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seen by the Administration)

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Panel on Welfare Services

**Subcommittee on Review of the
Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme**

**Minutes of the 5th meeting
held on Tuesday, 24 May 2005 at 8:30 am
in Conference Room A of the Legislative Council Building**

Members present : Dr Hon Fernando CHEUNG Chiu-hung (Chairman)
Hon LEE Cheuk-yan
Hon CHAN Yuen-han, JP
Hon TAM Yiu-chung, GBS, JP
Hon LI Fung-ying, BBS, JP
Hon Frederick FUNG Kin-kee, JP
Hon Alan LEONG Kah-kit, SC
Hon LEUNG Kwok-hung

Member absent : Hon Fred LI Wah-ming, JP

Member attending : Hon LEUNG Yiu-chung

Public Officers attending : All items

Ms Salina YAN
Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Elderly Services and Social Security)

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Mrs Brenda FUNG
Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
(Elderly Services and Social Security) 2

Mrs Rachel Cartland, JP
Acting Deputy Director of Social Welfare
(Administration)/Assistant Director of Social Welfare
(Social Security)

Mr LAI Shiu-bor
Chief Social Security Officer (Social Security) 2
Social Welfare Department

Miss YEUNG Kok-wah
Chief Social Security Officer (Social Security) 4
Social Welfare Department

Mr Kenneth NG
Senior Statistician (Social Welfare)
Social Welfare Department

Mr Allan NG
Chief Social Work Officer (Youth)
Social Welfare Department

**Deputations
by invitation** : Item II

Concerning CSSA Review Alliance

Ms WONG Shek-hung
Social Worker

Ms WONG Sau-ping
Single Parent Representative

New Women Arrivals League

Ms LI Kam-wa
Chairman

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Society for Community Organization

Ms SZE Lai-shan
Community Organizer

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service

Mr CHUA Hoi-wai
Business Director

Hong Kong Women's Coalition in Equal Opportunity

Miss CHUNG Yuen-yi
Project-in-charge

Hong Kong Association for the Survivors of Women Abuse
(Kwan Fook)

Ms TO
Member

Ms LUI Lok-man
Staff

Harmony House

Ms Queenie YUEN
Co-ordinator

Civil Human Rights Front

Ms WONG Mei-fung
Representative of member organisation

Mr FAN Lap-hin
Convenor of Human Right Commission Working Force

Hong Kong Christian Institute

Ms WONG Mei-fung
Intern

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「同心社」綜援家庭互助組

Ms LAU Wai-ling
Group Member

Ms HO Shin-yee
Social Worker

Single Mothers Concern Group

Ms HO Foei-lin
Deputy Chairman

Mr CHEUNG Ka-pan
Volunteer

Oxfam

Mr WOO Man-lung

Hong Kong Social Security Society

Ms LEE Wai-yee

Blindforce

Mr Silver KONG

Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union

Mr YUM Kwok-tung
Secretary for members' liaison

Hong Kong Social Workers Association

Mr LAW Chi-kwong

Ms LAW Suk-kwan

The Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong

Mr WONG Kwai-yau

Ms HO Yin

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Clerk in attendance : Ms Doris CHAN
Chief Council Secretary (2) 4

Staff in attendance : Miss Mary SO
Senior Council Secretary (2) 8

Miss Maggie CHIU
Legislative Assistant (2) 4

I. Date of next meeting and items for discussion

Members agreed to hold the next meeting on 23 June 2005 at 10:45 am to discuss the findings of the evaluative study of the intensive employment assistance projects (IEAPs).

II. The review of arrangements for single parent recipients under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme
(LC Paper Nos. CB(2)1603/04-05(01) to (08), CB(2)1644/04-05(01) to (06)
CB(2)1652/04-05(01) to (02) and CB(2) 1785/04-05(01) to (03))

2. With the aid of powerpoint, Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Elderly Services and Social Security) 2 (PAS/HWF(ES&SS)2) briefed members on the Administration's review on existing arrangements under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme for single parent families and the options to help single parents on CSSA move towards self-reliance and reduce the risk of social exclusion through engagement in work as soon as possible, details of which were set out in the Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(01)). Notably, the Administration recommended that single parents on CSSA with the youngest child aged six to 14 should be required to seek at least part-time employment. The same requirement would be applicable to family carers who claimed CSSA on grounds of looking after young children. No change would be made to the eligibility criteria for the standard rates for single parents, but the single parent supplement (SPS) would only be paid to single parents earning at least \$1,430 a month and with at least one child aged below 15.

