

Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities
Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities

Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission

Purpose of the Paper

This paper sets out to provide the Equal Opportunities Commission's (EOC's) views to the Subcommittee on Rights of Ethnic Minorities regarding the Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities.

Role of the EOC

2. Tasked with implementing the anti-discrimination legislation in Hong Kong, the EOC has been working toward the elimination of discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status, pregnancy, disability, family status and race. With the vision to create a pluralistic and inclusive society free of discrimination where there is no barrier to equal opportunities, the EOC set up the Ethnic Minorities Unit (the Unit) in 2015 to enhance its work on promoting racial integration and advancing equal educational and employment opportunities as well as fair access to goods, services and facilities for ethnic minorities (EMs).

3. Currently, six Support Service Centres and two Sub-Centres (Support Service Centres) for EMs are funded by the Home Affairs Department and operated by NGOs to (i) facilitate the integration of ethnic minorities into the community and (ii) enhance their access to public services. Both are major areas of concern for the EOC in promoting racial equality and inclusion for EMs. For example, the EOC met five Government Bureaux/Departments last year to

encourage them to reduce the language barrier for EM service users by proactively offering interpretation service in EM languages provided by the HK Christian Service CHEER Centre, one of the Support Service Centres. Besides, the Unit has also been working with different Support Service Centres to conduct training workshops on a regular basis for a diversity of EM groups on the anti-discrimination laws and cultural sensitivity towards the mainstream community. From user feedback, it is clear that the Support Service Centres serve well as the first stop for many EMs while seeking information or advice on public services, and a valuable link between the Government and the EM population. However, stakeholder groups have also raised concerns on the poor location of certain Support Service Centres, resource constraints faced by most operators and the misconception that they are responsible for all EM service needs.

EOC Recommendations

Location and Space

4. Some Support Service Centres are hard to locate for EMs. A few centres are cramped in upstairs office units of commercial buildings and some are situated far from the EM community. This is mainly due to the fact that the current funding level fails to keep pace with increasing rents. As a result, the operators resort to run their services in remote and inconvenient locations. The Government is thus urged to help the NGO operators identify and secure premises accessible to EMs and spacious enough for organizing activities.

5. Although Support Service Centres are not restricted to serve only within the district they are located in, it is understandable that their primary targets and clientele have become the EM communities in the neighbourhood of their offices. Given this tendency, we feel there is a need to broaden the network of Support

Centres that are currently not served by any. For examples, there is no Support Service Centre in the East New Territories region and the nearest ones for the sizeable EM population in Kowloon City, Tokwawan and Wong Tai Sin can only be found in either Kwun Tong or Yaumatei. The Government is recommended to set up additional centres to fill the service gap in these districts as soon as possible.

Funding and Manpower Resource

6. As illustrated in the previous section, rents and rates take up a massive chunk of the funding received by most Support Service Centres, significantly jeopardising the resource available for manpower and programmes. Given that the Support Service Centres provide diverse services, feedback from the staff suggests that they are spread too thin – both manpower and funding-wise.

7. For instance, as the EOC had previously mentioned in its submission dated 13 February 2017, the HK Christian Service CHEER Centre, which also provides community interpretation services, is constrained by a lack of adequate resources. Failing to offer career progression and reasonably attractive remuneration leads to high attrition rates as well as a shortage of interpreters in certain high-demand languages. As a result, they are unable to fully meet the demand for their interpretation services, which are used by Government Departments and individuals. The Government is recommended to look at the resource and funding needs of the Support Service Centres in light of the breadth of services they provide.

Role of Support Service Centre

8. The principle roles of the Support Service Centres are to facilitate EMs to use mainstream services and adapt to the local society. They should not and

cannot replace the Government and public service providers in delivering their respective professional services. However, in our experience of working with different Government Departments and public bodies, it is not uncommon that the Support Service Centres are identified as the responsible bodies whenever EM issues have arisen, such as enquiries on public housing applications, family welfare allowance procedures etc., even though the services required were beyond their scope, whilst the subject offices were passive in providing the necessary assistance. The Government should state clearly to all Bureaux/Departments that they have the first and absolute responsibility to address the needs of EMs, just as any Hong Kong citizen, in their service areas, and should require all Bureaux/Departments to provide training to their staff so as to equip them with the proper mindset and necessary skills to serve EMs.

Conclusion

9. As the EM community grows and evolves just as the Hong Kong society around them, it is essential that the mandate, strategic goals, services, funding limits and criteria of the Support Service Centres are reviewed from time to time in order to ensure maximum results and effective use of resources. Strategic priority areas and the profile of EMs in the community may have changed since the previous years, making it imperative to modify the services accordingly. A procedure involving careful analysis through feedback and data to develop goals and allocate resources must be put in place. Equally, a well-thought-out monitoring mechanism is essential.

Equal Opportunities Commission

April 2017