

Our Ref.: HWF CR L/M 39/2004

By Fax

Hon Frederick Fung Kin-kee
Chairman, Subcommittee to study the subject of combating poverty
Room 1104
Sunbeam Commercial Building
469-471 Nathan Road
Kowloon
(Fax No: 2782 3137)

16 December 2004

Dear Hon Fung,

Thank you for your letter dated 10 December which was forwarded to us by the LegCo Secretariat, requesting the Government to respond to the Motion moved by your Subcommittee on 9 December urging the Administration to reinstate grants for glasses for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) children.

We are equally concerned with the development of children. Our principle is that no children should be deprived of education or medical care due to a lack of means. The existing CSSA Scheme has taken care of the special needs of children, including providing them with a higher standard rate than able-bodied adults, as well as special grants related to studies such as school fees, meal allowance, subsidy for transport expenses and subsidy for examination fees. (For details, please refer to the Annex.)

For individual CSSA families who may have difficulties in purchasing glasses for their children, we would provide extra assistance to them. The Director of Social Welfare would exercise his discretion under the CSSA Scheme to assist children in need of purchasing glasses having regard to the situation of each family. Children in need will be granted a subsidy of no more than \$500 each in general. CSSA families who have difficulty in purchasing glasses for their children may approach their caseworkers in the Social Security Field Unit. If schools come across any students

who are in financial difficulty but are in need of glasses, they may also refer them to the Social Welfare Department (SWD) for follow-up. SWD also operates a hotline (2343 2255) to answer enquires related to the CSSA Scheme.

Many local organizations also provide low-cost or free eye-screening services to children who require optometric assessment. For example, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University has been providing free eye-screening services to children from low-income families; the General Eye and Low Vision Centre under the Hong Kong Society for the Blind also provides subsidy or remission on consultation fees, medicine charges, expenses on glasses etc., to CSSA recipients. We understand that some Members have recently collected 2 000 optical frames and are also actively seeking the same quantity of lenses and optical cases as well as free optometric services for needy children. We welcome their caring move and will study how to make the best use of these community resources to render suitable arrangements for CSSA children. In this regard, staff of SWD have contacted the concerned Members to facilitate the early allocation of glasses to children in need. We shall make an announcement once the arrangements are in place.

We believe the existing CSSA rates can satisfy the basic needs of the majority of the CSSA families, including providing glasses for their children. The CSSA Scheme also caters for the special needs of children. The Government has outlined the arrangements for children on CSSA in a report to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2003, and explained the background and justification for tightening up CSSA rates for able-bodied recipients in 1999. The report has been uploaded to the website of the Home Affairs Bureau. We are of the view that the existing CSSA arrangements for children are in line with the Convention.

Yours sincerely,

York Y N Chow
Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food

c.c.: Secretary General, Legislative Council Secretariat (Attn: Mrs Constance Li)
(Fax No: 2509 0775)
Mr Paul TANG, Director of Social Welfare
(Fax No: 2838 0757)

AnnexPayments to CSSA children

The existing CSSA Scheme has taken care of the special needs of children, including:

- (i) The standard rates for children are higher than that for adults (by \$130-\$150), with the monthly payments ranging from \$1,275 to \$1,920 for each person. No restrictions are imposed on the use of the standard rates; and
- (ii) To cater for the needs of children, CSSA Scheme provides the following special grants related to study:

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|--|---|
| a) Grant to cover school fees | Actual fees except for kindergarten fees of which the maximum levels are :
full-day kindergarten : \$2,260
per month
half-day kindergarten :\$1,279
per month |
| b) Meal allowance for students | \$195 per month for full-time students who have to take lunch away from home |
| c) Grant to cover fares to and from school | Actual expenses |
| d) Grant to cover Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination fees | Actual fees |
| e) Grant for selected items of school related expenses (i.e. books, stationery, school uniforms, miscellaneous and minor one-off expenses) | A flat-rate grant is payable to full-time students up to the upper secondary level for selected items of school related expenses. The rates are as follows: |

<u>Education level</u>	<u>Full grant per student per school year</u> (\$)
Day nursery	1,245
Kindergarten	2,845
Primary	2,505
Lower secondary (Secondary 1-3)	3,810
Upper secondary (including technical/ commercial institutes)	3,210

The existing average monthly CSSA rates

The estimated average monthly payments to CSSA households of different sizes are appended below:

No. of members in the household	Estimated average monthly CSSA payments w.e.f. 1 Oct 2004 (\$)
1	3,424
2	5,737
3	7,664
4	9,005
5	10,662
6 or above	13,296

Recipient households with earnings from employment will have a higher monthly disposable income (since part of the earnings can be disregarded up to a maximum of \$2,500 a month). CSSA recipients are also entitled to free public healthcare services.

Background for the withdrawal of grants for glasses under CSSA

The main reason for tightening of CSSA payments (including grants for glasses) for able-bodied recipients in June 1999 was in response to growing public concern about the rapid growth in the CSSA caseload and expenditure, the high levels of CSSA benefit for larger families as compared with market wages, and the sharp increases in the number of able-bodied adults turning to CSSA. After extensive public

consultation and endorsement by the Legislative Council, a package of measures was implemented to provide active employment assistance for unemployed recipients and encouraging them to rejoin the workforce. Following adjustment of the CSSA rates for able-bodied recipients, the average monthly CSSA payments to CSSA households are still very close to or even higher than the average monthly expenditure of non-CSSA households in the lowest 25% expenditure group. This proves that the level of CSSA benefits can satisfy the basic needs of recipient families.