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公務員事務局

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21 April 2005

Clerk to Panel on Public Service
Legislative Council
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central
Hong Kong

(Attn: Ms Rosalind Ma)

Dear Ms Ma,

Panel on Public Service

Submission from the Welfare Worker Branch Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association

Thank you for your letter of 16 February 2005 inviting the Administration's written response to the letter of 3 February 2005 from the Chairman of the Welfare Worker Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association (WWB/HKCCSA) to the Chairman of the Panel.

To start with, it may be relevant to give some background information about the Welfare Worker grade. The grade consists of two ranks, i.e. the Welfare Worker and the Senior Welfare Worker. Staff in the Welfare Worker grade are mainly deployed to provide support services like planning and running programmes; providing care services to children in reception centres, rehabilitation centres and day

nurseries; looking after elderly persons in residential homes and sheltered housing for the elderly; training and supervising the handicapped in rehabilitation centres; and organizing interest/uniform groups in youth centres, etc. In gist, they provide frontline support service to the vulnerable groups and people with special or particular needs.

To achieve greater cost effectiveness and cope with rising public demands, the Social Welfare Department has in recent years decided to condense its core business and move away from delivering direct services unless these are statutorily required or are crucial to the department's key functions to support the community. As at the end of 2004-05, a total of 28 service units have been closed or hived-off to Non-governmental Organizations. Based on the number of surplus staff that would arise from this new strategy up to 2006-07, the Director of Social Welfare had therefore included the Welfare Worker grade in the second Voluntary Retirement Scheme.

On the specific issues raised in the letter of 3 February 2005 from WWB/HKCCSA to the Financial Secretary, please refer to our letter of 21 April 2005 to the organization (attached) for the Administration's response.

Yours sincerely,



(Miss CHENG Wai-fung)
for Secretary for the Civil Service

c.c. Financial Secretary (Attn: AA/FS)
Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Attn: Mr Freely Cheng)
Director of Social Welfare (Attn: Mr Paul Tung)

(Translation)

Our Ref. (32) in PC/370/051/7 Pt. 3

Tel. No. 3185 3102

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21 April 2005

Mr WONG Wai-sing
Chairman
Welfare Worker Branch
Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association
8 Wylie Road,
King's Park,
Kowloon.

Dear Mr Wong,

Welfare Worker Grade of the Social Welfare Department

Thank you for your letters of 3 February 2005 to the Financial Secretary and the Secretary for the Civil Service, who have asked me to reply on their behalf. I note that you have also sent a copy of your letter to the Financial Secretary to the Chairman of the Legislative Council Panel on Public Service.

— We have consulted the Director of Social Welfare on issues raised in your letters concerning the Social Welfare Department. The Director's response is provided in the Appendix.

On your Branch's proposal to the Financial Secretary to monitor the employment of non-civil service contract (NCSC) staff in departments, we would like to reply as follows.

The NCSC scheme was introduced in January 1999 to provide greater flexibility for Heads of Departments (HoDs) in the deployment of resources. Under the Scheme, HoDs are delegated with the authority to employ staff on fixed term contracts outside the civil service establishment to meet service needs which are short-term, part-time or under review. The Scheme is meant to supplement the civil service appointment system but not to replace the making of civil service appointment.

There are detailed guidelines on the employment of NCSC staff, specifying the circumstances under which NCSC staff may be employed, the terms and conditions of appointment and the control and monitoring mechanism in a department. Specifically, the employment of NCSC staff must be approved by a directorate officer in the department with delegated authority from the HoD and there should be a directorate officer not below the Directorate pay scale of D2 equivalent to control and monitor the implementation of the NCSC scheme. For overall monitoring of the NCSC staff situation, the Civil Service Bureau conducts half-yearly survey to collect general statistics on the Scheme and ad hoc surveys where needed.

