

Information Note for LegCo Panel on Welfare Services

Support Services for Street Sleepers

Introduction

When “support services for street sleepers” was discussed at the Panel on Welfare Services meeting on 10.4.00, the Administration undertook to inform Members of its further discussion with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the possible relaxation of the age limit for admission to hostels and its work plan for tackling the street sleeper problem. This note sets out the details.

Relaxation of the age limit for admission to hostels

2. Members were aware at the Panel meeting that –
 - (a) temporary shelters were open to all regardless of age; and
 - (b) since early 1999, SWD had reached an understanding with NGOs operating hostels that they would exercise flexibility in admitting street sleepers aged below 55 with genuine needs.
3. Following the Panel meeting, a meeting between SWD and NGOs was held. With the exception of one non-subvented NGO, all NGOs had agreed to delete the age restriction rule. The exception explained that it was its mission to specialize in offering service for elderly persons.
4. Members did show understanding at the Panel meeting that in the event of excess demand for individual hostel concerned, it would have to give priority to elderly persons who were a more vulnerable group than young people.

Improving the facilities of shelters/hostels

5. Members were aware at the Panel meeting that 13 service units had

submitted their applications for funding assistance to carry out improvement works in the shelters/hostels. So far, Lotteries Fund grants of \$141,100 have been approved for 3 hostels while the other applications are being processed actively.

Strengthening social work intervention in shelters/hostels

6. 11 shelters/hostels run by 7 NGOs have its own social workers. Besides, social workers of SWD who refer cases to the shelters/hostels will continue to follow up the cases until they are able to secure permanent accommodation.

7. 5 shelters/hostels run by 3 NGOs do not have its own social workers; however, assistance from social workers is still available to its residents. For one NGO, all residents of its shelters are being followed by social workers as most of the cases admitted by the agency are referred by social workers. For the other two NGOs, they have agreed to work closely with SWD by referring their residents in need of welfare services to the nearest family services centres for assistance. In addition, one of these two NGOs has accepted SWD's offer to provide outreaching services to its shelters. SWD family services centres have started providing regular outreaching visits to these shelters to intake new cases and introduce welfare services to the residents.

8. In order to streamline the referral procedure and ensure timely assistance, a standardized referral form, together with an address list of SWD family services centres nearest to the respective shelter/hostel has been designed and introduced for use in May 2000 by all shelters/hostels.

Concerted efforts of SWD and NGOs in providing outreach service

9. Extensive outreaching service for street sleepers in all districts are being undertaken by caseworkers of SWD family services centres and the three street sleeper outreaching teams. Moreover, staff of NGOs' day relief centres also reach out to street sleepers to persuade them to live off the street and accept welfare assistance. As the street sleeping problem has occurred in quite a number of districts, the concerted efforts of both SWD and NGOs is required to tackle the problem.

Focused approach for street sleepers

10. Members were aware at the Panel meeting about the West Kowloon Regional Task Group on Tackling Street Sleepers project. In view of the positive outcome of this outreaching project, caseworkers of other districts have been advised to provide similar service with a focused approach. Priority attention is given to the elderly, the able-bodied unemployed and those with short history of street sleeping to cater for their special needs. Between 14.1.00 and 30.4.00, 128 street sleeper cases have been assisted to live off the street and accommodated either to permanent or short term housing in the public or private sector.

Assistance provided to ex-prisoner cases

11. Ex-prisoner street sleepers or residents in shelters/hostels require special assistance in their long-term rehabilitation. SWD has reached an understanding with the Society for the Rehabilitation of Offenders, which has expert experience in providing specialized services to ex-prisoners, to accept referrals on these cases. The shelters/hostels and family services centres will refer these cases to the Society for specialized assistance after obtaining the consent of individual cases.

Financial Relief

12. For street sleepers and shelter/hostel seekers who are CSSA recipients, if they have genuine difficulty in paying rental deposit, they can apply for discretionary grants under the CSSA scheme. Guideline has been issued again in early May to remind Social Security Field Unit staff to make use of this provision. For non-CSSA street sleepers or shelter/hostel seekers who are in genuine financial hardship, they can apply for cash grants from charitable trust funds to meet their urgent needs. Staff concerned of SWD will inform street sleepers of these avenues through their visits.

Co-operation with Other Departments/Bureaux

13. The Sunrise House, a singleton hostel of HAD and managed by the

Salvation Army on a non-profit-making and self-financing basis in Sham Shui Po, has started to accept referrals of residents living in shelters/hostels since February 2000. As needy homeless persons are allowed to stay in Sunrise House for one year or more, depending on individual case merits, NGOs of shelters/hostels have been encouraged to refer cases who would require a longer period in settling their accommodation need to the Sunrise House.

14. There is ongoing co-operation with the Housing Department and the Labour Department in addressing the needs of street sleepers for compassionate housing and employment assistance respectively.

Conclusion

15. Members are asked to note the above for information.

Health and Welfare Bureau/
Social Welfare Department
31 May 2000