

Legco Panel on Welfare Services
Response to SOCO's Submission on Street Sleepers

This paper outlines the welfare services available to help street sleepers, in response to issues raised in the survey on street sleepers conducted by the Society for Community Organization (SOCO) from June to August this year.

Service objective

2. According to the latest survey conducted by the Social Welfare Department (SWD), there are a total of 783 street sleepers as of September 1999. Some 347 (or 44%) amongst them are receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA).

3. In 1999/2000, the Government has allocated around \$11 million to various service units of SWD and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide welfare services for street sleepers. The objective is to encourage them to give up street sleeping and help them re-integrate into the community. Special attention is given to the more vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill and those who are drug dependent.

Strategy in tackling the problem of street sleeping

4. Based on the recommendations of the Working Group on Street Sleepers formed in 1993, SWD has adopted a comprehensive strategy to tackle the street sleeper problem. This strategy, which is reviewed every six months, includes measures such as strengthening the outreach and counseling services for street sleepers and increasing the provision of temporary accommodation and urban hostels. SWD has also encouraged volunteers to carry out community service projects to help street sleepers. Active steps have been taken to enhance public awareness of the services available for street sleepers, while communication and liaison between relevant departments and district organizations have been strengthened to ensure that the problem is tackled more effectively.

Existing welfare service provision for street sleepers

5. SWD, together with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), provide a wide range of welfare services for street sleepers. These included counseling service, accommodation assistance (such as temporary shelters, urban hostels, day relief centres, and compassionate rehousing), referrals for financial assistance, employment assistance, as well as medical and drug treatment, as appropriate. A summary of these welfare services is at Appendix.

Administration's Response to the survey report of SOCO

Age and employment

6. The SOCO submission indicated that the number of young people, aged 20-39, found street sleeping (20% or 19 out of the 94 persons interviewed) was on the increase. About a third of them had completed secondary education. However, the results of SWD's territory-wide Survey of Street Sleepers, including the most recent one conducted in November 1998, showed a lower and more stable figure of around 11%.

7. At a time of economic downturn and given the prevailing employment situation, some members of the community may decide to sleep on the streets because of various reasons. In this connection, both Government and NGOs have devoted considerable resources to help them overcome their problems and enable unemployed street sleepers, especially those at a younger age with better education qualifications, to regain their self-reliance through appropriate employment assistance and referral.

8. In October 1998, 41 NGO service units received support from the Lotteries Fund to operate a 2-year pilot project "District-based Network Employment Support Programme" under the coordination of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service. This project aims to assist unemployed persons to return to the work-force by way of an integrated social work approach. Apart from job referral and placement service, the project also provides counseling, job training and development programmes for participants through nine Employment Support Centres and 32 Employment Information Centres set up in existing NGO service units. Young street sleepers who are unemployed can benefit from this programme.

9. Through a network of 9 Employment Centres, 2 Employment and Guidance Centres for New Arrivals, and the Telephone Employment Service, the Local Employment Service (LES) of the Labour Department (LD) has been rendering free employment assistance to the unemployed.

10. Vacancies are posted up in the employment centres and can also be accessed by touch screen computers located in these centres. Job seekers can identify vacancies suitable for them and either apply directly to the employer, if the particulars of the employer are disclosed, or request the employment centre to make a referral for an interview.

11. The Job Matching Programme (JMP) of the LES provides a more intensive and personalized counseling and job matching service to job seekers who have not been able to find jobs on their own. Job seekers will be referred, where appropriate, to retraining courses funded by the Employees Retraining Board to improve their chances of successful employment.

12. The LD is studying how to help the unemployed people who have the greatest difficulties in finding a job. Top on the list is street sleepers who are actively looking for jobs.

13. LD is currently working on a pilot project with the support of SWD and NGOs to provide outreaching service for street sleepers to identify active job seekers. SWD will provide them with rent deposits and financial assistance to seek more permanent accommodation, while LD will provide them with intensive personal job counseling and job matching service under the JMP. The NGOs will provide the street sleepers with the necessary psychological counseling and follow up service. The LD is also considering providing bona fide job seekers from this category with a pager until they have secured employment.

