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LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

**Minutes of meeting
held on Thursday, 14 October 1999 at 10:15 am
in the Chamber of the Legislative Council Building**

Members Present : Hon CHAN Yuen-han (Chairman)
Hon HO Sai-chu, SBS, JP (Deputy Chairman)
Hon David CHU Yu-lin
Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan
Hon LEE Kai-ming, SBS, JP
Hon LAW Chi-kwong, JP

Members Absent : Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon Eric LI Ka-cheung, JP
Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP
Dr Hon YEUNG Sum
Hon YEUNG Yiu-chung

Members Attending : Hon Michael HO Mun-ka
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP

Public Officers Attending : Dr E K YEOH, JP
Secretary for Health and Welfare

Mr HO Wing-him, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 2

Mr Robin GILL, JP
Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 3

Mr Andrew LEUNG, JP
Director of Social Welfare

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Mrs Marion LAI, JP
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration)

Mrs Patricia CHU
Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services)

Mr Y K CHENG
Assistant Director of Housing (Applications and Home Ownership)

Clerk in Attendance : Mrs Justina LAM
Assistant Secretary General 2

Staff in Attendance : Ms Joanne MAK
Senior Assistant Secretary (2) 4

I. Briefing by the Secretary for Health and Welfare (SHW) on the Chief Executive's Policy Address 1999

SHW said that the Health and Welfare Bureau (HWB) had worked on a total of 38 pledges in respect of care services for the elderly and welfare services in 1998/1999. Regarding the provision of care services for the elderly, HWB had completed most of the commitments and would be able to complete the rest on schedule. As for the provision of welfare services, HWB had completed 22 out of 34 commitments and the rest would be completed on schedule. SHW invited Members to refer to this year's Policy Objective booklets entitled "Care for the Elderly" and "Welfare Services" for details of the progress of work.

Care for the elderly

2. SHW said that the Administration would strengthen the provision of support services for elderly people who lived at home and required formal care services. It would also upgrade home help service and review the modes of services of day care centres and multi-service centres for the elderly to seek improvements.

3. SHW pointed out that 4 500 additional residential places would be provided by 2002. HWB was working closely with the Housing Authority, Land Development Corporation, Mass Transit Railway Corporation and Kowloon and Canton Railway Corporation to identify sites for the provision of 14 000 additional residential places in the next nine years. Moreover, HWB would continue to help private residential care homes upgrade their services by strengthening their staff training. In addition, HWB would put in place a new mechanism next year for more accurate assessment of the

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demands of elderly people for residential care services.

4. SHW said that in order to promote a sense of worthiness amongst the elderly, Social Welfare Department (SWD), in conjunction with Education Department and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), would organize a variety of social, recreational and educational programmes for them.

Welfare services

5. SHW said that SWD would continue with its review of the welfare subvention policy to improve the present subvention system and achieve greater cost-effectiveness in the delivery of welfare services. In this connection, SHW said that a number of Funding and Service Agreements and Service Quality Standards had been drawn up for NGOs.

6. SHW informed Members that an additional \$10 million would be allocated in the next two years to strengthen family education and provide better support to families to cope with family problems. Furthermore, 300 additional day nursery places and 600 additional residential places for people with disabilities would be provided in 2000/01. Additional school social worker posts and child protection worker posts would be created.

Questions raised by Members

7. Miss Cyd HO Sau-lan pointed out that demands for welfare services had been on the rise in the wake of the economic downturn. She asked what assistance the Administration would provide to NGOs to cope with growing demands for welfare services. As an example, she pointed out that the shortage of residential places was so serious that there were about 12 000 elderly people on the waiting list. Moreover, the number of existing residential places fell short of that pledged in the 1997 Policy Address.

8. SHW replied that there had been considerable increases in the allocation of resources to welfare services in recent years and the Administration would continue to expand the provision of welfare services. He believed that NGOs would be able to provide quality services in a more cost-effective way by introducing measures such as reviewing the mode of service delivery. In particular, he considered that if NGOs had greater flexibility in deployment of resources, they would be able to use their resources in a more efficient way to meet demands. In this connection, he pointed out that the purpose of the current review of the welfare subvention policy was essentially to provide more flexibility to NGOs in their management of resources. He explained that this was necessary as the current system of allocating resources, which emphasized input control by SWD, had created much inflexibility for NGOs to deploy resources. Apart from the review, he pointed out that there was need to re-examine the existing modes of services to ensure that they could meet changing needs in the community. He emphasized that given resource constraints, it was necessary for the welfare sector

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to review priorities of services.

