

For discussion
on 17 May 2021

Legislative Council Panel on Public Service

Targeted Measures for Protection of Government Employees under the Epidemic

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the targeted measures implemented by the Government for protecting the health and safety of government employees under the epidemic.

BACKGROUND

2. With the joint efforts of all sectors of the community and the civil service, the fourth wave of the COVID-19 epidemic has been easing gradually. During this period, civil servants have all remained steadfast in carrying out their duties and maintained the provision of emergency services and essential public services despite the epidemic. On the other hand, through demonstrable collegiality and commitment, civil servants have ensured the smooth implementation of various initiatives, plans and operations under the anti-epidemic strategy. To safeguard the health and safety of government employees and the people being served, and to reduce the risk of the spread of the virus, the Government implemented different targeted measures in response to the development of the epidemic.

INFECTION CONTROL MEASURES

3. After the outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic in Hong Kong early last year, the Government raised the response level under the “Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance” to Emergency Response Level, and decisively implemented rigorous social distancing measures to reduce the risk of the virus spreading in the community. In fighting the epidemic and protecting the safety of employees, the Government also takes into account the needs for the functioning of society and has all along been maintaining emergency services and essential public services. At the same time, the Government has implemented a series of measures to safeguard the health of frontline staff.

Provision and Enhancement of Protective Gear

4. To prevent infection at government buildings and offices, bureaux and departments (B/Ds) have enhanced the cleansing of communal facilities (such as lifts and escalators), conducted body temperature checks for persons entering such premises, provided alcohol-based hand-rub and sanitising mats, etc., and installed suitable partitions in the workplace having regard to actual work environment. B/Ds have also procured suitable epidemic prevention equipment specific to their operational needs and risks. For instance, the Fire Services Department deep-cleans the air conditioning system and vents of ambulances with special disinfectants, and frequently replaces the electrostatically charged filters and dust filters of air conditioners; multiple fire stations also had additional disinfection facilities installed such that staff can go through disinfection processes as soon as possible after duty.

5. As regards personal protective equipment (PPE), the sudden outbreak of the epidemic led to a spike in demand for PPE when the market was in short supply in early 2020. In view of the shortage of supply of masks and having considered expert advice, the Government issued internal guidelines to accord priority in the provision of masks to healthcare workers and frontline staff. The Government had to procure PPE and epidemic prevention equipment worldwide through multiple channels and means to meet the imminent needs within a short time span. The Government Logistics Department (GLD) has liaised with the suppliers from different countries and arranged for the procurement of PPE, including masks, for distribution to B/Ds within very short period of time. The overseas Hong Kong Economic and Trade Offices and Invest Hong Kong also leveraged their networks to assist in the procurement drive by referring overseas suppliers to GLD or by assisting in securing orders for PPE. In collaboration with the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department and the Architectural Services Department, the Correctional Services Department (CSD) had converted four existing workshops at the Lo Wu Correctional Institution, Tung Tau Correctional Institution and Stanley Prison into Filter Mask Workshops. Over 2 500 off-duty or retired CSD officers had been recruited as volunteers to participate in the production of masks. With the supply of PPE gradually stabilising, the Government has also provided staff with masks, gloves, alcohol-based hand rub and alcohol swabs, etc. All B/Ds, including healthcare workers and frontline staff, have been provided with adequate PPE during this period. Since then the supply of PPE has not become an issue of concern.

6. During the epidemic, some staff of outsourced services also remained on duty, such as workers of outsourced cleansing services of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department who continued to provide cleansing services for the public. To ensure the safety of these staff of outsourced services, it is

stipulated in the contracts signed between the Government and its service contractors that the contractors have the responsibility to ensure the safety and health of their staff at work, and therefore they need to provide their frontline staff with the necessary PPE. Apart from distributing additional masks every day, these include gloves, protective sleeves, aprons, non-slippery rubber boots, face shields or goggles, coveralls and cap, etc.

Adjustments to Mode of Operation and Service to Minimise Contact among Employees and Flow of People in Government Offices

7. The Government first implemented special work arrangements for government employees on 29 January 2020 in light of the epidemic situation. The measure helped to significantly reduce the flow of people in the community and minimise the risk of infection among the employees, it also served to encourage employers to allow their staff members to work from home to further reduce the social contact. During the implementation of the special work arrangements for government employees, B/Ds had kept the demand for public services under review and, having regard to the development of the epidemic, views from the public and experience gained under previous rounds of special work arrangements, made flexible adjustments such as adjusting opening hours of some offices, continued to provide limited services or resuming the provision of basic public services. Meanwhile, departments had also restricted the number of visitors at any one time by making use of measures such as scheduled appointments, drop boxes and quota system, etc. to minimise the risk of infection.

