

Information Note

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL PANEL ON PUBLIC SERVICE

Meal Break Arrangements for the Ambulanceman Grade of the Fire Services Department

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the latest situation of the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen of the Fire Services Department (FSD).

Background

2. The Government provided information to the Panel in August 2017 on the shift patterns of and meal break arrangements for ambulancemen of the FSD as follows.

3. Different disciplined services have different conditioned hours of work, shift arrangements and meal break arrangements having regard to their service demands and operational needs. The requirement to perform shift duties on a regular basis has been taken into consideration by the Standing Committee on Disciplined Services Salaries and Conditions of Service and the Government when determining the pay scales of the disciplined services grades.

4. The conditioned hours of work of the Ambulanceman grade is 48 hours gross per week with meal breaks included. Generally speaking, ambulancemen work 12 hours per shift on a cycle of “day shift, day shift, night shift, day off, day off”. The duty period of day shift is normally from 7:30 am to 7:30 pm or from 8:30 am to 8:30 pm; while that of night shift is from 7:30 pm to 7:30 am of the following day, or from 8:30 pm to 8:30 am of the following day. Some other ambulancemen may work on 9.5-hour day shifts or 24-hour shifts, depending on the operational needs of the respective units.

5. Subject to operational needs, ambulancemen may, similar to other staff of the disciplined services, be called out during their normal meal breaks to attend to emergency duties. It is incumbent upon the FSD to strike a balance between providing emergency ambulance services and ensuring the provision of reasonable meal breaks for ambulancemen. The FSD has made flexible meal break arrangements in light of actual operational needs on the premise that the service level is not affected.

6. For day-shift ambulancemen, the FSD has extended the “designated lunch break period” from 2 hours to 2 hours and 30 minutes with effect from 1 July 2014:

- (i) the “designated lunch break period” for ambulancemen on duty starting from 7:30 am is 11:00 am to 1:30 pm; and
- (ii) the “designated lunch break period” for ambulancemen on duty starting from 8:30 am is 11:30 am to 2:00 pm.

Apart from the lunch break, day-shift ambulancemen are given a 15-minute break each in the morning and the afternoon while on standby.

7. Night-shift ambulancemen usually have had their meals before they report duty, and they also have a “designated night-shift meal break period”. With effect from 1 November 2014, the period, originally spanning from 12:00 mid-night to 3:00 am, has been extended to 12:00 mid-night to 6:00 am. Apart from the meal break within the “designated night-shift meal break period”, there is a 15-minute break in the morning for night-shift ambulancemen while on standby.

8. During the “designated lunch break period” and “designated night-shift meal break period”, save for responding to emergency calls, ambulancemen are only required to stand by at their depots and may take their meal any time without having to perform other duties. During the period, the Depot Commander would, having regard to the circumstances, accord lower dispatch priority to certain ambulances to facilitate meal-taking of ambulancemen. However, if no other ambulances are available for dispatch, some ambulancemen may have to attend to emergency calls and have their meals interrupted.

9. If day-shift ambulancemen are unable to take a continuous 30-minute meal break due to attending to emergency calls during the “designated lunch break period”, or in the case of night-shift ambulancemen between 12:00 mid-night and 2:00 am, they are entitled to a 30-minute “compensatory meal break” after returning to their units, during which they will normally be free from attending to emergency calls.

Further Enhancement Measures on Meal Break Arrangements for Ambulancemen

10. Over the years, the FSD has been paying close attention to the meal break arrangements for frontline ambulancemen and, on the premise that the provision of emergency ambulance services remains unaffected, implemented various enhancement measures and increased resources for ambulance services. The demand for ambulance services recorded an increase of close to 14.4% from 2010 to 2017, while the establishment of the Ambulanceman grade expanded from 2 448 to 2 822 over the same period, showing an addition of 374 Ambulanceman grade staff which represents an increase of around 15.3%. In 2018-19 financial year, the FSD will further strengthen its manpower, including the addition of 95 posts in the Ambulanceman grade.