Accommodation

14. The SOCO have suggested ways of meeting the housing needs of single persons and street-sleepers. In addition to counseling street-sleepers to seek more permanent accommodation, social workers in Family Services Centres and Street Sleepers Outreaching Teams provide accommodation assistance through compassionate rehousing, or referral to institutions such as temporary shelters, urban hostels or elderly institutions according to individual circumstances. Temporary shelters, which provide overnight accommodation, are open to all street sleepers regardless of age. While the target client group of urban hostels for single persons are those aged 55 or

above, flexibility has been exercised by NGOs to admit street sleepers of other age groups with genuine needs.

15. Currently, 635 shelter/hostel places are available to provide temporary accommodation for street sleepers. The average utilization rate for these facilities in 1998/99 was 75%. To further improve the service and ensure that the hostels are available in places with strong service demand, another three urban hostels for single persons, providing 120 places (in Sheung Wan, Hunghom and Shamshuipo) are currently under planning to meet the needs of street sleepers.

16. Facilities such as dormitories, laundry, dining rooms and kitchens are available in urban hostels for single persons. Social workers, providing counseling and guidance for street sleepers during their stay in these hostels, will help them solve their personal problems and seek a more long-term accommodation. The caseworkers follow up with these cases and provide appropriate welfare assistance, such as referring those with drug problems to the drug treatment and rehabilitation centres for assistance. Services are co-ordinated to meet the specific needs of street sleepers.

Assistance for CSSA recipients

17. The SOCO submission suggested SWD to provide those street sleepers who are CSSA recipients with rent deposit and emergency relief payment to meet their transport and living expenses while seeking work. It should be noted that elderly, disabled or ill-health CSSA recipients are entitled to special grants provided under the CSSA Scheme, including the rental deposit. If able-bodied street sleepers are having difficulties in paying the rent deposit when moving to new accommodation, the provision of a special grant may be allowed, on grounds of exceptional circumstances, to cover this so as to enable them to stop street sleeping.

18. The Support for Self-reliance Scheme is designed to encourage and assist CSSA recipients to find employment and to regain their self-reliance. Able-bodied unemployed persons, including street sleepers, are required to enroll in this Scheme and their CSSA payment will normally start one month from the day of application. Payment may, however, be made from the day of application for hardship cases. Cash grants from charitable funds may also be provided for those non-CSSA street sleepers to meet their emergency needs.

Integrated approach in service provision

19. The SOCO submission suggested that services should be provided through a more integrated model at specified locations. Services tailored to meet the needs of street-sleepers are currently provided by NGOs in an integrated manner through close liaison and co-ordination. To illustrate this point, in the West Kowloon and Hong Kong Island regions, two NGOs also operate urban hostels to complement the work of their day relief centres. Staff in the centres also outreach to street-sleepers to encourage them to seek more permanent accommodation and refer them for financial or employment assistance. Most services available to street sleepers are not restricted to particular age groups. Proposals for additional services need to be carefully examined in the light of services already available and the scope for further integration.

Hotline service for street sleepers

20. SWD's Departmental Hotline Service, manned by social workers during specified hours and a recorded service round the clock, provides immediate telephone counseling or advice to those in need of assistance.

Street Sleepers' Survey conducted by SWD

21. SWD has conducted regular surveys on street sleepers since 1980. The frequency of the survey has been changed to once every two years since 1994 as the statistics indicate a fairly stable pattern in recent years. The last biennial survey on street sleepers was conducted in November 1998. Taking into account the possible changes in the street sleeping pattern arising from the prevailing economic conditions, SWD will advance the next survey originally scheduled in November 2000 to this winter. The comments and suggestions made by SOCO will be taken into account in the planning of this survey.