To tackle the surplus staff problem and optimize the use of clerical and secretarial officers, we have strengthened the control on the employment of NCSC staff for clerical and secretarial duties. HoDs are required to seek redeployment of surplus staff from the Director of General Grades first if they want to employ NCSC staff for clerical and secretarial duties. They would only be allowed to employ NCSC staff if redeployment cannot be arranged. In addition, policy Bureaux are required to coordinate the redeployment of common grade officers among the departments under their policy portfolio.

Given the nature of the NCSC scheme, the provision of clear guidelines and the existing staff re-deployment and monitoring mechanism, we do not consider it necessary to establish a separate committee to monitor and examine departments' proposals to recruit NCSC staff.

As for departmentalization of General Grades, this is a complicated issue with pros and cons for consideration in the longer term with due regard to matters such as inter-departmental transfer and promotion prospects. At this stage, we do not have any implementation plan or timetable. We will consult

staff and staff associations, if and when the matter is taken any further.

Yours sincerely,

signed

(Miss CHENG Wai-fung)
for Secretary for the Civil Service

c.c. Financial Secretary (Attn: AA/FS)
Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Attn: Mr Freely Cheng)
Director of Social Welfare (Attn: Mr Paul Tung)

Appendix

Response to issues raised in the letter of 3 February 2005 from the Welfare Worker Branch of the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants' Association (WWB/HKCCSA) to the Financial Secretary concerning the Social Welfare Department

Reasons for including Welfare Worker grade in the second Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS II)

The VRS II was launched in March 2003 to enable civil servants in specified ranks and streams of 229 designated grades with identified or anticipated surplus to retire voluntarily from the service with compensatory payment and immediate pension benefits. The designated grades were nominated by the respective Heads of Departments/Grades, having regard to their projected manpower position.

2. Starting from 1999, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been closing down non-core direct service units or hiving them off to non-government organizations (NGO) in order to cope with rising public demands and achieve efficiency savings. Based on the number of surplus staff that would arise from the new strategy up to 2006-07, the Director of Social Welfare decided to include the Welfare Worker grade in the VRS II.

3. As at the end of 2004-05, a total of 28 service units have been closed/hived off to NGOs. Due to the lukewarm response to the VRS II from the Welfare Worker grade, currently 93 Welfare Worker grade staff have become surplus due to these closures/hiving off and other service re-engineering projects. All these surplus staff are being gainfully employed in either new service areas without receiving new resources or other existing service units (please see paragraph 12(a) below).

Employment of non-civil service contract (NCSC) staff in the Social Security Branch of SWD

4. Social security payments take up a significant portion of the

Government's recurrent expenditure. Because of the unfavourable economic conditions in recent years, the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) caseload has increased from 228 060 as at the end of 2000 by 67 634 (or 29.66%) to 295 694 as at the end of 2004. There has been wide public concern over the administration of the CSSA Scheme, both in terms of its gate-keeping mechanism and measures to prevent fraud and abuse.

5. A key objective of the SWD's Support for Self-Reliance Scheme (SFS) introduced on 1 June 1999 is to encourage and help unemployed able-bodied CSSA recipients to rejoin the workforce and move towards self-reliance. To implement the SFS, SWD has employed NCSC Employment Assistance Co-ordinators (EA Cos) as facilitators to enable the able-bodied unemployed CSSA recipients participating in the Scheme to get access to up-to-date labour market information and other support services, and to develop personalized action plans to assist them to find jobs and monitor progress.

6. In addition, the department has employed NCSC Social Security Assistants (SSAs) to conduct investigations for processing or reviewing applications for assistance under various social security schemes, and to assist applicants in obtaining other services not provided through social security schemes.

7. With the economy slowly recovering, the upsurge in social security workload appears to be stabilizing. It would be imprudent to increase manpower in the social security field on a permanent basis at this stage and the employment of NCSC staff is a pragmatic measure to deal with the problem. The department will ensure that NCSC staff are not employed for jobs where there is a continued need for permanent staffing by civil servants to meet the service needs. The department is now consulting staff on a "Proposal to Review the Operations of Social Security Field Units". The review will be completed in mid-2005 and by then the long-term manpower projection and staff deployment plan will become clearer.