Views of deputations

Hong Kong Social Security Society (HKSSS), Concerning CSSA Review Alliance and Oxfam Hong Kong (Oxfam)
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1644/04-05(06))

3. Ms LEE Wai-yee of HKSSS and Mr WOO Man-lung of Oxfam jointly presented, through powerpoint, the findings of a study conducted by the three organisations on the rationale, measures and effectiveness of the policy implemented in Norway, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the Netherlands to help single parents on public assistance to find work. Specifically, the findings of the study revealed that to better help single parents on public assistance to seek work, the rationale of the policy must be family-focused and client-centred. For instance, instead of forcing single parents to seek work, due regard needed to be given as to whether they were ready for employment; and if not, what measures should be taken to assist them. Such assistance could take the form of encouraging single parents to attend training courses to upgrade their work skills, engaging them in voluntary work to build up their self-esteem, etc. In order to enable single parents who found work to hold on to their jobs, measures, such as adequate child care support service, the establishment of a minimum wage and the willingness of employers to provide an environment that helped parents and carers balance employment and family, were essential. In view of the above international experience, Mr WOO urged the Administration to abort its plan to require CSSA single parents to seek work.

Hong Kong Social Workers Association (HKSWA)
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1785/04-05(02))

4. Ms LAW Suk-kwan presented the views of HKSWA as detailed in its submission. Notably, HKSWA urged the Administration not to require CSSA single parents whose youngest child had reached the age of six to seek work across the board, in view of the varying circumstances of each single parent family and the inadequacy of the existing after school care programme (ASCP) service. Rather, the Administration should adopt a “case manager” approach in helping single parents on CSSA by developing tailor-made plan to help them attain self-reliance. Although HKSWA was supportive of the idea of helping single parents on CSSA move towards self-reliance through work engagement, this should be taken forward in a progressive and encouraging manner, such as arranging those not ready for employment to attend training courses and undertake voluntary work, rather than penalising those with youngest child aged six to 14 for failing to earn at least \$1,430 a month by not paying them the SPS.

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*The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1785/04-05(01))*

5. Ms WONG Kwai-yau presented the views of the Association as detailed in its submission. In particular, Ms WONG said that the Association opposed the Administration's plan to require CSSA single parents whose youngest child had reached the age of six to seek work across the board, without giving due regard to the difficulties they encountered arising from single parenthood. The Association also opposed not paying the SPS to single parents who were unable to earn at least \$1,430 a month and with at least a child aged below 15, as it was against the rationale of granting the SPS in recognition of the special difficulties which single parents faced in bringing up families on their own without the support of spouses. Instead of implementing a sweeping approach to force CSSA single parents to seek work, the Association advocated the adoption of a "case manager" approach to be carried out by trained social workers.

*Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS)
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(06))*

6. Mr CHUA Hoi-wai presented the views of HKCSS as detailed in its submission. Specifically, HKCSS suggested the following -

- (a) the Administration should review and make improvements to the enforcement of maintenance order in order to avoid payees from resorting to public assistance;
- (b) the Administration should strengthen vocational training and adult education for single parents on CSSA in order to enhance their employability;
- (c) the Administration should consider the need of establishing statutory minimum wage and maximum working hours to reduce the likelihood of low-income groups falling into the safety net;
- (d) the concept of "family support and family friendly" should form an integral part of all Government policies. In this connection, the choice of CSSA single parents to stay home to care for their children should be respected;
- (e) the Administration should formulate a comprehensive plan which would allow CSSA single parents to build up their self-help capacity and integrate with the community and at the same time could continue taking care of their children. In so doing, the Administration should take reference from overseas experience

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which revealed that apart from paid work, voluntary work and continuous education could also help single parents to move towards self-reliance. To examine how effective such a plan was, a longitudinal study on the single parent families concerned should be conducted;