9. As regards the shortage of residential places, SHW said that some of the elderly people on the waiting list had already been provided with infirmary service in public hospitals and they should have been removed from the list. On the other hand, some elderly people living in residential homes were waiting to be transferred to public hospitals once they were allocated infirmary beds there. SHW said that action would be taken to obtain a more up-to-date position on the demand and supply of residential places. He added that the improvements to be made to home help service might help reduce demands for residential places.

10. Miss Cyd HO Sau-lan noted from the booklet on "Welfare Services" that "85% of the subvented welfare service units under the 35 Funding and Service Agreements introduced in 1999/2000 would meet the respective output standards in 2000/2001". She asked what would be done with the remaining 15% of the subvented welfare service units which would fail to meet the prescribed output standards. SHW replied that SWD would discuss with the NGOs concerned and provide assistance as far as possible.

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11. In reply to Mr LAW Chi-kwong's question about the plan for strengthening family education, Director of Social Welfare (DSW) said that an additional \$10 million would be allocated in the next two years to provide 20 additional social workers to strengthen services for families with problems. Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Services) (DDSW(S)) added that there were currently 79 social workers providing family life education as a preventive service. In view of the deterioration in youth problem, it was considered necessary to provide greater support to parents and to strengthen parent education. DSW added that the Administration would review family service next year to achieve optimal use of manpower resources in areas of priority.

12. Referring to the Portable Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (PCSSA) Scheme, Mr HO Sai-chu asked what progress had been made in the liaison between the Administration and the Guangdong authorities on the provision of medical services for PCSSA recipients. He also asked whether the Administration was satisfied with the present number of PCSSA recipients. DSW replied that there were currently about 1 600 PCSSA recipients. As found in a recent survey, most of the recipients felt that they generally enjoyed better housing facilities and living environment in Guangdong than they did in Hong Kong. It was also found that over 80% of them lived with their family members or relatives in Guangdong. DSW explained that as the purpose of the Scheme was only to assist elderly people to continue to receive the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) payments after retiring to Guangdong, HWB had no targetted number of PCSSA recipients.

13. DSW further said that in view of the general concerns about high medical costs on the Mainland, the Administration had explored the possibility of medical insurance coverage for PCSSA recipients. However, it had come to the view that insurers were

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unlikely to provide the services because of the high risk involved. DSW said that the Administration would explore other options and follow up the matter with the Guangdong authorities. He pointed out that PCSSA recipients could also choose to come back to Hong Kong to receive free medical services. Moreover, the Hong Kong Red Cross, which was appointed as the agent of SWD to implement the PCSSA Scheme, would provide escort service for PCSSA recipients who had genuine urgent need to return to Hong Kong but could not make their own arrangements.

14. Mr LEE Kai-ming said he had heard complaints that many child care centres closed at around 6 p.m. and this had created much inconvenience for working single parents. As a result, some of them had to resign from their jobs in order to look after their children and to rely on CSSA instead. Mr LEE pointed out that in the absence of additional resources, NGOs were unable to extend the opening hours of the child care centres that they operated. He was worried that the problem would lead to more and more single parents being forced to resign from their jobs and apply for CSSA.

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15. SHW responded that the Administration was exploring ways to provide more support to single parents and that some child care centres had already extended their opening hours. Nevertheless, he undertook to follow up the matter. DSW supplemented that there were 27 000 existing day nursery places and the Administration would provide 1 800 additional places in the next few years. Moreover, the Administration had assisted some NGOs to form mutual help child care groups in various districts to cater for occasional child care service needs. DSW assured Members that the Administration would continue to enhance its support for single parents and to assist those who lived on CSSA to re-join the workforce. In addition, the Administration would consider specifying the requirement of extended opening hours of child care centres in the relevant Funding and Service Agreements signed with NGOs.

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16. Mr LEE Kai-ming was concerned about the problems faced by split families involving children separated from their mothers who had no right of abode in Hong Kong. He considered that the immigration policy should allow women who had young children in Hong Kong to be given priority in obtaining one-way permits. He asked whether HWB would pursue such a policy in collaboration with the Security Bureau. SHW agreed to consider the suggestion.

17. Mr TAM Yiu-chung expressed concern about the current review of the Old Age Allowance Scheme and asked for details of its scope and whether it would include reviewing the "absence rules" under the Scheme. Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare 2 (DSHW2) replied that the review would take into consideration the various views expressed by the community on the Scheme. In view of the large number of elderly recipients who would be affected by the review, DSHW2 said that the Administration needed to study the matter very carefully before coming up with any proposals. Therefore, it was not appropriate for him to go into the details of the review at the present moment. However, he would provide further details to the Panel when he was in a position to do so. As regards the "absence rules", DSHW2 said that

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the Administration would take note of the views of the public on the issue but he emphasized that he was not implying that there would definitely be changes to the rules. SHW supplemented that the Administration would adopt a comprehensive approach to handling the problems of the elderly, which involved wide-ranging issues such as housing and the interface of the Old Age Allowance with the future Mandatory Provident Fund System.

