

For Information
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LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES

Subcommittee on Strategy and Measures to Tackle Family Violence

**Handling of High-risk Domestic Violence Cases by
the Police and the Social Welfare Department**

INTRODUCTION

This paper briefs Members on the existing measures adopted by the Police and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) in handling high-risk domestic violence cases.

2. The Government is committed to preventing and tackling domestic violence and has adopted a series of measures to combat domestic violence and strengthen services for victims of domestic violence. The Police handle and investigate all reports of domestic violence professionally and conduct thorough investigations according to the circumstances of each case. Where there is evidence of an offence, the Police will take prompt and decisive actions to effect arrest. The prosecuting authorities will take follow-up action in accordance with the “The Policy for Prosecuting Cases involving Domestic Violence” and “The Statement of Prosecution and Practice”. In addition, the SWD adopts a three-pronged approach, i.e. preventive measures, and provision of supportive services and specialised services, to help victims of domestic violence and prevent domestic violence.

HANDLING OF HIGH-RISK CASES BY THE POLICE

Initial Handling Stage

Emergency Referral Questionnaire (ERQ)

3. To assist in the early identification of high-risk factors during the initial screening process, an ERQ has been deployed as an assessment tool to guide police officers to identify and assess existing high-risk factors within the victim family by going through a series of structured threat assessment questions. The ERQ has adopted the concept of risk assessment that is universally employed in the policing of domestic violence and the questions focus on such immediate high-risk factors as recent assault and dispute history, history of abuse of children, position regarding divorce and aggravating factors including suicidal tendency and parties' history of violent behaviour.

4. The risk assessment tool would guide the handling officers in better appreciating the family situation of the victim, and would assist the officers to make a more informed decision on whether emergency referral is required by removing the victim and his/her children to a place of refuge or approaching the SWD's outreaching teams for immediate crisis intervention. To enhance frontline supervision, the Police requires an officer of Sergeant or above to personally review and endorse the assessment on the ERQ.

Central Domestic Violence Database (CDVD)

5. To assist the Police in the early identification of high-risk cases, police officers responding to all reports of domestic violence would make reference to the CDVD which captures all domestic violence cases and other related reports made to the Police in the preceding two years. Apart from case information, the CDVD also electronically captures previous ERQs and facilitates officers' ready access to previous assessments and identification of high-risk or recurring cases.

Investigation of High-Risk Cases

Designated Domestic Violence Investigation Units (DV Units)

6. The Police investigative response to domestic violence is built on a three-tiered structure which reflects a graded response according to the seriousness of the cases while also taking into consideration the existence of high-risk factors in the family. Designated DV Units, comprising specially trained officers with strong investigative background, are set up at District level to investigate serious DV reports. The accumulation of expertise within the units and the strengthened collaboration between the DV Units and the local welfare units would assist in the handling of high-risk cases.

'One Family One Team' Concept

7. To overcome the complications arising from different units handling different cases occurring within the same family, a 'One Family One Team' approach is adopted. The rationale is to provide a more co-ordinated approach as familiarity with the background of the family would enhance the investigation units' capability to identify high-risk factors within the family and facilitate early intervention.

Supervision of Police Actions in High-Risk Cases

Frontline Supervision

8. To enhance professionalism and ensure a quality response, supervision is emphasised at all stages of the Police handling of high-risk cases. To ensure proper classification, handling and documentation during the initial handling stage, an officer of the rank of Sergeant or above will take charge of the initial investigations at the scene.

Alert Mechanism

9. Divisional and District management of high-risk cases is

strengthened by the creation of an Alert Mechanism in the CDVD to automatically generate repeated cases occurring within 12 months or less for the attention of the Divisional/District supervisory officers for the purpose of more intensive monitoring as well as closer collaborative efforts with the social welfare units.

Emergency/Non-consensual Referral of High-Risk Cases

Emergency Referral Mechanism for High-Risk Cases

10. If a domestic violence case is considered to be of high-risk and the situation warrants emergency removal and/or referral at any stage, the Police will make immediate arrangements for temporary accommodation and/or approach the SWD outreaching team for immediate crisis intervention.

Direct Referral Line for Police

11. A 24-hour Direct Referral Line has been established with the SWD for the Police to seek urgent professional advice and/or support services from the SWD outreaching team so as to provide timely assistance to victims in high-risk cases.

Non-consensual Referral for High-Risk Cases

12. Under the non-consensual referral mechanism, should the case be assessed as high-risk while the victim declines to be referred, a Superintendent of Police will personally review the case and decide whether non-consensual referral is warranted so as to mitigate the risk of the situation.

Training On Handling Of Domestic Violence

Training Focus

13. Underpinning the whole Police response to the handling of domestic violence is the emphasis on enhancing the handling and investigative capability of frontline officers. Apart from increased training opportunities,

the training focus has also been adapted to enhance officers' abilities to identify high-risk factors, increase their sensitivity and awareness of family dynamics and victim psychology.