- (f) instead of phasing out the Ending Exclusion Project (EEP), the Administration should substantially increase the number of places of the Project;
- (g) the Administration should review whether the existing 6 600 ASCP places could meet demand, in particular if all CSSA single parents and family carers who claimed CSSA on grounds of looking after young children with the youngest child aged six to 14 were required to seek work;
- (h) the Administration should encourage agencies operating the ASCP service to provide a service which could better cater to the needs of single parents who worked outside normal office hours;
- (i) the Administration should encourage non governmental organisations (NGOs) to create more job opportunities for single parents and encourage the business sector to adopt a family friendly policy towards their employees, such as allowing employees who were single parents to work flexible hours;
- (j) the Administration should make improvements to the Co-operatives Ordinance to better enable single parents to form co-operatives to build up their self-help capacity and integrate with the community; and
- (k) the Administration should conduct a review to find out whether the SPS could achieve its objective of providing additional support to single parents in recognition of the special difficulties they faced in bringing up families with the support of spouses.. Before coming to a conclusion on that, the Administration should not cease paying the SPS to single parents not earning at least \$ 1,430 a month and with at least one child aged below 15.

*New Arrival Women League
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(04))*

7. Ms LI Kam-wah presented the views of the League as detailed in its submission. Specifically, the Administration should not require CSSA single

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parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to work part-time when the existing ASCP service was still inadequate, and it was unrealistic to require CSSA single parents to work 32 hours and earn \$1,430 a month, which came up to about \$45 per hour, given that the prevailing rate for low-skill casual job was about \$20.

Society for Community Organisation (SOCO)
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(05))

8. Ms SZE Lai-san presented the views of SOCO as detailed in its submission which were outlined as follows -

- (a) the Administration should abort its plan to require CSSA single parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to work part-time lest withholding their monthly SPS, when the service hours of ASCP could not provide care and supervision to children whose parents had to work shifts and during Sundays and public holidays. Although CSSA single parents would be required to work at least 32 hours a month, or eight hours a week, many low-skilled part-time jobs nowadays required staff to work shifts and during Sundays and public holidays;
- (b) the Administration should reform the ASCP service and extend the operating hours of the service. Consideration should also be given to allocating funds to launch a childcare service. This new measure would not only provide single parents with another option to see that their children were attended to while they worked, it would also provide create additional job opportunities; and
- (c) engaging in paid employment was not the only way to help CSSA single parents to build up their self-help capacity and encourage them to integrate with the community. Other means, such as undertaking voluntary/community work, taking up educational studies and attending training courses to build up work skills, were just as effective.

Hong Kong Association for the Survivors of Women Abuse (Kwan Fook)
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(08))

9. Ms TO presented the views of Kwan Fook as detailed in its submission. Specifically, Kwan Fook opposed the scheme of not paying the SPS to CSSA single parents not earning at least \$1,430 a month and with at least one child aged below 15. Given that the going rate for low-skilled part-time jobs was between \$10-odd to \$20 per hour, it was questionable how a single parent could find a part-time job which paid about \$45 per hour. If a single parent had to earn at

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least \$1,430 a month in order to continue to receive the SPS, this would mean that he/she would need to work at least 72 hours a month. Not only would such long time away from home undermine their care for their young children, it was questionable whether there were enough low-skilled part-time jobs in the marketplace to absorb all CSSA single parents with the youngest child aged six to 14 which was estimated to be over 30 000.

10. Kwan Fook shared the views of other deputations that measures to help single parents to attain self-reliance and reduce the risk of social exclusion should be voluntary, and should include other forms such as undertaking voluntary work and attending educational courses/training programmes. Action should also be taken to improve the existing ASCP service and greatly increase the number of full-fee waiving ASCP places. The Administration's plan to increase the number of full-fee waiving ASCP places from 830 to 1 250 was far from adequate. The Administration should acknowledge and educate the public that taking care of families, though not income-earning, was also work, in order to remove the social stigma put on CSSA single parents that they were lazy people.

Harmony House

(LC Paper No. CB(2)1644/04-05(01))

11. Ms Queenie YUEN presented the views of the Harmony House as detailed in its submission. Notably, the Harmony House strongly opposed the measure of not paying the SPS to single parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to punish them for not earning at least \$1,430 a month. The Harmony House considered that the Administration should not implement the scheme unless the existing inadequacies in child care support service were fully addressed. The Harmony House also considered that helping single parents to build up their self-help capacity and integrate with the community should be taken forward in a step-by-step manner. They should first be involved in community work, and after they had built up more self-esteem and confidence, they should be encouraged to attend courses to acquire job skills. Arrangement should also be made for them to work in projects of social enterprise nature as these projects generally accorded more flexible working environment. At the same time, the Administration should step up work in engaging the business sector in providing capacity-building jobs for single parents. Lastly, the Administration should expeditiously set up a Maintenance Board to help payees collect outstanding maintenance payments from their former spouses.