Merging of the NCSC EA Cos with the SSA grade

8. SWD has not proposed to merge the NCSC EA Cos with the civil service SSA grade. In order to streamline the operation of Social Security Field Units, the department is consulting staff on some initial proposals including -

- (a) the reshuffling of duties between Senior Social Security Assistant and SSA; and
- (b) the integration of NCSC EA Cos with NCSC SSAs.

9. SWD has made it very clear to all staff concerned that the proposals are of a preliminary nature, and there is no decision on whether and when this will be implemented. The department has arranged extensive consultation with staff side and has yet to finalize the proposals because it is still collating staff feedback.

Employment of NCSC Programme Assistants

10. To tackle unemployment, the Government has created a number of temporary jobs in the public sector to help the unemployed enter/re-enter the labour market and to meet operational needs. 108 Programme Assistants in SWD are being employed under the job creation initiatives. The Finance Committee of the Legislative Council has approved on 4 March 2005 the necessary funding to extend the temporary jobs for one more year.

Proposed merger of the Welfare Worker grade with the SSA grade

11. In response to the WWB/HKCCSA's request for merging with the SSA grade, SWD conducted a comprehensive review in August 2004 and sounded out all relevant staff associations on the proposal. Views on the proposal were mixed.

12. After taking into account the overall manpower situation of the SSA grade and the long-term direction for the provision of social security services, the development of the various grades being affected and the relevant experience and expertise of colleagues involved, the department is of the view that the merger proposal is not an appropriate solution, for the following reasons -

- (a) Suitability of the Welfare Worker grade to take up social security work

Surplus Welfare Workers have been fully deployed to assist in service areas where the job nature is more akin to the work nature of the grade i.e. social welfare services. Of the 93 surplus staff, 23 have taken up

duties of the Job Developers under the SFS, 15 at the Standardized Care Need Assessment Management Offices of the Elderly Branch, 50 in the Planning and Coordinating Teams in the district offices and 5 in other service units.

The merger of the Welfare Worker grade with the SSA grade or redeployment of the surplus Welfare Workers to take up SSA duties will inevitably drain away all the existing manpower engaged in the new service areas. The department does not have additional resources to fund these new services apart from deploying the surplus Welfare Workers.

(b) Response from the Social Security related staff associations

These staff associations expressed serious concerns on the proposed merger plan, or the taking up of social security duties by the Welfare Worker grade, which will inevitably affect the promotion prospect of the SSA grade.

Redeployment plan proposed by the WWB/HKCCSA

13. As Welfare Workers are not registered social workers, they are not qualified to perform duties required of a registered social worker as governed by the Social Workers Registration Ordinance. There are such constraints in deploying Welfare Workers to various service branches as proposed by the WWB/HKCCSA. However, the department has already informed the organization that their proposal of posting more Welfare Workers to work in the hostels providing service to clients with mental disability and in the future Training Complex for Juveniles (to be established in 2006-07) would be considered carefully. In fact, surplus Welfare Workers have already been deployed to work in various service branches as the department sees fit.

Demand for social welfare services

14. Due to the fast growing demand for social welfare services in recent years, new initiatives are being introduced to strengthen elderly services, rehabilitation services and services to tackle domestic violence and support deprived children and

youths. There is an urgent need to inject additional manpower for these new services. With their welfare-oriented experience and background, Welfare Workers are better suited to work in these service areas as compared to social security work. That said, the department has deployed 23 Welfare Workers to assist in the SFS as Job Developers in the social security field, as the work nature of Job Developers is broadly consistent with Welfare Workers' welfare-oriented background. The department will review the deployment of surplus Welfare Workers on a regular basis to ensure that they are gainfully deployed to service areas in need of additional hands.