

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

Sign Language Interpretation Service and Promotion of Sign Language

Purpose

This paper provides information on sign language training and interpretation services, and reports the work progress in promoting sign language.

Background

2. It is the Government's established policy objective to create a barrier-free environment and promote barrier-free communication, thereby facilitating full integration of persons with disabilities into the community. Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the Convention) also stipulates that appropriate measures should be taken to facilitate persons with disabilities to communicate with others without barriers, including facilitating persons with hearing impairment to communicate in sign language or other forms of communication. To achieve the above policy objective and to realise the spirit of the Convention, the Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) will continue to urge the relevant policy bureaux and departments to review the policies and measures under their purview and to take suitable follow-up action with a view to promoting barrier-free communication, including the use of sign language. In this regard, LWB and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) have taken forward various measures on sign language training and interpretation services and promotion of sign language. Details of these measures are set out below.

Sign Language Training and Interpretation Services

3. To promote the use of sign language and enhance social inclusion, sign language training courses are organised by some Social and Recreational Centres for the Disabled and two Multi-service Centres for the Hearing Impaired Persons subvented by SWD with a view to enhancing the communication of persons with hearing impairment with others. These centres include Y's Men's Centre for the Deaf of Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf Jockey Club Hong Kong Centre, the Multi-service Centres of the

Hong Kong Society for the Deaf at Tseung Kwan O and Tuen Mun, and the Cheung Ching Lutheran Centre for the Disabled of the Hong Kong Lutheran Social Service. Over 200 sign language training courses were offered by these centres in the past three years from 2009-10 to 2011-12.

4. Apart from sign language training courses, these centres also provide sign language interpretation services to assist persons with hearing impairment in communicating with the hearing community and reduce the communication barriers. The sign language interpretation services provided include interpretation service for government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and persons with hearing impairment in relation to job interviews, court hearings, wedding ceremonies, medical consultations, etc. For medical consultations, a total of 2 234 sessions of sign language interpretation services were provided by these centres in the past three years from 2009-10 to 2011-12.

5. In addition, NGOs and self-help groups serving persons with hearing impairment also produce sign language training manuals and self-learning package, including assistive tools for learning sign language via computer or smart phone applications. They also organise public education activities to enhance public understanding of sign language.

Working Group on Promoting Sign Language under the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee

6. To further promote the use of sign language and social inclusion, the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee (RAC) formed a Working Group on Promoting Sign Language (the Working Group) in 2010 to advise the Government on ways to promote sign language. The Working Group comprises members of the RAC, persons with hearing impairment, sign language interpreters and representatives from NGOs of the rehabilitation sector and the education sector. Representatives of relevant government bureaux and departments also attend meetings for discussion as and when required.

7. In order to extensively collect the views of stakeholders, the Working Group held a public consultation session on the promotion of sign language on 13 September 2010 to brief over 100 persons with hearing impairment from 16 local deaf associations, agency representatives and other stakeholders on the aims and objectives of the Working Group, and seek their views on the promotion of sign language. In addition, the Working Group held a sharing session on 17 May 2011, in which Professor Marc Marschark, an internationally renowned scholar, and Mr. Markku Jokinen, President of the World Federation of the Deaf, were invited to share international experience in the promotion of sign language.

8. Having regard to the views collected and subsequent discussions with the relevant government departments and organisations, the Working Group has formulated the strategic direction in the promotion of sign language and worked out a programme plan covering four major areas, namely sign language training, daily life application, community promotion and education. Besides, on 26 June this year, the Working Group organised another sharing session to brief persons with hearing impairment and related organisations on the progress of the programme plan and to exchange views with the participants on the way forward in the promotion of sign language.

Work Progress

9. Regarding community promotion, promotion of sign language has been included as one of the main themes under LWB's annual public education programmes on rehabilitation. As subsidised by LWB, various inclusive activities have been organised by NGOs, public bodies and the 18 District Councils to promote basic sign language and deaf culture. In 2011-12, nine such projects incurring a total amount of over \$600,000 were funded by LWB. The funded activities were multifarious. These included production of a short film and DVD in sign language version to promote the Convention, a series of diversified sign language promotion activities (e.g. sign language songs contests, school seminars, carnivals, etc.), programmes to promote employment of persons with hearing impairment (e.g. training of sign language tutors, workshops on sign language and deaf culture, job referral services, etc.), and the Third Hong Kong Deaf Festival, etc. The 2011 International Day of Disabled Persons, a major public education programme, also adopted barrier-free communication (including promotion of the use of sign language) as its theme.

10. In tandem, the Radio Television of Hong Kong (RTHK), in response to the Working Group's suggestion, has assisted to produce a series of 5-minuters on Hong Kong sign language, in which sign language experts with hearing impairment and sign language interpreters have participated as artists. The ten-episode programme, entitled "Sign Language Capriccios" (手語隨想曲), had been broadcast on four TV channels at different time slots on every Sundays during the period from 4 December 2011 to 5 February 2012. Concurrently, this programme had also been uploaded to the RTHK and social networking websites, so as to attract audience from all walks of life, particularly the younger generation. A new series of "Sign Language Capriccios" programme is expected to be launched in 2013 to continue promoting to the public the use of basic sign language in daily life.

11. In view of the increasing popularity of smart phones, LWB has also allocated funds to the Hong Kong Sign Language Association for developing a barrier-free sign language communication self-learning platform (「無障礙手語

溝通自學平台」)^{Note}， which includes smart phone application, online version and sign language learning cards. It had been released for public use in end-August 2011. Given its satisfactory results, this project has been selected by the Sub-committee on Public Education on Rehabilitation as one of the outstanding projects in 2011-12 and has been uploaded onto LWB's website for public information.

12. In light of the Working Group's suggestion, the Civil Service Training and Development Institute has been organising sign language training courses jointly with the rehabilitation sector since July 2011 for frontline staff of various government bureaux/departments and public bodies to provide them with the basic knowledge of deaf culture and sign language, and the keys to effective communication with persons with hearing impairment. Up to now, a total of 300 public officers have participated in these courses.

13. The Working Group is also exploring jointly with the Hospital Authority (HA) on the feasibility of providing video relay service for sign language interpretation for patients with hearing impairment in hospitals. HA proactively offers assistance in the Working Group's trial runs to facilitate the implementation of the service. Furthermore, to further enhance access to public healthcare services by patients with hearing impairment, HA is gauging the market's interest in providing sign language interpretation services with a view to assessing the feasibility of drawing up a sign language interpretation service contract.

The Way Forward

14. The Working Group will continue to examine other related issues, such as sign language tutor training, training and accreditation of sign language interpreters, quality of sign language interpretation service, use of sign language in deaf schools, etc., and will continue to collaborate with HA for the study and implementation of out-patient video relay service for sign language interpretation. It will also continue to work with the rehabilitation sector, relevant government departments, public bodies and various sectors of the community to promote the use of sign language with a view to facilitating barrier-free communication and access to services by persons with hearing impairment, and fostering mutual understanding between persons with hearing impairment and others, thereby achieving social inclusion.

^{Note} The link to the website is: <http://www.hksla.org.hk/n/node/52>

Advice Sought

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

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