

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

Support Services for Street Sleepers

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the existing support services for street sleepers.

Background

2. The Administration briefed Members on the services provided for street sleepers at the meeting of the Panel on Welfare Services held on 16 April 2009 vide LC Paper No. CB(2)1231/08-09(05). The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been monitoring the number and service demand of street sleepers through the computerised Street Sleepers Registry (SSR), which captures the personal data of street sleepers' personal data and records the services they received. Both SWD and the service units of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialised in serving street sleepers have to register newly confirmed street sleeper cases with SSR on a monthly basis and de-register cases when it is confirmed that the street sleepers have given up street sleeping. At the end of March 2011, the number of registered street sleepers was 414.

Support Services for Street Sleepers

Integrated Services Team for Street Sleepers (IST)

3. Since April 2004, SWD has been providing subvention to three NGOs, namely the Salvation Army, St James' Settlement and the Christian Concern for the Homeless Association, to each operate an IST which provides a package of tailor-made and one-stop services for street sleepers including day and late-night outreaching visits, emergency shelter and short-term hostel placement, counselling, employment guidance, personal care (e.g. bathing, hair-cutting and meal service), emergency relief fund, arrangement of long-term accommodation, aftercare service and service referrals, etc.. The three ISTs also collaborate with other NGOs such as the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug

Abusers and the Society for Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention, Hong Kong (SRACP) to ensure that specialised services are effectively provided to street sleepers with special needs, e.g. drug addicts and ex-offenders. The wide range of support services provided by the ISTs aims to address the emergency needs of street sleepers and enhance their work motivation and skills so as to help them give up street sleeping and become self-reliant as far as possible.

Care and Support Networking Team (CSNT)

4. Besides the aforementioned support services, SWD also subvents the Society for Community Organisation to run the CSNT. Through the provision of outreaching support, casework and group work services, the CSNT aims at helping street sleepers and other vulnerable groups reintegrate into the community, thereby contributing to the Home Affairs Bureau's policy objective on community development.

Urban Hostels and Emergency Shelters

5. To address the accommodation needs of street sleepers and other needy persons, SWD subvents NGOs to operate five urban hostels and two emergency shelters, providing a total of 202 places of short-term accommodation and counselling services. The average utilisation rate of these hostels and shelters in 2010-11 was around 80%. Apart from these government-subvented hostels and shelters, there are eight street sleeper or temporary shelters, operated by NGOs on a self-financing basis, which provide a total of 436 places of overnight or temporary accommodation for street sleepers and other needy persons.

6. Individuals or families who have genuine and pressing housing needs but are unable to solve the problems themselves may approach the integrated family service centres (IFSCs) / integrated services centres (ISCs) over the territory for welfare assistance. Social workers of these centres will, based on the resources available and the specific circumstances of each individual case, provide the persons concerned with the appropriate assistance, including the provision of short-term financial assistance to cover rental and removal expenses and referring cases eligible for compassionate rehousing to the Housing Department for consideration of allocating public rental housing units, etc..

7. Since the commencement of service in April 2004 and up to March 2011, the three ISTs helped a total of 1 012 street sleepers give up street sleeping and move into different types of accommodation, including private tenement, temporary shelters, urban hostels and public housing.

Financial Assistance

Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme (CSSA)

8. Street sleepers in financial hardship can apply for CSSA to meet their basic needs.

9. Rent allowance is payable to eligible CSSA recipients for meeting accommodation expenses. The amount of the allowance is the actual rent paid, or the maximum level determined by the number of members in the household eligible for CSSA, whichever is less. The maximum rates of the rent allowance (MRA) are adjusted annually in accordance with the movement of the Consumer Price Index (A) rent index for private housing (the rent index). The Legislative Council endorsed the rent index as the objective basis for adjusting the MRA in 1998.

Other Emergency and Temporary Financial Assistance

10. Apart from CSSA, an allocation of \$70,000 is included in the annual subvention for each of the three ISTs as emergency funds for eligible users to cover various expenses, such as short term payment of rent and living costs, rental deposit and other removal expenses, etc.. If other resources are unavailable, social workers of SWD or NGO service units will, having regard to individual circumstances, provide temporary cash grants to individuals and families (including street sleepers) through applying for charitable trust funds (including Li Po Chun Charitable Trust Fund, Tang Shiu Kin & Ho Tim Charitable Fund, Kwan Fong Trust Fund for the Needy and Brewin Trust) to help them tide over financial difficulties arising from emergencies. In addition, SRACP provides a maximum of two months' rental assistance for non-CSSA newly-discharged rehabilitated offenders to help them meet their imminent accommodation need.

Mental Health Services

11. Apart from the aforementioned support services provided by SWD for street sleepers, needy street sleepers can also use the various medical and mental health services provided by the Administration.

Psychiatric Services Provided by the Hospital Authority (HA)

12. HA has all along been providing citizens, including street sleepers, with various medical and rehabilitation services. On mental health services,

HA strives to ensure that a comprehensive range of services, including prevention, early identification, medical treatment and rehabilitation services, are accessible by needy persons on a continuous basis. In this connection, HA adopts a multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral team approach in catering for the needs of persons with mental health problems in a holistic manner.

13. At present, HA provides various mental health services to patients in need, including inpatient, outpatient, day care and community outreach services. Street sleepers with suspected mental illness may seek assistance from the social worker or NGOs who are following their cases. HA will provide appropriate assessment and treatment services based on the needs of the patient. Some street sleepers with mental illness may refuse to receive assessment services at the psychiatric outpatient clinics of HA. In such cases, the healthcare staff and social workers may arrange for the patient to receive services at a safe place (e.g. a community centre operated by NGOs) agreeable by parties concerned, provided that the safety of the patient, social worker and healthcare staff could be safeguarded. If a patient refuses treatment and his condition warrants his detention in a mental hospital for observation or treatment, and such detention is in the interests of his own health or safety or for the protection of other persons, his doctor may apply to the Court for an order for the detention of the patient in a mental hospital for observation and treatment under section 31 of the Mental Health Ordinance (Cap. 136).

The Integrated Community Centres for Mental Wellness (ICCMWs)

14. To enhance the provision of community mental health support services, SWD has set up ICCMWs across the territory since October 2010 to provide one-stop district-based community support services ranging from prevention to crisis management to discharged mental patients, persons with suspected mental health problem, their families/carers and residents living in the community. In order to strengthen the collaboration of ICCMWs with other welfare service units and ensure its effective delivery of services, SWD has worked with relevant stakeholders to issue the referral procedure and collaboration guidelines. SWD, together with the stakeholders concerned, will continue to keep in view ICCMWs' mode of operation.

Way Forward

15. SWD will, in collaboration with the ISTs and other parties concerned, continue to closely monitor the demand for and operation of street sleeper services and consider introducing further measures if necessary.

Advice Sought

16. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

**Social Welfare Department
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