

LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES

Workload of and Challenges faced by Social Workers

Purpose

This paper gives an overview of the workload of and challenges faced by social workers in Hong Kong.

Circumstances Leading to Challenges

2. In the past decade, we have witnessed rapid changes to the global environment bringing challenges to the entire world and Hong Kong is of no exception. Like other world cities, Hong Kong has been deeply affected by the tides of globalization and the accompanying economic and social challenges. Following the Asian financial turmoil and the occurrence of SARS, Hong Kong's economy went into recession for a number of years. The economy has now recovered its buoyancy but Hong Kong still faces serious challenges. Re-structuring of the local economy has reduced employment opportunities for our workers. Our fundamental family values and family solidarity are also being challenged, as evidenced by the weakening of the marriage system and increase in the variety of family problems. Our ageing population poses an increasing demand for elderly care services. There is also a rising concern about the various problems faced by young people, such as high youth unemployment rate, non-engaged youth, crimes among young people, etc. Social workers in the frontline play a key role in dealing with these social problems. They are facing not only an increased workload but more complex social issues.

3. Increase in the workload and the complexities of the problems aside, higher expectation, demand for accountability and greater transparency on the part of the service clients and the community as a whole have put more pressure on social workers. This does not only apply to the Social Welfare Department (SWD), it also applies to the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which are accountable for the effective use of public money. This explains why there have been

increasing concerns on the sustainability of our welfare system, the use of subventions, outcome-focus performance and the effectiveness of our service performance monitoring system. All these call upon the need for better corporate governance in the NGOs.

4. In addition, the rapid growth of information technology (IT), which has inevitably demanded higher efficiency in public services, also means that, like other professions, social workers have to respond to social needs more expeditiously than ever before. This also explains increased pressure on social workers.

Initiatives and Measures to Help Facing Challenges

5. To address the various challenges faced by social workers and to maintain a sustainable welfare system, the Government has introduced, among others, a number of initiatives and measures in the past years as set out below.

Injection of additional resources in welfare expenditure

6. The Government has been increasing expenditures on social welfare. Expenditure on social welfare accounts for 16.2% of the total recurrent public expenditure at present. The recurrent public expenditure on social welfare for 2006-07 is \$34.6 billion, which is \$2.3 billion higher than the revised figure of 2005-06. During the past few years, despite the financial stringency faced by the Government, our recurrent public expenditure on social welfare has never been reduced. Over the past decade, our recurrent expenditures on social welfare expenses have doubled (from \$16.5 billion in 1996/97 to \$34.6 billion in 2006/07). Excluding the expenditures on social security, our social welfare expenditures have expanded for about 90% (from \$5.3 billion in 1996/97 to \$10.1 billion in 2006/07).

7. There are a number of examples demonstrating the Government's commitment to injecting additional resources to expand and strengthen service provision to alleviate the workload of social workers. For example, in 2005-06, additional recurrent resources have been allocated to the Integrated Family Service Centres (IFSCs) to strengthen their manpower support. In the same year, an additional \$15 million and \$13.5 million recurrent expenses were also allocated for District Support Scheme for Children and Youth Development and enhancement of the outreaching support services for young night drifters respectively. In 2006-07, an additional \$30 million has been earmarked to

implement a Family Support Programme in IFSCs and Family and Child Protective Services Units and psychiatric social work units, etc. The Government has also allocated an additional \$20 million to strengthen home care services for the elderly, \$10.4 million to enhance services for the disabled living in residential rehabilitation service centres, and \$6.3 million to provide a new Integrated Children and Youth Services Centre (ICYSC). As the Government has injected substantial amount of new resources on social welfare manpower under various programmes of family and child welfare, elderly, rehabilitation and young people, it has significantly helped ease the workload and work pressure of social workers as a whole.

Enforcing a self-reliance philosophy and policy

8. While the Government is committed to providing a safety net to those least able to help themselves, we discourage over-reliance on Government assistance. This is in line with the fundamental social work philosophy of “helping people to help themselves”. For example, we assist recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) who are capable of working to achieve self-reliance through the Support for Self-reliance Scheme. The New Dawn Project rolled out in 2006-07 is also a programme facilitating single parents and child carers on CSSA to engage or re-engage in employment. In other social work programmes, people are empowered to help themselves and regain independence through such means as mutual help, peer support and volunteer service.

Re-engineering of services

9. To address the changing needs of the society, a number of re-engineering exercises were carried out in various services including children and youth, family and elderly, etc. in the recent years. Through service re-engineering and integration, we are able to rectify fragmentation and overlapping in service provision, streamline practice and make more effective use of resources. Besides, it enables us to move away from the traditional casework and problem oriented approach to adopting a holistic perspective and employing integrated and multi-disciplinary approach to better cater for the needs of our service recipients. In this connection, we now emphasize a teamwork approach and use of different intervention methods, hence no longer dwell on casework and number of cases handled by each worker.

