

立法會 *Legislative Council*

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Panel on Welfare Services

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 16 April 2009

Support services for street sleepers

Purpose

This paper provides background information and gives an account of the discussions of the Panel on Welfare Services (the Panel) on the support services for street sleepers.

Background

2. At present, three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) each operates an Integrated Services Team for Street Sleepers. A package of integrated services includes outreaching visits (including midnight outreaching), counselling and group activities, personal care such as bathing, hair-cutting, employment guidance, escorting, emergency fund, emergency shelter/hostel placement, as well as the service referrals, and are aimed at helping them to give up street sleeping and re-integrate into the community. Besides, the Integrated Family Service Centres/Integrated Services Centres of the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and NGOs also provide outreaching, counselling, financial and accommodation assistance, referral for treatment and other support services to street sleepers.

3. SWD has set up a Street Sleepers Registry (SSR) to capture street sleepers' data. Both SWD and services units of NGOs specialized in serving street sleepers have to register newly confirmed street sleeper cases with SSR on a monthly basis; and de-register the case when it is confirmed that the street sleepers have given up street sleeping. According to the Administration, the average number of registered street sleepers per month for the period from February 2008 to January 2009 was 358, an increase of 23 over the average monthly figure (335) in the preceding 12 months.

Three-year Action Plan to Help Street Sleepers

4. At its meeting on 9 April 2001, the Panel discussed a Three-year Action Plan to Help Street Sleepers (Action Plan). As the number of street sleepers in SSR had risen rapidly from 819 in January 2000 to 1 399 in February 2001, SWD had, in consultation with three NGOs specializing in street sleeper services, drawn up a three-year action plan to tackle the specific needs of street sleepers, in particular, to assist those younger, able-bodied and unemployed street sleepers to rejoin the work force. A Lotteries Fund grant of \$8.73 million was approved for implementing the Action Plan from April 2001 to March 2004. The Action Plan comprised three key elements -

- (a) midnight outreaching and other integrated supportive services for street sleepers (including provision of emergency funds and emergency placements, assistance in seeking job placement and long-term housing, and counselling) provided by three NGOs, namely St. James' Settlement (SJS), The Salvation Army (SA) and Christian Concern for the Homeless Association (CCHA);
- (b) an emergency shelter in Wan Chai run by SJS; and
- (c) an evaluative research conducted by the City University of Hong Kong (CityU) to assess the effectiveness of the services in (a) and (b) above as well as the existing services tackling the street sleeper problem.

5. The Panel was updated on 10 June 2002 of the progress of the Action Plan's first year of operation and other improvement measures taken during the period to complement the Action Plan. In gist, the Action Plan had some initial positive outcomes since its operation in one year's time. To tie in with the Action Plan, SWD had taken a number of initiatives and measures viz. improving hostel services for single persons, interfacing with specialized service units such as the Society of Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention, and Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers to provide services to street sleepers with special needs, and strengthening district efforts in tackling the street sleeper problem.

6. While noting that the Administration would revert to the Panel on the findings of the evaluative research conducted by CityU, members were concerned about the housing needs of the street sleepers. The Administration explained that the Action Plan included setting up an emergency shelter in Wan Chan run by SJS which was an expedient form of transit housing before more long term arrangement could be made for street sleepers to live in private rental housing or hostels. Most of the hostels run by NGOs on a subvented or self-financing basis could continue to provide temporary accommodation for street sleepers until they found more permanent accommodation. In view of the characteristics of the street sleepers, other types of accommodation such as provision of hostel services would be a more suitable interim measure to assist the street sleepers who were mostly unemployed and financially unstable.

7. In response to members' suggestion of providing special grants to street sleepers on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance to help them pay rental deposits, the Administration advised that the provision of emergency fund was considered a more efficient way to assist the street sleepers in solving their immediate needs. About 55% of the emergency fund included in the Action Plan budget had been granted to needy street sleepers for paying rental expenses.