Other approaches to tackling the street sleeper problem

22. In addition to the services available to street sleepers as described above, we agree that better coordination between service units and enhanced outreach and public education work would help address the issue. SWD plans to strengthen its work in the following areas :

- (a) SWD will continue to organise programmes, in close collaboration with NGOs, to take account of specific district characteristics in helping street sleepers. Volunteers and ex-street sleepers will be invited to participate in these programmes to assist in motivating street sleepers, particularly hard-core groups, to re-integrate into the community;
- (b) to strengthen the outreach and counseling service for street sleepers through more night visits to motivate them to solve their problems. Liaison groups have been organised in districts to ensure that services available will better meet the needs of street sleepers; and
- (c) SWD will continue to strengthen inter-departmental coordination to tackle the street sleeping problem at the district level.

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Appendix

Welfare Services for Street Sleepers

1. Introduction

Social Welfare Department (SWD) works jointly with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide direct services for street sleepers, particularly the elderly, the disabled, the poor and the sick, those who are mentally-ill and those who are suspected to be drug abusers. NGOs are also given funding support for their work in helping street sleepers.

2. Welfare services provided by SWD

- (a) counseling service, including assistance towards family reunion :
 - (i) 65 Family Services Centres operated by SWD and NGOs, and SWD's Hotline (2343 2255) provide counseling for street sleepers. Caseworkers in family services centres also provide an outreach service to help needy cases;
 - (ii) SWD's Outreaching Teams for Street Sleepers handle hard-core cases, such as those who are suspected to be mentally ill;
- (b) accommodation assistance, such as shelters and hostels for the homeless, homes for the elderly and the disabled;
- (c) referral for financial assistance, welfare services, including compassionate rehousing, medical treatment, drug treatment and rehabilitation, employment, and other miscellaneous matters; and
- (d) distribution of blankets and referrals to shelters managed by Home Affairs Department when the temperature drops below 12°C.

3. Welfare services provided by NGOs

- (a) visiting teams to reach out to street sleepers, providing material assistance and to encourage them to receive welfare services.
- (b) day relief centres and drop-in centres to provide relief for street sleepers, such as supportive counseling, personal care service, food, bathing, hair-cutting, clothing, referral for medical or residential services, etc.

- (c) temporary shelters/hostels in areas where street sleepers congregate. Temporary shelters provide overnight accommodation for street sleepers while hostels offer short-term accommodation placement to street sleepers. Residents in these shelters/hostels are provided with counseling service, personal care, group and recreational activities, religious activities, arrangements for long-term accommodation. A list of these shelters/hostels is as follows :

<u>Temporary Shelters/ Urban Hostels</u>	<u>Number of places</u>	
	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
Caritas- Hong Kong		
Cable and Wireless Temporary Shelter for Street Sleepers, Wong Tai Sin District	32	
Street Sleepers' Shelter Society Trustees Incorporated		
(a) Un Chau Street Shelter, Sham Shui Po District	40	52
(b) Shanghai Street Shelter, Yau Ma Tei District	48	22
(c) Kat On Street Shelter, Wan Chai District	45	15
Missionaries of Charity		
Home of Love, Nam Cheong Estate, Sham Shui Po District	45	25
Salvation Army		
(a) Nam Ming Haven for Women, Sham Shui Po, District		42
(b) Shun On Hostel, Yau Ma Tei District	14	
(c) Chi On Hostel, Sham Shui Po District	12	
(d) Yee On Hostel, Sham Shui Po District	40	
Christian Concern for the Homeless Association		
Yan Lam Hostel, Yee Kuk Street, Sham Shui Po District	11	
Pok Oi Hospital		
Pok Oi Hospital Jockey Club Hostel for Single Persons, Siu Sai Wan Estate, Eastern District	40	
Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council		
Jockey Club Lok Fu Hostel for Single Persons, Wong Tai Sin District	30	12
St. James' Settlement		
Li Chit Street Single Persons Hostel, Wan Chai District	40	
Caritas-Hong Kong		
Mount Davis Hostel for Single Persons, Central and Western District	30	
Yan Chai Hospital		
Yan Chai Hospital Urban Hostel for Single Persons, Tsuen Wan District	28	12
Total :	455	180

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