Day-shift Ambulancemen

11. Apart from extending the “designated lunch break period” for day-shift ambulancemen as mentioned in paragraph 6 above and increasing manpower, the FSD has introduced measures in the past few years to improve the lunch break arrangements for day-shift ambulancemen, including:

- (a) establishing the Special Support Unit (SSU) in April 2014, with two teams stationing in the Kowloon West and New Territories South Divisions respectively. In addition to meeting the demand for ambulance services arising from festive occasions and major incidents, the SSU has also relieved the workload of other ambulance units during peak periods. By standing by for calls during periods with greater manpower demand, the SSU helps reduce the chance of other ambulancemen having to attend to calls during the “designated lunch break period”. In view of the effectiveness of the SSU, the FSD established the third and the fourth teams of the SSU in August 2016 and August 2017, stationing in the Hong Kong Island and the New Territories North

Divisions respectively. This has increased the number of staff of the SSU from 24 in 2014 to 48 at present;

- (b) deploying a total of eight additional ambulances on 9.5-hour shifts since May 2016 to cope with the greater demand for emergency ambulance services during daytime and share the workload during the lunch break period; and
- (c) since November 2017 and on a trial basis, according lower dispatch priority for ambulancemen of all units¹ who are unable to return to their units to have meals after 2:00 pm so as to facilitate their early return to their units for a compensatory meal break. In view of the satisfactory result of the trial, the FSD has turned this measure into a standing arrangement since August 2018.

Night-shift Ambulancemen

12. With effect from November 2014, the FSD has extended the “designated night-shift meal break period” for night-shift ambulancemen (see paragraph 7 above). The FSD has also extended the period for compensatory meal breaks during night shifts, from 3:00 am to 4:30 am to 2:00 am to 4:30 am. Moreover, the FSD has accepted the staff union’s suggestion to further extend the period for compensatory meal breaks during night shifts to four hours (from 2:00 am to 6:00 am) on a trial basis starting from April 2017. This measure has become a standing arrangement since November 2017.

13. Besides, the FSD has launched a trial since June 2018 with a view to enhancing the meal break arrangements for night-shift ambulancemen. Instead of assigning a fixed number of compensatory meal break quotas for each operational Ambulance Division, the FSD now allocates the quotas for all five operational Divisions over the territory flexibly to ambulances in different Divisions subject to actual demand and circumstances. The trial will last for six months. The arrangement will better utilise resources by enabling more ambulancemen of the busier Divisions to take compensatory meal break as early as possible. If the trial results are satisfactory, the FSD will consider implementing the arrangement as a standing measure.

¹ Ambulancemen deployed at Wong Tai Sin Ambulance Depot and Sheung Wan Fire Station are excluded. Since these two units are relatively busy, the FSD has earlier on implemented the relevant arrangement of according lower dispatch priority for ambulancemen of these two units starting from 1 pm.

Latest Meal-taking Situation of Ambulancemen

14. The FSD has been using a statistical computer programme since July 2014 to collect detailed figures on the actual duration of meal breaks taken by the ambulancemen of each ambulance within the “designated lunch break period” as well as the 1.5-hour period thereafter for analysis purpose. From January to June 2018, 98.07% of ambulancemen had a continuous lunch break of at least 30 minutes, which shows a continuous improvement as compared with 97.77% in 2017, 97.43% in 2016, 97.06% in 2015 and 96.79% in 2014 (July to December). Detailed figures are tabulated below:

Year	Percentage of cases in which a continuous lunch break of at least 30 minutes was taken within the “designated lunch break period” of 2 hours and 30 minutes				Percentage of cases in which a continuous lunch break of at least 30 minutes was taken within the “designated lunch break period” and the 1.5-hour period thereafter
	30 to 44 minutes	45 to 59 minutes	60 minutes or above	Total	
2014 (July to December)	33.34%	19.28%	37.19%	89.81%	96.79%
2015	32.59%	19.36%	39.17%	91.12%	97.06%
2016	33.35%	19.74%	38.94%	92.03%	97.43%
2017	34.59%	20.61%	37.81%	93.01%	97.77%
2018 (January to June)	36.13%	20.49%	35.82%	92.44%	98.07%

Summary

15. As illustrated by the data above, the lunch-taking situation of ambulancemen has improved continuously in the past few years. This reflects that the various enhancement measures implemented by the FSD are effective in maintaining highly efficient emergency ambulance service for the public and providing reasonable meal break arrangements for ambulancemen. The FSD will continue to listen to the views of frontline ambulancemen, as well as closely monitor the effectiveness of various measures and the meal break data so as to further improve the meal break

arrangements for ambulancemen.

For Information

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

**Civil Service Bureau
Security Bureau
Fire Services Department
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