Provision of services by the new Integrated Services Teams

8. At the meeting on 13 April 2004, the Panel was briefed on the findings of the final report of the evaluative research conducted by CityU and SWD's plan to revamp its street sleeper service. Based on the findings of the final evaluation of the Action Plan, the research team made the following recommendations on future service development for street sleepers –

- (a) an integrated approach, i.e. provision of a continuum of services including casework, outreaching, emergency and short-term accommodation, emergency funding, employment assistance, network re-building, aftercare etc. in helping street sleepers live off the street and be self-reliant;
- (b) aftercare service for accommodated street sleepers, at least for the initial six months, was essential to ensure that they could adjust satisfactorily to the new living environment, re-build their social network and to prevent relapse; and
- (c) NGOs should focus on direct service delivery while SWD should assume the role of service planning, co-ordination and monitoring.

9. Members were advised that the Administration considered the Action Plan effective in tackling the street sleeper problem as reflected by the declining number of street sleepers, promoting self-reliance and promoting social well-being. With the experience of the Action Plan, the Administration agreed with the research team's recommendation that service integration should be both a strategy and direction to tackle the street sleeper problem.

10. The Administration proposed to pool the resources of the individual subvented services programmes operated by SJS and SA and the three SWD's Street Sleepers Outreaching Teams¹ (SSOTs) to facilitate revamping of three new Integrated Services Teams, to be operated by SJS, SA and CCHA, modelled after the Action Plan, to provide one-stop integrated services for street sleepers to cover the whole territories. Other subvented services or self-financing services such as street sleepers' temporary shelters, day relief service, short-term accommodation

¹ SWD's three SSOTs provided only casework and outreaching but not other support services (e.g. day relief centres, urban hostels, etc.) and these SSOTs had to rely on the provision of such services by the subvented sector.

service operated by various NGOs would continue to be in existence to provide support to the three NGOs. On the other hand, Integrated Family Service Centres/Family Service Centres would continue to support street sleepers either through direct casework services/groups and programmes or networking with the NGOs operating street sleeper services for referral of services for street sleepers as appropriate. SWD would close its SSOTs but maintain the role of service planning, co-ordination and monitoring.

11. Members expressed support in principle the revamping of street sleepers service. However, some members expressed concern about the resources for the three NGOs to operate the three new Integrated Services Teams. The Administration advised that the resources would be pooled from the recurrent subventions of \$3.4 million to SJS and SA for the subvented services including two day relief centres and two urban hostels for single persons no longer required, and from the saving of \$2.6 million resulting from the closure of the three SSOTs of SWD. The required subvention was worked out with each NGO concerned, taking into account the service components and essential staffing requirement.

12. Some deputations took the view that longer period of aftercare service for accommodated street sleepers should be provided. The Administration explained that providing aftercare service to street sleepers for six months was only the minimum requirement as stipulated in the funding and service agreement. It did not rule out the need for a longer period of time for aftercare service.

13. Members were advised that as exemplified by the Action Plan which had been proven to be effective in helping street sleepers who were younger, better educated, in normal health and with shorter duration of street sleeping to live off the street, a similar integrated approach in providing a continuum of services would be adopted to help those hardcore street sleepers to live off the street and become self-reliant.

14. Members were further advised that as the Action Plan would expire on 31 March 2004, the three new Integrated Services Teams would be in place with effect from 1 April 2004 so that continuity of service could be maintained. On the same day, SWD's three SSOTs would cease to provide service.

Question raised at the Council meeting

15. A question raised by Mr CHEUNG Kwok-che at the Council meeting on 11 March 2009 was related to the support services for street sleepers. The Administration's reply to the question is in the **Appendix**.