Training Mode

14. Another important feature of the Police training is the focus on cross-fertilization of professional knowledge and working experience from different professionals such as social workers and clinical psychologists to enhance officers' understanding of the problem of domestic violence from different perspectives and facilitate service interface.

Specialised Training for Officers of DV Units

15. Apart from general training to equip all frontline officers, specialised training is tailor made for DV Units in the handling of high-risk cases. The Child Protection Policy Unit in conjunction with the SWD and the Police Psychological Services Group is currently conducting a training programme specially designed for all officers of the DV Units to enhance their capability in the early identification of high-risk factors and the effective handling of serious cases. The training focuses on the dynamics of domestic violence, psychology and behavioural patterns of the parties involved, handling and interviewing techniques, follow-up measures on safety issues as well as service interface with social welfare units. As a continuous effort to tap overseas experience, the Police and the SWD have also conducted joint study visits to overseas government agencies and NGOs in Singapore and Australia in recent years.

Publicity efforts

16. On publicity efforts, the Police play an active participating role in outreaching publicity campaigns especially at high-risk districts with a high domestic violence incidence rate. An example is the Anti-Domestic Violence Publicity Campaign held in Tuen Mun co-organised by the SWD, the Crime Headquarters of the New Territories North Region and the local NGOs in Tuen Mun.

HANDLING OF HIGH-RISK CASES BY SWD

Specialised Units

17. The Family and Child Protective Services Units (FCPSUs), which are specialised units under SWD manned by experienced social workers, provide a co-ordinated package of one-stop service and arrangement of various services for victims, their families and batterers in domestic violence cases. A multi-disciplinary approach is adopted to provide necessary support for the victims and children to help them tide over the difficult period, lessen trauma associated with violence and live a new life. Social workers of FCPSUs perform the role of a case manager to coordinate a wide range of services and assistance including crisis intervention, short-term accommodation at refuge centres or Family Crisis and Support Centre, counselling, clinical psychological services, medical treatment, housing assistance, financial assistance, etc.

18. FCPSUs also serve as the contact points for referrals and initial screening of domestic violence cases referred by the Police. High-risk domestic violence cases will be handled by social workers of FCPSUs. To ensure service quality and strengthen clinical support for frontline social workers in FCPSUs, additional resources have been allocated to strengthen the manpower of FCPSUs and expand the number of FCPSUs from five in 2004-05 to eight in 2006-07 and 11 in 2007-08.

Setting up New Service Units in High-Risk Districts

19. With additional resources, the SWD has set up new FCPSUs in districts with relatively more domestic violence cases, e.g. Yuen Long, Tuen Mun, Wong Tai Sin / Sai Kung, in the past two years. Moreover, a new Clinical Psychological Unit (CPU) will also be set up in Yuen Long in 2007-08 to address the increasing service need and facilitate easy accessibility for clients affected by domestic violence who reside in the north-western part of the New Territories.

Case Assessment

20. During initial contact with victims of domestic violence, assessment will be made in four areas, namely risk assessment, assessment of welfare needs, assessment of psychosocial and family functioning, and assessment of the motivation of the victims, their families and the batterers to receive help. In conducting the assessment, the social workers may make use of different assessment tools as appropriate. Some commonly used assessment tools are “Initial Risk Assessment Form of Battered Spouse Cases (IRA)”, “Spousal Assault Risk Assessment Guide (SARA)”, Child Abuse Risk Assessment Matrix (CARA)”, “Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Centre Scale (LASPC)” and “Danger Assessment (DA)”. The “Risk Assessment Tools for Spouse Battering and Child Abuse in Hong Kong Chinese Families” which are newly developed by the Hong Kong University under a study commissioned by SWD will also be used by the social workers who have attended the in-depth training course when the related computer programme is ready. In the course of working with the victims, their families and their batterers, the concerned social workers will conduct on-going assessment and will make intensive contacts with high-risk cases.

Support for Victims of Domestic Violence and their Children

21. In handling domestic violence cases, the prime focus is to respond immediately to stop the violence, ensure safety of the victims and their families and provide support, in particular to the victims. Our guiding principle is to put the safety of victims and children as the first priority. If the victims and children are considered to be of high-risk of further violence, immediate action will be taken (subject to the victims’ consent as appropriate) to arrange for shelter, temporary accommodation or residential service for the victims and their children. In case of need, social workers would also facilitate the victims to seek legal protection through application of an injunction order under the Domestic Violence Ordinance or initiating the application of a Care or Protection Order under the Protection of Children and Juveniles Ordinance to protect the children. To ensure adequate support for victims and children who require immediate accommodation away from their home, additional resources have been allocated to increase the capacity of refuge centres for women and

residential childcare services. Enhanced measures have also been implemented with the Housing Department in assisting victims of domestic violence with genuine and long-term housing need which cannot be resolved by their own means, through splitting of tenancy, conditional tenancy and compassionate rehousing.