10. For instance, starting from 2000, resources were pooled to form 133 ICYSCs. Additional resources were also injected to strengthen overnight outreaching services in some ICYSCs to address the needs of young night drifters. In addition, re-engineering of family services was completed in March 2005. Through pooling of resources, 61 IFSCs are set up over the territory to provide a wide range of services to support families in need. The new service delivery model not only facilitates greater accessibility of services to service recipients, but also enables social workers to focus their effort in early identification and intervention of individual and family problems.

Additional seed money to promote social inclusion and harmony

11. A stable and harmonious society relies not only on welfare services but reciprocity, responsibility sharing and community support from all sectors. In recent years, through the setting up of the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund and the Partnership Fund for the Disadvantaged, the Government actively promotes social capital building and tripartite partnership among the welfare sector, the business sector and other community organizations in addressing increasingly complex social issues. Advocating brand-new and alternative concepts, these funds provide new avenues for social workers to develop new and innovative services, identify and build up cross-sectoral community partners to help address community problems and develop mutual support networks among people conducive to fostering social harmony in the community.

Supporting corporate governance in the NGO sector

12. With the introduction of the Lump Sum Grant subventions system since January 2001 which provides NGOs with more autonomy and flexibility in managing their resources and services, SWD has been working with NGOs to provide support in developing strategic leadership that ensures effectiveness, credibility and viability of the organizations and bringing about innovations in service delivery. A series of improvement measures have been taken, including a reference guidebook on corporate governance for NGO Boards, tailor-made management training courses for CEOs and senior managers of NGOs and the Business Improvement Project Scheme to fund business improvement proposals of NGOs.

Supporting the use of information technology

13. To support social workers in the use of IT, the Joint Committee on Information Technology for the Social Welfare Sector has mapped out strategic framework for exploiting IT to underpin the corporate governance and business development of NGOs and encourages sharing of IT knowledge, experience and applications. By the end of 2005, an accumulative total of about \$217 million Lotteries Fund grants have been approved for implementing 32 IT development projects in the entire welfare sector.

Support and training for social workers

14. To equip social workers with new knowledge and skills in meeting nowadays' service demand and enhance their competence in facing all the challenges stemming from the rapidly changing society, on-going training to social workers has been provided in the social welfare sector. For example, SWD has spent \$1.93 million in 2005-06 to render 379 training courses/programmes reaching 8,712 social workers with focus on the more hard-pressed subjects such as family violence, risk assessment, multi-skill training for IFSC social workers, workplace violence as well as other development programmes such as managerial competence, stress management and change management, etc.

15. In addition, to help social workers better manage stress and emotional problems arising from rendering services to victims and survivors of critical incidents or natural disasters as well as direct threats to their security and violence in the workplace, Critical Incident Stress Management at the workplace have been in place in SWD. The Critical Incident Stress Management Services administered by the Department also render debriefing services to concerned social workers, apart from victims, witnesses, family members and the general public affected by the incidents. SWD will help NGO IFSCs who do not have their own clinical psychologist to provide psychological services to their cases as well as social workers.

Way Forward

16. Despite the many challenges and work pressure, social workers, whether employed by the Government or by NGOs, take pride in their work which involves promoting human dignity and social harmony and helping the weak and vulnerable people. Social work is still one of the most competitive subjects in the local universities. While today's social workers have to upgrade themselves continuously through adopting a new mindset and equipping themselves with new knowledge and skills to keep abreast with the changes in the macro environment and rapid social developments, the Administration will continue to address the challenges confronting social workers, keep close view of the situation and take appropriate measures and initiatives to alleviate the situation. At the same time, we would further strengthen our strategy to mobilize different sectors of the society to enhance social capital, to promote tripartite partnership and corporate citizenship as well as to promote self-reliance and mutual care among the citizens to foster a harmonious and inclusive society.

17. Despite all these efforts, it should be pointed out that the ultimate mission enshrined in the social work profession is to help the disadvantaged build up self-confidence and self-esteem with a view to helping people to help themselves, and helping others later on. Social workers have acted as enablers, supporters and facilitators in the process. Their efforts alone, however, would not be adequate in bringing solutions to all social issues nor ensuring the well-being of all. The society needs to take a realistic expectation on social workers and appreciate the many limitations they are facing. After all, the building of a harmonious and inclusive society requires the concerted efforts of the Government and all sectors of the community. Individuals, families, the neighbourhood and community at large all have a role to play to make this happen.

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