Relevant papers

16. Members are invited to access the Legislative Council's website at <http://www.legco.gov.hk> to view the Administration's papers for the meetings of

the Panel on Welfare Services on 9 April 2001, 10 June 2002 and 8 March 2004, and the relevant minutes of the meetings.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
7 April 2009

Legislative Council Question No. 20
(Written Reply)

Asked by: **Hon CHEUNG Kwok-che** Date of Sitting: **11 March 2009**

Replied by: **Secretary for Labour
and Welfare**

Question:

Some local organizations have repeatedly relayed to me that the Government has underestimated the number of street sleepers in Hong Kong and the situation of insufficient residential places for them. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (a) how the authorities will improve the existing information system for collecting statistics on street sleepers in Hong Kong;
- (b) of the average number of registered street sleepers each month from February 2008 to January this year, and whether this number had risen as compared to that of the preceding 12 months;
- (c) whether it knows the specified time restriction on stay of the residential places currently provided to street sleepers by various non-government organizations (including the three street sleepers' shelters operated by Street Sleepers' Shelter Society Trustees Incorporated), and whether it has looked into the situation of street sleepers staying beyond the specified time restriction on stay; if it has, of the details;
- (d) of the time normally taken by the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") to vet and approve street sleepers' applications for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance;
- (e) whether there are street sleepers receiving assistance from charitable/trust funds administered by SWD (including Li Po Chun Charitable Trust Fund, Tang Shiu Kin & Ho Tim Charitable Fund, Kwan Fong Trust Fund for the Needy and Brewin Trust Fund); if so, of the details; and
- (f) of the operations, in terms of funding, materials and the residential services provided, of the three Integrated Services Teams for Street Sleepers subvented by SWD last year?

Reply:

President,

- (a) The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has set up a Street Sleepers Registry (SSR) to capture street sleepers' data. To ensure that the record is accurate, both SWD and services units of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialised in serving street sleepers (including the three integrated services teams for street sleepers (ISTs) and the Society for Community Organisation) have to register newly confirmed street sleeper cases with the SSR on a monthly basis; and de-register the case when they confirm that the street sleeper has given up street sleeping.
- (b) The average number of registered street sleepers per month for the period from February 2008 to January 2009 was 358, an increase of 23 over the average monthly figure in the preceding 12 months (335).
- (c) At present, there are seven street sleeper shelters/temporary shelters operated by NGOs (including the Street Sleepers' Shelter Society Trustee Incorporated) on a self-financing basis. The period of stay normally should not exceed six weeks. Since the shelters are operated on a self-financing basis, SWD does not have information on street sleepers who continue to occupy shelter places beyond the time limit.

As regards the five urban hostels and the temporary shelter operated by NGOs subvented by SWD, the period of stay normally should not exceed six months. SWD is not aware of any street sleepers occupying these shelter places beyond the time limit.
- (d) Regardless of whether an applicant is a street sleeper, upon receipt of an application for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance, SWD will contact the applicant for an interview to verify the applicant's circumstances and information provided by the applicant. Under normal circumstances, and if the applicant can produce all the necessary information, the application process can be completed within four weeks.
- (e) If other resources are not available, SWD will, having regard to individual circumstances, provide temporary cash grants to individuals and families (including street sleepers) to help them

tide over financial difficulties arising from emergencies. Funding for these cash grants comes from the allocations that SWD receive from the four charitable trust funds mentioned in the question. SWD does not keep statistics on the number of street sleepers among the beneficiaries.

- (f) In April 2004, SWD set up three ISTs for operation by St. James' Settlement, Salvation Army and Christian Concern for Homeless Association to provide street sleepers throughout the territory with one-stop integrated services including day and late-night outreaching visits, emergency placement and/or short-term hostel placement, counseling service, employment assistance, personal care (e.g. bathing, hair-cutting and meal service), emergency relief fund, arrangement of long-term accommodation and service referrals, etc.

The operating funds of the three ISTs come from SWD's recurrent subvention which amounts to \$8.73 million in 2008-09 (revised estimates). The subvention includes an emergency fund of \$50,000 for each IST which is to meet the urgent financial needs of street sleepers. If necessary, SWD will consider increasing the provision for the emergency funds.

The three ISTs may use SWD's subvention to purchase materials for providing tangible assistance, such as basic necessities, dry rations and hot meal, etc., to street sleepers according to their individual needs.

At present, the emergency shelter and short-term hostels operated by the three ISTs altogether provide 90 places of short-term accommodation and counseling services for street sleepers and other needy persons. Admission is by referral of SWD or NGOs only. For the period from April to December 2008, the average utilisation rate of these shelter / hostels was 81%.