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Panel on Welfare Services

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

Background paper prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat

**Measures to help single parents on
Comprehensive Social Security Assistance to Attain Self-reliance**

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Welfare Services (the Panel) on the measures to improve the social well being of single parents receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA).

Background

2. Under the CSSA Scheme, single parents whose youngest child is under 15 are not required to participate in the Active Employment Assistance (AEA) Programme of the Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme as are other able-bodied CSSA recipients. The SFS Scheme was one of the major recommendations of the 1998 CSSA Review introduced in 1999 to encourage and help unemployed CSSA recipients to re-enter the labour market and move towards self-reliance.

3. In view of the rise in the number of CSSA single-parent cases and having regard to the fact that the longer single parents were on public assistance, the harder it was for them to move towards self-reliance, the Administration consulted the Panel on 10 December 2001 on its proposal to implement an Ending Exclusion Programme (EEP) which aimed to assist CSSA single parent families with youngest child under 15 to become more self-reliant and reduce their risk of social exclusion. Participation in the Project, launched in March 2002, was voluntary.

Measures under the EEP

4. The Project comprises a voluntary employment assistance programme, improved work incentive, help with child care and enhanced supportive

services, details of which are summarised below.

5. The voluntary employment assistance programme is a proactive service drawing experience from the AEA programme for the able-bodied unemployed to help single parents to find jobs. Project participants are assisted to access up-to-date market information and employment training opportunities and develop personalised action plans to find work. Where appropriate, they are also referred to other employment assistance projects run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), especially targeting at single parents.
6. To provide a greater incentive to work, the maximum level of disregarded earnings for single parents CSSA recipients with young children was revised from \$1,805 to \$2,500 per month in March 2002.
7. To better meet the single parents' need for After School Care Programme (ASCP), single parent CSSA recipients attending training/retraining programmes, participating in paid employment or activities under the employment assistance projects or actively seeking work may be assisted with coupons for free ASCP places in over 130 centres in the territory running the Programme.
8. To help single parents overcome problems and stress arising from single parenthood, they are referred to suitable welfare services, such as those provided by the Single Parent Centres (SPCs), to help them restore resilience and build up a social network of support and mutual work.

Evaluation of the EEP

9. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) commissioned the City University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong to jointly conduct a one-year Longitudinal Study to evaluate the effectiveness of the EEP starting from April 2002. At the meeting on 14 April 2003, the Panel was briefed by the Administration on the initial results of the Study which suggested that the Project had achieved its objective in helping single parents to become more self-reliant and reduce the risk of social exclusion.
10. Upon completion of the entire data collection exercise by the end of 2003, the Administration reported to the Panel on 9 February 2004 the final results of the one-year Longitudinal Study. The findings revealed that EEP participants exhibited more job-seeking behaviour and secured more part-time employment than single parents not participating in the Project. They also became less isolated and improved in work involvement. As the EEP had been well received by participants generally and was endorsed by relevant parties, the Administration decided to continue with the programme. In addition, in view of the rise in the single parent caseload over the recent past and concerns expressed by the Ombudsman, the Administration undertook to review the entire issue of single parents on CSSA in order to understand the present situation better and to make recommendations for any suitable improvement measures to help single parents achieve self-reliance.

Major concerns raised by the Panel and the Administration's response

11. Panel members were generally supportive of the EEP. Their concerns were mainly centred on the child help support for single parents.

12. Some members were of the view that providing coupons for only 300 ASCP places to single parents attending employment retraining programmes, being engaged in activities under the employment assistance projects run by NGOs or actively seeking jobs was far from enough, having regard to the fact that the target number of Project participants was 2 000. Other members were of the view that the validity period of the ASCP coupon should be extended from one month to six months to avoid disruption to the child concerned.

13. The Administration explained that the reason why only 300 Project participants would be provided with free ASCP places at any one time was because SWD could only identify savings from existing resources to fund 300 ASCP places at no cost to service users. The Administration however pointed out that not all Project participants would be eligible for ASCP provision as some of them would choose to remain a full-time parent until their youngest child reached 15 years of age. Moreover, once a single parent became unemployed again, withdrew from attending employment retraining programmes or failed to actively seek jobs, he/she would cease to be provided with a ASCP coupon and the freed up coupon could then be provided to another eligible single parent. Notwithstanding this, if more single parents participating in the Project had found paid jobs thus proving the cost-effectiveness of the ASCP coupon, there would be a strong case for the Administration to deploy money saved from reduced CSSA payments made to fund more free ASCP places for eligible single parents.

14. On the question of the validity period of the ASCP coupons, the Administration advised that these coupons were initially issued on a monthly basis so that SWD staff administering the Project could make use of the opportunity to review participants' progress in job searching or development of employability through attending employment-related training. However, for those who had taken up paid employment but still on CSSA, coupons would be issued up to the end of the validity of their CSSA payment with further extension subject to review.

15. Members raised query as to why the utilisation of the ASCP service by the Project participants was on the low side. Between March 2002 and August 2003, only 326 ASCP full-fee waiving coupons had been issued to 74 single parent families (4.7% of the cumulative job-ready participants) to release them for working, training or seeking employment.

16. The Administration agreed to look into the reason for the low utilisation of ASCP service by single parents. The Administration considered that one possible way to make ASCP service more accessible and convenient to the parents was to adopt the "money follow the children" concept.

17. A member expressed concern that the existing child care services and ASCP service fell short of meeting the needs of single parents. For instance, most child care centres (CCCs) were closed during inclement weather and some even refused to take in a child running a fever. As a result, the single parent concerned had to seek leave from his/her employer which was not always possible.

18. The Administration conceded that there was room for improvement in providing child care support for working parents. However, it was unrealistic to expect CCCs and after school care centres to stay open to suit the needs of all service users. To address such, a plan was underway to promote the development of mutual help service in the neighbourhood. Efforts would also be made to explore engaging more families in providing child minding service for children living in their neighbourhood.

Recent development

19. The Administration has recently completed a review of existing CSSA arrangements and related services for single parent families on CSSA and would be consulting the Subcommittee on the findings and recommendations of the review at its meeting scheduled for 24 May 2005.

20. At the meeting of the Panel on 9 May 2005, the Administration has agreed to consider the issue of re-opening SPCs after the completion of its review on the Integrated Family Services Centres in one year's time.

Relevant papers

21. Members are invited to access the LegCo website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) to view the minutes of meetings of the Panel held on 10 December 2001, 14 April 2003 and 9 February 2004, the papers provided by the Administration and the submissions from the deputations.