18. Mr David CHU Yu-lin asked when the target of providing a school social worker post in each secondary school could be met. DSW responded that the Administration aimed to implement the plan within two years by redeployment of resources from the existing youth services. He said that the Administration was examining possible sources of funding with NGOs.

19. The Chairman pointed out that despite the pledges made by the Chief Executive to foster a sense of security and care for the elderly, she found that in many cases the Administration's policies were contrary to these objectives. She said that one of the examples was the policy in respect of addition of family members to public rental housing tenancies of single elderly tenants. Under the current policy, requests from elderly tenants for addition of children aged over 18 were generally not approved. She asked how HWB would resolve the problem that some bureaux had devised policies which were inconsistent with the policy objective of caring for the elderly.

20. SHW replied that HWB played a coordinating role amongst various policy bureaux in the provision of services for the elderly. It was also assisted by the Elderly Commission (EC) in pursuit of a good coordination amongst departments/bureaux in the planning and development of various programmes and services for the elderly. He further informed Members that HWB had recently reviewed the progress made in meeting the needs of the elderly in the past two years. In the next few months, EC would also review its progress of work and make improvements where necessary. Assistant Director of Housing (Applications and Home Ownership) supplemented that Director of Housing was actually one of the members of EC and housing policies had quite often been discussed by EC.

21. The Chairman referred to the review of the pilot schemes of dementia units in residential care homes and day care centres and asked whether the Administration would take into consideration the views of the relevant concern groups during the review. SHW replied that the Administration had found some of the suggestions made by the concern groups very useful. He assured Members that the Administration would take into account the views of patients' family members, doctors and the relevant concern groups during the review and put emphasis on meeting the needs of patients.

22. Miss Cyd HO Sau-lan referred to the child abuse cases recently reported in the media and asked if the Administration had found out what were in common in the family background of the victims and why they could not have obtained proper foster care services. She also asked whether the Administration would consider teaching

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children about the meaning of child abuse and under what circumstances they should report to the police.

23. DSW replied that the Administration would embark on various new initiatives to tackle the problem of child abuse, including stepping up publicity on child protection, providing additional child protection workers and launching a large-scale education programme to enhance public awareness of the problem. He said that the Administration's publicity efforts would also target at children through school education, family life education and distributing pamphlets. DDSW(S) pointed out that it was an established procedure for SWD to obtain full details of each reported child abuse case for analysis and follow-up. She explained that formal foster care services were being provided by SWD and six subvented NGOs. There were about 500 such places available and each case was monitored and followed up by a caseworker. She said that the Administration would promote the availability of the services so that needy parents would know where to obtain the services.

24. Mr HO Sai-chu noted that the Administration had launched in 1998/1999 a pilot project in selected schools for identification of students at risk to facilitate early intervention. However, he considered that it was also important to provide assistance to those who had already gone astray and asked the Administration what efforts it had made in helping them. DDSW(S) briefed Members on the pilot project and explained that for those who had already gone astray such as young offenders, there were different social services provided to them. For students who were facing problems, school social workers would follow up and provide assistance to them.

25. Mr TAM Yiu-chung said he had heard complaints from social workers that SWD had no longer accepted applications for admission to subsidized residential care homes since 1 June 1999 due to shortage of places. In addition, there were complaints about poor meal service provided in many private residential care homes and that the male and female inmates were sharing showers in private homes.

26. DSW replied that the Administration had been closely monitoring the standards of private residential care homes especially those which had participated in the Bought Place Scheme (BPS). He informed Members that in response to the allegations referred to by Mr TAM Yiu-chung, SWD had conducted inspections to the concerned private residential care home and compiled an investigation report afterwards. DSW highlighted that the allegations of male and female inmates sharing showers in private homes were not substantiated. However, he admitted that there was room for improvements in the shower facilities in some private homes which had been advised to make the necessary improvements. DSW denied allegations that applications for admission to subsidized residential care homes had all been rejected. He explained that as the waiting list for subsidized residential care homes was long, some applicants had been offered the choice of receiving residential care services in private homes which had participated in BPS.

27. DDSW(S) pointed out that SWD had issued a code of practice to each private

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residential care home as guidance of their daily operation including the standards they should meet in the provision of meal service. She explained that to ensure compliance with the required standards, SWD staff conducted both regular inspections at three to six-month intervals and ad hoc inspections to private homes. She pointed out that when complaints against private homes were received, SWD would look into the cases immediately, where necessary, and compile investigation reports on the cases and take necessary follow-up action.

28. The meeting ended at 11:15 am.

Legislative Council Secretariat

9 February 2000