Civil Human Rights Front

(LC Paper No. CB(2)1644/04-05(02))

12. Mr FAN Lap-hin presented the views of the Front as detailed in its submission. In essence, the Front opposed the scheme of requiring CSSA single

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parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work for the reasons similar to those given by other deputations at the meeting. The Front urged the Administration, in making changes to the CSSA policy, should conduct wide public consultation, and not restrict the consultation to individual organisations and the welfare sector, given that CSSA was a safety net of last resort for everyone in the community.

Hong Kong Christian Institute
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1644/04-05(03))

13. Ms WONG Mei-fung presented the views of the Institute as detailed in its submission. Notably, the Institute strongly opposed the scheme of requiring CSSA single parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work. The Institute considered that taking care of families should be recognised as work. It was pointed out that the prevailing hourly rate of hiring local domestic workers to do housework was \$50. The Institute also considered that the scheme was at variance with the policy of safeguarding the welfare of children. In the Institute's view, the Administration should provide more support to enable single parents to care for their young children instead of forcing them to go out and seek work. Moreover, the existing child care support service was far from adequate and the number of full-fee waiving ASCP places was still in short supply even it was increased to 1 250.

「同心社」綜援家庭互助組
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1644/04-05(04))

14. Ms LAU Wai-ling presented the views of「同心社」as detailed in its submission. Ms LAU said that「同心社」opposed the scheme of requiring CSSA single parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work, having regard to the fact that children aged six to 14 still needed much care and protection from their parents. Ms LAU further said that the Administration should conduct a comprehensive review of the CSSA system and not to adopt a piecemeal approach, such as to introduce a scheme when there was an upsurge in a particular type of CSSA cases.

Single Mothers Concern Group
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1644/04-05(05))

15. Ms HO Foei-lin presented the views of the Concern Group as detailed in its submission. The Concern Group strongly opposed the scheme of requiring CSSA single parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work. The Administration should provide more training opportunities for single parents, such as allocating more resources to sponsor NGOs to run social building projects, so as to allow more time for single parent to acquire their job skills at their own pace so

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that they could enter the labour force when their children had grown older.

Blindforce

(LC Paper No. CB(2)1785/04-05(03))

16. Mr Silver KONG presented the views of Blindforce as detailed in its submission. Notably, Blindforce opposed the scheme of requiring CSSA single parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work, the reasons of which were similar to those expressed by other deputations at the meeting.

Hong Kong Social Workers' General Union

(LC Paper No. CB(2)1652/04-05(01))

17. Mr YUM Kwok-tung presented the views of the General Union as detailed in its submission. Mr YUM said that the General Union was deeply dissatisfied about the Administration's total disregard of the special difficulties faced by single parents by its intention to require CSSA single parents with youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work.

Hong Kong Women's Coalition in Equal Opportunity

(LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(07))

18. Miss CHUNG Yuen-ye presented the views of the Coalition as detailed in its submission. Measures suggested by the Coalition to help needy single parents were as follows -

- (a) women's perspectives and needs should be incorporated in the formulation of Government policies;
- (b) taking care of families should be recognised as work because of its contribution to the community, albeit intangible;
- (c) a Maintenance Board should be set up to help payees to collect outstanding maintenance payment;
- (d) the existing child care support service should be made more comprehensive to better cater to the needs of single parents, including increasing the number of child care support places, extending service hours and increasing the number of service centres in different locations throughout the territory; and
- (e) incentives, instead of punitive measure, should be instituted to encourage single parents to seek work.

