

For discussion on
17 July 2018

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PANEL ON PUBLIC SERVICE

Managing Work-Related Stress in the Civil Service

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the assistance provided to civil servants for managing stress at work.

Background

2. In face of the rising expectations and changing needs of the community, the civil service must continue to enhance its services and efficiency to keep up with the times. In adapting to and coping with changes, civil servants may have to face a certain level of stress arising from work at times, and some officers have to seek assistance in handling stress.

3. The Government adopts a two-pronged approach to help civil servants cope with stress at work. In addition to providing professional counselling services to staff in need, the Government takes preventive action by organising training and educational activities to help staff develop the necessary skills for managing stress and to promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle. A brief account of these measures is given below.

Counselling Services

4. The Civil Service Bureau (CSB) has in place a hotline counselling service scheme (the Scheme), which offers professional counselling services to help staff cope with stress arising from work and personal problems. CSB engages the Christian Family Service Centre to provide counselling services to the staff of some 60 bureaux and departments (covering all bureaux and departments within the Government except those mentioned in paragraph 6 below, which have their own dedicated departmental counselling services). The services are available to all the 90 000 or so staff (including civil servants and non-civil service contract staff) of the bureaux and departments concerned. The services provided under the Scheme include –

- (a) telephone counselling service from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., Monday to Friday, and from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, except public holidays. Telephone calls made outside the service hours are answered by a paging service and counsellors will return call as soon as possible;
- (b) face-to-face counselling by experienced counsellors or clinical psychologists for staff who require the service;
- (c) referral to appropriate bodies if the service required is not covered by the Scheme. These bodies include public and private institutions providing psychiatric treatment, consultation and other welfare services; and
- (d) workshops to provide practical tips to staff for coping with stress from work and developing a positive attitude towards life.

5. In 2017, about 670 telephone calls from some 320 staff were received under the Scheme. Some 660 telephone counselling sessions and 360 face-to-face counselling interviews and about 60 clinical psychology appointments were arranged for the staff. Among those cases, about 50% involved work-related problems such as relationship with supervisors and colleagues, workload, job security and work changes. The remaining cases were related to personal problems such as health, family or financial issues. According to feedback from the users, the services were effective in helping them cope with stress. From 2015 to the first quarter of 2018, about 160 workshops were organised to provide practical tips for coping with work-related stress to around 2 800 participants.

6. Other than the Scheme, 11 departments provide dedicated counselling services to their 100 000 or so staff. Among these departments, the counselling teams of the Correctional Services Department, the Fire Services Department (FSD), the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF), the Immigration Department and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) provide their respective staff with counselling services such as making arrangements for them to meet with counsellors or clinical psychologists, while the Customs and Excise Department, the Department of Health (DH), the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (EMSD), the Hongkong Post, the Housing Department (HD) and the Transport Department have engaged professional counselling agencies to provide hotline counselling services to their staff.

7. Besides, the Families Clinics under DH have been providing clinical psychology services to civil service eligible persons¹ (CSEPs) since March 2016. These services include individual professional counselling and health talks, which aim to enhance the mental health education work in the Families Clinics and hence help CSEPs manage and ease stress at work and in life with a positive attitude. The services are available to any CSEPs in need and referred by doctors of the families clinics. DH has increased the manpower for clinical psychology services in 2017-18, and there are now three clinical psychologists providing such services at the Families Clinics. DH expects that each clinical psychologist will be able to handle about 1 500 attendances annually when provision of the services is stabilised. At the current service demand level, the shortest waiting time for first appointment is about four weeks in general. As regards the date of follow-up consultation, it depends on the clinical condition of the patient. For more serious cases which warrant special attention, an earlier follow-up appointment will be scheduled.

8. Civil servants may, instead of taking sick leave, submit an application for time-off from duty to their departments if they have to receive counselling services provided by clinical psychologists as mentioned above during office hours.

Training and Educational Programmes

9. As a preventive measure, we encourage supervisors to get to understand more about the problems faced by their subordinates in their daily work, and provide timely assistance to them. At the same time, we will organise different training programmes and educational activities to equip staff with the necessary skills for managing stress and to promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle. These programmes and activities aim to –

- (a) help participants better understand the causes and consequences of stress, and enhance their capability to cope with stress positively;
- (b) introduce to participants effective means and simple skills for coping with stress and achieving a more balanced and healthy lifestyle; and
- (c) introduce to participants skills that can be applied in the work environment to support colleagues in their teams.

Examples of these programmes and activities are outlined below.

¹ Civil service eligible persons include serving civil servants, pensioners and their eligible dependants.

Enhancing Capability in Stress Management

10. The Civil Service Training and Development Institute (CSTDI) organises different seminars and workshops to enhance civil servants' resilience to stress and adversity as well as their capability in overcoming challenges at work. These include programmes to strengthen staff's understanding of emotional, psychological and physical wellness as well as programmes on customer service skills, complaint resolution and handling of aggression and violence. From 2015 to the first quarter of 2018, about 12 400 officers participated in these training programmes. In addition, CSTDI provides civil servants with web resources on work-life balance and positive lifestyle at its e-learning portal.

11. Different departments also organise training programmes for their staff having regard to their specific operational needs. For example, FSD organises various training programmes on stress management and psychological skills for officers at different levels, such as "Handling Adversity: Inspiration and Experience", "Positive Interpersonal Interaction in Workplace" and "Thematic Seminar on Handling Workplace Conflicts". HD likewise organises diversified training and educational activities to strengthen its staff's resilience to stress and help them develop a positive attitude towards life, such as "Stress Management Seminar" and "More Than Work Workshop".

Promotion of Healthy Lifestyle

12. Departments organise educational and recreational activities to promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle. For instance, SWD organises the "Mindfulness Workshop" and "Seminar on Positive Aging" to strengthen the physical, mental and emotional health of its staff. EMSD conducts the "Personality Dimension Workshop" to help participants understand more about themselves through personality analysis and hence develop a positive attitude towards life and enhance their communication skills. HKPF arranges a wide range of activities to promote physical and mental wellness, work-family balance and healthy lifestyle amongst its staff, including "Physical Fitness and Health Management Carnival", "Force Family Sports Day" and "Family Life Education Programme".

Promotion of healthy and safe workplace

13. In the context of promoting occupational safety and health in the civil service, CSB has promulgated guidelines on personal safety at work to help bureaux and departments compile departmental guidelines for dealing with situations that affect their staff's personal safety, taking into account their specific operational circumstances and requirements. In addition, CSB organises service-wide activities on a regular basis targeting all civil servants to promote a healthy work environment, including seminars to help staff develop the necessary skills for coping with stress at work. From 2015 to the first quarter of 2018, about 5 500 officers attended 29 such seminars.

Advice Sought

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

Civil Service Bureau
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