expected to be published towards the end of this year. We will consult the Social Welfare Advisory Committee and the Panel on Welfare Services of Legislative Council on the recommendations of the Review.

Social Welfare Department

2. Demanding the implementation of flexible child care services

In order to meet the needs of families, including those receiving CSSA, to take care of their young children, the Social Welfare Department provides a variety of child care services supporting the family.

- Day care services **subvented by the Government** include **nurseries** for children aged two to six and **creches** for infants under the age of two. The aim of the services is to support and assist families with full day child care needs and provide care and education for young children. As at 31st October 1998, there are more than 41 000 day nursery places and 1 700 day creche places. In view of the continuing demand for nursery service, the Government will provide an additional 3 600 places in the next two years. If parents of families receiving CSSA desire to re-enter the labour market and are in need of day child care services, priority will be given to their children for admission into nurseries and creches operated or subvented by the Government. Parents having financial difficulties to pay for the child care centre fees can apply for Child Care Centres Fee Assistance Scheme under the Social Welfare Department.
- In order to support single parents and working parents who need longer hours of child care arrangement because of their working hours, some child care centres provide **Extended Hour Service**. Currently, five nurseries in Wan Chai, Kwun Tong, Sham Shui Po, Tai Po and Tuen Mun provide this service. The Government is examining the further provision of such flexible child care service with non-governmental organizations so as to meet the needs of working parents. The

Government also plans to provide an additional **140** places in other districts in need of extended hours service in the coming two years.

- Because of parents' needs for short-term day care service, **Occasional Child Care Service** is provided in full-day, half-day or two hourly sessions in child care centres to assist families in need in a more flexible way. At present, there are **220** child care centres in the territory providing 680 occasional child care places. The Government plans to provide over 60 places in districts with greater needs in the next two years.
- The Government also puts emphasis on the development of diversified child care services to cater for the varying needs of parents. In order to provide more choices on flexible child care services for young children aged under six, the Government encourages and assists non-profit making organizations, such as kaifong groups, women's groups and church bodies, to set up **mutual help child care centres** for the purpose of building a support network on district level and promoting the spirit of mutual help in the neighbourhood to address the problem of child care. In addition, the Government actively promotes **informal child care services**, for example, encouraging single parents receiving CSSA or families of the new arrivals to provide short-term and flexible child care service for children aged under six in a group of less than six children at home, and encouraging volunteers, such as elderly volunteers, to provide temporary or short-term child care service for children under six so as to strengthen the support to families with different child care needs.

Response to ‘聖雅各福群[基層綜援檢討小組]的立場書

Labelling CSSA recipients as lazy people

Exaggeration of abuse of CSSA

The CSSA scheme is intended to provide financial assistance to needy individuals and families. Over the recent past, there has been growing public concern about the rapid growth in the CSSA caseload and expenditure. It is our responsibility to make public the relevant data, including the current levels of CSSA payments. Different people may have different views and interpretations on these data.

We have never labelled CSSA recipients as lazy people nor exaggerated the abuse of CSSA. In fact the great majority of the CSSA recipients are the old, the disabled and the sick. It is unlikely that abuse of CSSA is prevalent. Nevertheless, to ensure prudent and defensible use of public funds, we need to strengthen control measures to prevent fraud and abuse.

CSSA Review

Setting up a mechanism to help CSSA recipients to leave the CSSA net

The objective of the current review of the CSSA Scheme is to encourage and help the employable CSSA recipients to rejoin the workforce, move towards self-reliance and leave the CSSA net. In the course of the review, we have met relevant parties, including representatives from social services, academics and concern groups, and listened to their views and suggestions.

Objection to the three proposals

These proposals fall within the scope of the current Review. The Review is near completion. We will publish the findings of the Review towards the end of this year, and we will consult the Social Welfare Advisory Committee and Panel on Welfare Services of the Legislative Council on the Review's recommendations.