Service for Batterers

22. In reducing the risk of domestic violence, it is necessary to break the cycle of violence, and providing services to batterers has been another important focus of SWD's work. Apart from individual counselling or treatment of batterers provided by social workers of FCPSUs and clinical psychologists, SWD has since January 2006 launched a pilot project on Batterer Intervention Programme (BIP) in order to identify effective treatment modalities for batterers. Upon the completion of the pilot project in March 2008, SWD will conduct an evaluation and the experience will provide useful reference for defining the goals, contents and standards of BIPs in Hong Kong for further service development.

Early Identification of High-Risk Cases

23. Not all families with risk of domestic violence referred by the Police are willing to receive service from social workers. The Family Support Programme launched in FCPSUs since October 2006 aims at connecting these families with appropriate support services through telephone contacts, home visitations, group work and programmes. Volunteers and support persons with similar background are recruited and trained to build up a support network for these families and help them address their problems early.

24. Following the setting up of the CEASE Centre, a new crisis intervention and support centre, in March 2007 which provides round-the-clock service throughout the year for individuals and families affected by, among others, domestic violence, a new 24-hour hotline manned by social workers was set up to facilitate the public to seek help or refer cases.

Training

25. The SWD will continue arranging training programmes for the social workers and related professionals, including the Police, medical and allied health professionals, teachers and child care professionals, on handling domestic violence. The core subjects include child abuse, spouse battering, elder abuse and sexual abuse. Apart from the training programmes organised at the central level, relevant training will also be arranged by respective districts according to their local needs. Social workers and clinical psychologists of the SWD are also sponsored to attend training organised by other training institutes or organisations.

26. In addition to local training programmes, the SWD will also sponsor their staff and NGO social workers to attend overseas conferences and training in order to widen their exposure and tap overseas experience in handling domestic violence.

Publicity efforts

27. Enhancing public awareness of the serious impact of domestic violence, encouraging the needy families to seek help, and promoting community support and family values are important ingredients to prevent domestic violence. The SWD will continue to launch the territory-wide publicity campaign, "Strengthening Families and Combating Violence", through various means including publicity in the mass media. To help victims of domestic violence understand their rights, protection provided by law and support services available in the community, an information kit has also been developed and distributed widely since June 2007.

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

28. At the Central level, the Director of Social Welfare chairs the Working Group on Combating Violence (the Working Group) which is responsible for mapping out strategies and approaches and coordinating among different government bureaux, departments and non-governmental organisations

(NGOs) to address the problem of domestic violence in Hong Kong. The Police is represented at the Working Group. To ensure consistency and enhance collaborative efforts across inter-departmental boundaries, the Working Group published the “Procedural Guidelines for Handling Battered Spouse Cases” which is binding on all concerned professionals including the Police and social workers.

29. At the district level, 13 District Liaison Groups on Family Violence, chaired by the respective District Social Welfare Officers, have been set up since March 2005 to strengthen communication amongst the Police, the SWD and local NGO service units and to discuss measures to enhance the collaboration in handling domestic violence cases including high-risk cases.

30. At the case level, social workers of FCPSUs, when necessary, will convene multi-disciplinary case conferences during which the professionals concerned will share their professional knowledge and information on the case and work together in formulating the most appropriate welfare plans for high-risk cases.

Referral mechanism between Police and SWD

31. A referral mechanism has been in place since 2003 by which the Police will refer victims and/or alleged batterers of domestic violence cases to SWD for follow-up service with their consent. Through the mechanism, non-consensual referrals will also be made if the case is assessed as high-risk and a Superintendent of Police, having personally reviewed the case, decides that such referral is warranted so as to mitigate the risk of the situation deteriorating. An acknowledgement system is also put in place to strengthen the communication between frontline police officers and social workers during the case referral process. On receiving a police referral, the social workers will acknowledge receipt and inform the Police of the contact details of the responsible social worker, and whether or not the victims and/or batterers have responded to services provided.

32. To facilitate the Police to seek urgent professional advice and/or immediate social work support in handling urgent and high-risk cases, a 24-hour

Direct Referral Line has been set up since October 2006 with the Police. In case of need, social workers will perform outreaching duties with the Police to handle crisis situations.

THE WAY FORWARD

33. The SWD will continue to seek continuous improvements and strengthen the three-pronged approach in handling and preventing domestic violence. The Police will seek continuous improvements in the handling of domestic violence with special focus on containing the risk posed to victims and their children. In pursuit of our goal, the subject has again been included in the Commissioner of Police's Operational Priorities 2007 and the Police is committed to professionally responding and investigating all reports of domestic violence.

Social Welfare Department
Hong Kong Police Force
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