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## ***Children* forced to remain in hospitals**

About 60 youngsters cannot be discharged as they do not have a safe home to go to; one has remained in hospital for as long as six months

Around 60 *children*, who were considered fit to be discharged, have been stranded in public hospitals - with one staying for as long as six months - as they do not have a safe home to go back to.

Child welfare concern groups warned that this could affect their emotional and physical health and education, and called on the government to increase the "catastrophically insufficient" number of places in shelters for vulnerable *children* and provide better support for their troubled families to facilitate reunion.

The thorny issue will be discussed in the Legislative Council today.

The Social Welfare Department provides residential services for those under the age of 21 who cannot be adequately cared for by their families because of issues such as domestic violence, having parents with drug problems and crises arising from illness and death. There were around 3,700 places available in June, according to official figures.

But concern groups said these facilities were always full, resulting in some youngsters being stranded in hospitals even though they were fit to be discharged.

The Hospital Authority estimates around 60 such *children* remain in hospitals.

Lawmaker Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, citing figures provided by the authority, said these *children* had been staying for an average of 42 days, with the longest around six months.

Social workers noted that they had no choice but to leave these *children* in hospitals as there were no places available in shelters and sending them home was too risky.

Wanda Hau Yuet-king, assistant director of Against Child Abuse, said the current situation was not ideal as there were a lot of germs in hospitals and schooling was affected as no one was available to take the *children* to school.

"While there are schools in hospitals, the learning of these *children* would be affected as they are lacking socialisation with their usual teachers and classmates," she said.

"[We] should not deprive these *children* of a good, healthy development because of their family



problems," said Susan So Suk-yin, director of the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of *Children*.

According to official statistics, the average waiting time for residential child care services, excluding emergency services, is currently about three months.

Child welfare groups urged the government to increase the number of places in homes and provide more support for troubled families.

A spokeswoman for the Social Welfare Department said it would continue to review residential child care services and fight for resources for additional places.

She noted that around 130 additional places would be available in the coming two years.

#### SOCIAL WELFARE

## CHILDREN FORCED TO REMAIN IN HOSPITALS

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Fernando Cheung (front centre) with child welfare representatives.

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