Social Welfare Department

Response to the Group of Review of CSSA for Grass Roots' submission

The government and the Housing Authority have pledged to reducing the average waiting time from the present 6 1/2 years to 5 years before the end of 2001, to 4 years by 2003 and to 3 years by 2005. The number of flats to be allocated to Waiting List applicants in 1998/99 is 17,550 which is 46% more than the previous year. For the year 1999/2000, we anticipate to provide at least 20,000 flats for Waiting List applicants. To further shorten the waiting time, the Housing Department will expedite allocation through giving three offers at one time to eligible applicants as from 1 April 1999 and re-alignment of the geographical boundaries of districts. These arrangements have already been endorsed by the Rental Housing Committee of the Housing Authority in September 1998.

With the increased supply of public housing flats and the enhanced arrangements to efficiently allocate public rental housing flats to applicants, we are confident to meet our pledges in reducing the average waiting time for Waiting List applicants.

Hong Kong Housing Authority

(Translation)

(3) Retraining Courses must meet the needs of the market

The courses offered by the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) have always been market-oriented in that they are offered in accordance with the changes in the labour market. Retraining programmes not geared to the market needs will be slowed down or even phased out. For example, courses on paging operators were suspended because of the shrink of the job type. For full-time courses which are employment-tied, the average placement rate over the years has been maintained over the target of 70%.

The unemployment rate remains high in the past few months. In the light of the demands on retraining by the unemployed, the ERB has administered the above placement target with flexibility. The criteria of the 70% placement rate has been relaxed to allow training bodies to provide retraining services to the unemployed to meet with future need. However, this target is still valid for some of the job specific skills courses or tailor-made courses to make sure that the programmes meet with the instant needs of the market.

All training bodies provide placement services and maintain direct contacts with employers for more information on job vacancies. Course Steering Groups, consisting mainly of employers, are set up for every programme to advise on the course contents and ensure that the courses designs are based on users' actual needs.

To tackle the unemployment problem in Hong Kong, the ERB is extending its services with emphasis on the broadening and strengthening of employers network. Tailor-made programmes are actively developed in response to the market demands.

Any employer who offers bulk vacancies (15 or more) in certain job types can seek help from the ERB to recruit staff through tailor-made programme conducted by training bodies and designed fully according to employers' requirements. Since the courses are tailor-made on the basis of employers' requirements, the placement rates are usually close to 80%. Some of them even reach 100%.

Currently more than 140 types of full-time and part-time courses are being offered by the ERB. Full-time courses are mainly for the unemployed, including domestic helpers, security and property management, bookkeeping, accounting clerk, office assistant, and care worker, etc. To encourage further training of those in employment, the ERB also provides half-day or evening courses on general skills such as computer and languages etc.

LETTERHEAD OF EDUCATION AND MANPOWER BUREAU

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17 November 1998

Secretary General
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8 Jackson Road
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(Fax: 2521 7518)

Dear Miss Wong,

Comments on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme

Thank you for your letter dated 3 November 1998, relaying the views of the Group on Review of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance for Grass Roots ("the Group") of St. James' Settlement. The following is my response to the proposals on employee retraining courses and the importation of labour put forth by the Group:

I. Retraining programmes must cater to the needs

The courses run by the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) have always been market-oriented and placement-based. At present, the courses run by the ERB are based on training proposals submitted by training bodies with the approval of the Course Vetting Sub-Committee of the ERB. In determining the contents of the courses, the ERB and training bodies focus on assisting trainees to find and secure employment. In the past few years, on average 70% of those who have completed ERB's full-time courses were able to secure a job. Despite rising unemployment since the beginning of this year, the placement rate of those who have completed ERB's full-time courses still maintains at about 70%. The ERB will continue to respond to the needs of the market and employers by actively organizing courses to meet market needs, including tailor-made courses to cater for the vacancies of individual employers.