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*Concerning CSSA Review Alliance
(LC Paper No. CB(2)1603/04-05(03))*

19. Ms WONG Shek-hung presented the views of the Alliance as detailed in its submission. Major views were as follows -

- (a) endeavours, such as undertaking voluntary work, studying and training, should be included as substitutes for part-time work, as they also could help single parents on CSSA to move towards self-reliance and reduce their risk of social exclusion as engaging in part-time employment;
- (b) consideration should be given to arranging single parents on CSSA to work in NGOs providing welfare services and Government departments in their neighbourhood or else providing them with transport subsidy to work in other places so as to enable them to choose jobs which suited their circumstances and requirements;
- (c) policy on helping single parents on CSSA with the youngest child aged six to 14 to achieve self-reliance should be premised on encouragement rather than coercion by not paying them their monthly SPS of \$225 if they failed to earn at least \$1,430 a month. In addition, annual long-term supplement for single parents families should be reinstated;
- (d) the existing requirement that single parents on CSSA must find work once their youngest child reached the age of 15 should be changed to when their youngest children reached the age of 18, in view of the fact that children under 18 still needed close parental care and supervision;
- (e) improvements should be made to the existing ASCP run by NGOs for children aged six to 12 whose parents were unable to provide care and supervision for them during after school hours owing to work or other reasons. These included providing such service nearby schools thereby obviating the need for parents to arrange someone or transport to take their children to the NGOs concerned, alternatively, pick-up service from schools to the NGOs providing ASCP service should be provided; extending service hours, say, to 8:00 pm on weekdays and to stay open on all Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays;
- (f) as the great majority of single parents on CSSA had low educational attainment with little or no skill, the Administration should establish

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statutory minimum wage and maximum working hours to better protect their interests; and

- (g) to enable single parents on CSSA to find and secure paid work and at the same time to care for their children, the Administration should step up promotion on the adoption of flexible working hours by employers.

Discussion

20. Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung said that the Administration should not set down a certain sum and number of hours which CSSA single parents must earn and work in a month in order to continue to receive the SPS, without regard to the reality that the existing ASCP was not easily accessible and its service hours limited, and that low-skilled part-time jobs were still in short supply and their wages low. Moreover, such an arrangement would have a labelling effect on those CSSA single parents who could not seek work as lazy people, because of the many practicable difficulties they faced in the absence of the support of spouses. A better approach would be to assign social workers to help CSSA single parents to prepare for work if they were not ready for employment or seek employment if they were ready to do so. Mr LEUNG further said that the overseas examples cited by the Administration in its paper, that requiring single parents on public assistance to work was workable in helping them to attain self-reliance, was not convincing. Mr LEUNG requested the Administration to abort its plan to require CSSA single parents with the youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work for the time being, until members and the public had full information of the background of these overseas examples such as their unemployment rate, the educational attainment of single parents on public assistance, the support measures provided to single parents, etc.

21. Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (Elderly Services & Social Security (DSHWF(ES&SS)) responded that the scheme to require CSSA single parents with the youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work had already taken into account of the special difficulties faced by single parents. In so doing, CSSA single parents would only be required to work at least 32 hours a month, or eight hours a week. The Administration considered such a work requirement was not unreasonable nor impracticable, as single parents could make use of the time their children were in school to work part-time to build up their self-help capacity and integrate with the community. Moreover, employment assistance and other after-school care support services would be provided to these single parents to help them find work and overcome barriers to work. Apart from this, it was proposed that the scheme should be implemented in phases with a pilot to be conducted in selected districts. The Administration recognised that in terms of job vacancies and the provision of support services, it might not be feasible to require all single

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parents and family carers with children aged six to 14 to work all at once. This approach would enable a more focused effort to encourage single parents to work, and at the same time provide support to meet their needs, with interaction on the employment market monitored. Experience gained in the pilot would also help to refine the scheme before this was extended across the board.

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22. DSHWF(ES&SS) also said that in order to pursue the objective of helping single parents to build up their self-reliance capacity early, there was a case for turning the SPS into some kind of work incentive. However, CSSA single parents would continue to receive the SPS if they had justifiable reasons for not seeking work. As to the information requested by Mr LEUNG Yiu-chung in paragraph 20 above, DSHWF(ES&SS) agreed to provide it after the meeting. DSHWF(ES&SS) however pointed out that in deciding on the scheme to help single parents attain self-reliance, due regard was given to the local context while international experience only served as a reference point. For instance, many CSSA single parents with young children were in fact very willing to seek work. This was evidenced by the fact about 370 CSSA single parents whose youngest child was aged below 15 voluntarily participated in the IEAPs implemented in October 2003. To date, over 100 of them had secured either full-time or part-time employment. DSHWF(ES&SS) added that the Administration would take into account views from the Legislative Council (LegCo) and the community before deciding on the way forward.