II. Stop importing labour as soon as possible

The Supplementary Labour Scheme and the Special Labour Importation Scheme for the New Airport and Related Projects are the two existing labour importation schemes in Hong Kong. The Government appreciates the concern expressed by the community towards the Supplementary Labour Scheme or any other labour importation schemes at a time when the unemployment rate runs high. However, it must be pointed out that the implementation of such schemes will not take away job opportunities of local workers, including the unemployed, because the Government's policy on labour importation is based on two cardinal principles:

- (a) Local workers must be given priority in filling job vacancies available in the job market;
- (b) Employers who are genuinely unable to recruit local workers to fill their job vacancies should be allowed to import workers.

In other words, the labour importation policy does not seek to replace local workers with imported workers. Its objective is to ease the temporary bottleneck in our labour market by allowing imported workers to fill certain job vacancies in which local workers are in short supply.

The Supplementary Labour Scheme (SLS)

The SLS operates on an extremely stringent and carefully planned vetting mechanism. Under the SLS, all employers applying for imported workers must first put up advertisements in local newspapers for such job vacancies and recruit employees locally through the Labour Department. Only when such attempts fail are they allowed to fill such vacancies by imported workers. The Scheme also requires employers to pay their imported workers no less than the median wage of their local counterparts in comparable positions. Most important of all, the SLS is monitored by the Labour Advisory Board (LAB) which is made up of representatives from the Government, employers and employees.

In fact, ever since the introduction of the Scheme in early 1996, no applications have been approved without LAB's support. To date, only less than 4 000 imported workers are working in Hong Kong, representing about 0.1% of Hong Kong's working population, currently over 3 million.

Special Labour Importation Scheme for the New Airport and Related Projects

Since the commission of the new airport, the number of imported workers employed in Hong Kong under the Special Labour Importation Scheme for the New Airport and Related Projects has been decreasing, with just about 200 workers remaining in Hong Kong now. Most of these workers are engaged in projects relating to the Second Runway.

Should you require further information, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

(Ms. Esther LEUNG)
for Secretary for Education and Manpower

LETTERHEAD OF EDUCATION AND MANPOWER BUREAU

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21 November 1998

Secretary General
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Dear Miss Wong,

Comments on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme

Further to my letter dated 17 November 1998, I would like to respond to the proposals put forth by the Group on Review of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance for Grass Roots of St. James' Settlement on the introduction of various social security systems.

Retirement Protection

In order to ensure that our elderly people can be well provided for in retirement, we emphasize the introduction of an effective retirement protection system. The Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) is considered to be the retirement protection system which best suits Hong Kong and was adopted in the light of views expressed during extensive community wide discussions. We carried out public consultation on retirement protection in 1992 and 1993/94. We concluded that the public did not offer clear and unequivocal support for the Old Age Pension Scheme. The Mandatory Provident Fund system relatively

gained more support. The Government's views were also supported by legislators of the former Legislative Council. The principal ordinance and the subsidiary legislation for the MPF Scheme were passed at the former Legislative Council and the Provisional Legislative Council in July 1995 and April 1998 respectively.

The MPF Scheme was adopted as the retirement protection system following comprehensive consultation and wide discussion. At present, the most important task for us is to complete all the preparatory work for the implementation of the MPF with a view to ensuring that effective retirement protection can be provided for the public as soon as possible.

Unemployment Relief

The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme currently implemented by the Government provides financial assistance to meet the basic needs of individuals who encounter financial difficulties as a result of unemployment, disability or illness, etc. In Hong Kong, the Employment Ordinance also provides retrenched workers through protects such provisions as wages in lieu of notice, severance payment or long service payment. In the event that an employer is unable to discharge his statutory obligations of paying his employees wages, wages in lieu of notice, severance payment or long service payment due to insolvency, the affected employees may apply to the Protection of Wages on Insolvency Fund for ex gratia payment. In the light of the above, the Government deems it unnecessary to set up another financial assistance scheme specifically for the unemployed. Moreover, experience in many western advanced economies shows that an unemployment relief system will tend to reduce people's incentive to work and induce them to rely permanently on state grants. Hence, we must exercise prudence when considering this issue.

The most effective way to help the unemployed is to assist them in seeking a job and achieving self-improvement. Hence, rather than injecting a large sum of public funds to set up a financial assistance scheme specifically for the unemployed in addition to the CSSA Scheme, we consider it more appropriate to provide more resources for delivering an efficient employment service and organizing retraining courses for the unemployed in order to help them re-enter the workforce and sustain employment, and to implement various measures to create more employment opportunities.

Yours sincerely,

(Ms Esther Leung)
for Secretary of Education and Manpower

(Translation)

29 November 1998

The Welfare Right Concern Association for CSSA
Single Parents, Hong Kong

Submission on the Review of the
Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme

Regarding the CSSA Scheme, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has pointed out that those CSSA recipients who are considered as having no time to work, such as those housewives who have to rely on CSSA on the grounds of having to take care of young children, should be encouraged to take up part-time jobs. For those CSSA recipients who take up part-time jobs, the SWD has proposed that part of their income might be disregarded in the calculation of CSSA, in accordance with the following formula:

The first \$451 of the monthly income and half of the next \$2,708 can be disregarded in the calculation of income. Therefore, the maximum amount of disregarded monthly income is \$1,805. For a monthly income exceeding \$3,159, the full amount in excess of \$3,159 will be considered as income in the assessment of CSSA eligibility.

We recommend that for CSSA recipients taking up part-time jobs, the ceiling for disregarded income should be raised. The first \$1,500 of the monthly income and half of the next \$1,658 should be disregarded. The income ceiling for full-time jobs should remain at \$3,159 while the maximum amount of disregarded monthly income should be set at \$2,330. The method of calculation is set out as follows:

| | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| income | half of the | income in excess | | maximum |
| below \$1500 | next \$1658 | of \$3159 be | | amount of |
| be | be | calculated in the | | disregarded |
| disregarded | disregarded | assessment of | | monthly |
| in full | | CSSA eligibility | | income |
| | | | | |
| \$1,501 | + \$1,658 | = \$3,159 | \$1,501 + | $\frac{\$1,658}{2}$ = \$2,330 |

We propose to raise the amount of disregarded income to \$1500 on the following grounds:

1. Our proposal can provide more incentives for CSSA recipients to work, which is considered as a more effective way to encourage CSSA recipients to take up part-time jobs. In fact, the acquiring of more working experience and the enhancement of skills through the taking up of part-time jobs can better equip CSSA recipients to take up full-time jobs in future, thereby helping them to stand on their own feet;

2. The feelings of “working for nothing” will no longer be experienced if the amount of disregarded income can be raised;
3. The taking up of part-time jobs by CSSA recipients can improve their basic living standards;
4. Such a move is conducive to projecting a more positive image for single parents receiving CSSA, rectifying the public’s negative thinking about them;
5. If the Government can take the lead and encourage CSSA recipients to take up part-time jobs actively, an indirect advantage of creating an atmosphere of rejoining the workforce can be achieved; and
6. Support services and policies, such as child care services, should also be provided to tie in with the proposal of raising the maximum amount of disregarded income, if better results were to be achieved.

The above recommendation is not made from the perspective of an expert, but from the point of view of the recipients, taking into account their plights and feelings. We consider it a more feasible recommendation, capable of providing more incentives for CSSA recipients to work.

Moreover, we are strongly opposed to the following two proposals:

1. The proposal of making it a compulsory requirement for a single parent on CSSA to take up full-time jobs once the youngest child in the household has reached the age of 12; and
2. The proposal of prescribing an upper limit for the number of CSSA-eligible members in a household, as well as deducting or reducing the standard rates of CSSA payable to the fifth child and the subsequent children in a CSSA household.

The Welfare Right Concern Association
for CSSA Single Parent, Hong Kong

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