23. Mr WOO Man-lung pointed out that the reasons why working requirement for single parents was effective in the United Kingdom and New Zealand were due to the facts that these countries had statutory minimum wage and single parents generally had higher educational attainment and were younger.

24. Ms LI Fung-ying said that in view of the fact that about 61% of CSSA single parents only had primary school education or below and that about 56% of them were middle-aged women, she asked the Administration whether it had done any study to ascertain whether there were enough part-time jobs in the marketplace to suit this group of people and which paid \$45 per hour. Noting the Administration's plan to increase full fee-waiving ASCP places from 830 to 1 250, Ms LI asked whether this meant that the Administration considered such an increase was adequate to meet the demand from CSSA single parents whose youngest child was aged six to 14.

25. Responding to Ms LI's first question, Acting Deputy Director of Social Welfare (Administration) (DDSW(A)(Atg)) said that according to the Job Developers, who were brought in for the implementation of the intensified Support for Self-reliance Scheme in 2003, they found that when they actually began looking for jobs in the districts for their clients, there were many more job opportunities than were available through the Labour Department (LD). This

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was also the experience of NGOs in helping their IEAP participants to seek jobs. In the light of this, the Administration believed that there were always many more jobs available when people actually looked hard for them.

26. Ms WONG Sau-ping of Concerning CSSA Review Alliance pointed out that according to the figures from LD on 6 May 2005, the number of people looking for cleansing jobs and the vacancies were about 2 500 and 800 respectively, whereas that for the miscellaneous jobs were about 1 700 and 460 respectively, and their hourly rates were ranged from \$15 and \$18. Ms LEE Wai-ye also said that giving supplement to single parents amounting to \$2,700 a year was not unique under the CSSA Scheme. For instance, an annual long-term supplement of \$3,825 was payable to a five-member family involving any member who was old, disabled or medically certified to be in ill-health for the replacement of household and durable goods if the family had received assistance continuously for 12 months or more.

27. As regards Ms LI's second question, Chief Social Welfare Officer (Youth) said that the Administration was not sure whether an increase of 420 full fee-waiving ASCP places was adequate to meet the demand arising from the implementation of the scheme at this point. He however pointed out that as the scheme would be implemented in phases with a pilot to be conducted in selected districts, the Administration would work closely with NGOs concerned to increase the ASCP places to cope with demand. The operating agencies stood ready to extend their service hours on weekdays' evenings and Saturdays to meet the needs of the working parents. DSHWF(ES&SS) supplemented that the implementation of the School-based After-school Learning and Support Programmes under the Education and Manpower Bureau should further help students to have access to more after-school services and activities.

28. Responding to the Chairman's enquiry on the number of single parent and family carers which would be affected by the pilot scheme, DDSW(A)(Atg) said that around 5 000 families might be affected.

29. Mr Frederick FUNG urged the Administration not to implement the scheme, having regard to the serious shortfall in the number of ASCP places and the lack of menial part-time jobs in the market. Even though the scheme would be implemented in selected districts, this would still affect all the CSSA single parents and family carers who claimed CSSA on grounds of looking after young children living in those districts. A better approach would be for the Administration to provide part-time jobs to these two groups of people if they failed to find paid jobs which could allow them to care for their children. Mr FUNG further said that he did not oppose the idea of engaging single parents to take up paid employment, but this should be done on a voluntary basis. Instead of not paying the SPS to single parents not earning at least \$1,430 a month,

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the Administration should pay them additional sum as an incentive for achieving the said earning target.

30. DSHWF(ES&SS) responded that the Administration did not consider the scheme unreasonable nor unrealistic. While recognising the difficulty of combining paid work with family life for single parent with young children, the Administration believed that with adequate access to support services like after-school care support services, it would be possible for the single parent to at least take up part-time employment when the youngest child started primary school. At present, some 70% of Government, aided and direct subsidy scheme primary school places operated on a whole-day basis. The Administration had consulted the Working Group on CSSA of the Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC), SWAC and the Women's Committee. There was general support from these committee on the broad direction of helping single parents to achieve self-reliance through early engagement in work. Notwithstanding this, the Administration would take into account the views of LegCo, the relevant NGOs and the community before finalising the proposals.

31. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan said that if what the Administration said was true that there many more low-skilled jobs in the market than could be found through LD, then the Commissioner for Labour should resign. Mr LEE opined that the main reason for introducing the scheme was to deter single parents from applying CSSA, in view of the sharp increase in the CSSA single-parent caseload. Mr LEE pointed out that if the Administration was truly sincere in helping single parents to achieve self-reliance, it should help them to upgrade themselves through, say, enrolling them in adult evening schools and Project Yi Jin, instead of forcing them to take up menial jobs which could not help them to elevate themselves to improve their employability. Single parents could always take up such no value-added menial jobs after their children had grown up.

32. DDSW(A)(Atg) responded that experience all over the world showed that low-level jobs were attainable from many sources, not just from LD-like government agencies. The Administration considered now a favourable time to introduce the scheme because in the past 19 months the number of CSSA unemployment cases had been on steady decline. Experience from the EEP also revealed that unless there was some mandatory element, single parents would not actively seek work. In addition, not all EEP participants who had taken up part-time employment needed ASCP service.

33. Mr LEE Cheuk-yan asked for the reason for setting the criterion to continue to receive the SPS at earning at least \$1,430 a month. Mr LEE further said that he failed to see the rationale why single parents who could earn at least \$1,430 a month could continue to receive the SPS, whereas those who could not would not be paid the SPS.

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34. DDSW(A)(Atg) explained that \$1,430 was the same amount for able-bodied adults to continue to receive CSSA if they had taken up employment. As to paying the SPS only to single parents earning at least \$1,430 a month and with at least one child aged below 15, DDSW(A)(Atg) said that this was made having regard to the following considerations. In view of the questions raised on the rationale for the SPS by the Ombudsman in her Investigation Report on Prevention of Abuse of CSSA issued in December 2003 (paragraph 26 of the Administration's paper refers), emerging international practice, and the fact that the higher standard rates for single parents already catered for their special needs, there would appear to be a case to abolish the SPS altogether. The Administration however recognised that the SPS had been paid to single parents since 1995. To pursue the objective of helping single parents to build up their self-reliance capacity, there was a case for turning the SPS into some kind of work incentive. On balance, in order to encourage single parents to become self-reliant and reach out to the community early, the Administration had therefore recommended the option of paying the SPS only to single parents earning at least \$1,430 a month and with at least one child aged below 15. DDSW(A)(Atg) further said that a benchmark of pay of \$1,430 was used throughout the CSSA Scheme was one of the minimum conditions for a job to be counted as full-time employment.

35. The Chairman disagreed that jobs which paid about \$45 an hour, i.e. \$1,430 divided by 32 hours, were low paid jobs. In response, DDSW(A)(Atg) said that \$1,430 had no correlation with the 32 hours which single parents were required to work a month.

36. Mr LEUNG Kwok-hung opposed the scheme as it would not help lift CSSA single parents from poverty and could not help to improve the livelihood of their children, even if these single parents could take up part-time employment.

37. Miss CHAN Yuen-han urged the Administration not to implement the scheme unless there were adequate support measures in place, such as establishing outreaching teams to assist single parents whenever they were in need of assistance, and there were abundant low-skilled part-time jobs in the market. In the absence of a statutory minimum wage, forcing over 40 000 CSSA single parents with the youngest child aged six to 14 to seek work would only drive wages down.

38. DSHWF(ES&SS) responded that it was the established policy of the Administration to take into account people's needs in formulating new scheme or policy. The Administration was still in the process of collecting views on the proposals to help CSSA single parents to achieve self-reliance capacity before deciding on the way forward.

Action

39. Responding to the Chairman's enquiry as to when the Administration intended to implement the scheme in selected districts, DSHWF(ES&SS) said that no specific timetable on such had been set.

Conclusion

Admin 40. In view of the unanimous opposition to the proposed scheme, the Chairman requested the Administration to come back to the Subcommittee when it had more details on the support services to help single parents, such as the ASCP service and employment assistance, figures to support that it was possible for CSSA single parents to find part-time employment and how it intended to take forward the scheme in selected districts. At the same time, the Administration should seek the views of CSSA single parents and the public at large. DSHWF(ES&SS) agreed to consider the Chairman's requests.

41. There being no other business, the meeting ended at 11:05 am.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
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