8. Government employees under the special work arrangements are not on vacation leave. They must continue to work from home. To support these staff, departments widely adopted information technology and provided appropriate facilities to staff working from home. Departments procured additional computers, other mobile devices/equipment and computer software, and enhanced the capacities of their communications, networks, and databases according to their operational and staff needs. As of end-February 2021, the number of staff authorised for using virtual private networks for working remotely increased to about 20 800; about 19 100 members of staff were provided with notebook computers for accessing departmental intranets and servers; and about 11 600 members of staff were authorised to access classified information outside their offices through equipment provided by the government and secure communications channels. Such equipment have security patches and anti-malware software installed which are regularly updated to guard against hacking or leakage of information. Relevant staff cannot store government classified data on their own computers and mobile devices.

9. In light of the gradual stabilisation of the epidemic situation and taking into account the needs for the functioning of society and the economy, government departments fully resumed normal public services from 18 February 2021 subject to the implementation of targeted measures to reduce social contact and the application of infection control measures. Apart from implementing targeted measures, B/Ds have also adopted flexible measures, having regard to their mode of operation, to reduce the number of staff working in an office at any one time as far as possible, such as introducing flexible working and lunch hours to reduce the number of staff using public transport during peak hours, and adjusting the frequency, duration and mode of meetings. Employees who are pregnant or with chronic illnesses may also be deployed to posts with reduced contact with others as far as practicable. The Government has all along been encouraging members of the public to use alternative means, such as the post, drop-in boxes or online channels to receive the services they need; they should wear surgical masks at all times when they are entering or are present in any government buildings or offices, and comply with the infection control measures implemented by relevant departments.

Strengthening Tracing Work

10. Swift and accurate contact tracing is pivotal in breaking the chain of transmission. To better assist the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) in epidemiological investigations, and to increase the vigilance and sense of self-protection of government employees and members of the public, the Government actively promotes the use of the “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile app. With full resumption of public services, the people flow at government buildings or offices has increased. From 1 March 2021 onwards, all government employees and members of the public have been required to use the “LeaveHomeSafe” app or register their names, contact numbers and the dates and times of their visits before entering any government buildings and offices for necessary contact tracing if a confirmed case is found.

11. The Government has been reminding all staff to seek prompt medical advice and inform their respective B/Ds if feeling unwell. Since mid-July 2020, the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) has requested B/Ds to report the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 involving government employees. As of end-April 2021, a total of 200 confirmed cases (regardless whether the officer concerned is suspected to be infected in the working environment) have been recorded, and 38 B/Ds are involved.

12. If a government employee sustains an injury (including contracting COVID-19 in the performance of duty) in the course of employment, the Government as the employer will provide the employee concerned free medical treatment and compensation following the relevant ordinances and terms of

employment. The department of the employee concerned will handle such cases following established procedures on handling injuries on duty. The CSB has issued guidelines to Head of Departments which stipulate that if a government employee is confirmed to have contracted COVID-19, the employee can apply for sick leave following the established practice; thorough cleansing and disinfection should be carried out in the workplace of the officers contracting COVID-19, as well as the communal facilities concerned; the department concerned should also maintain close liaison with the CHP of the DH to assist in contact tracing. We understand that some members of staff may be worried or concerned, those who are mindful of risk of infection may apply for leave through established procedures and the CSB has reminded B/Ds to be compassionate when handling such leave applications. Further, if a government employee is put under compulsory quarantine or medical surveillance at a specified location as ordered by DH, authorised absence not counting as leave may be granted by respective department on a case-by-case basis.

TESTING STRATEGY

13. Extensive and large-scale testing is a key component of the Government's overall anti-epidemic strategy, specified persons of high risk are required to undergo compulsory testing on a mandatory basis; targeted groups are arranged to undergo testing on an obligatory basis; and we also encourage members of the public to undergo testing on a voluntary basis. The Government has implemented measures for government employees to tie in with this strategy and to serve as an example.

14. For testing on a mandatory basis, the CSB has issued guidelines that stipulate that if a government employee is confirmed to have contracted COVID-19, all staff working on the same floor and those who have worked with the government employee concerned must undergo testing as soon as possible within a prescribed period. While waiting for the test results, the staff concerned are arranged to work from home. If there are two confirmed cases in the same government building, the department responsible for building management should also arrange for staff in that building to be tested. The guidelines also stipulate that government employees who are issued compulsory testing notices by DH, or receive exposure notifications under the "LeaveHomeSafe" app, or have been in contact with a person in close contact with a confirmed patient, and would like to be tested as soon as possible, their department may arrange for them to work from home while waiting for test results.

15. For testing on an obligatory basis, since July 2020 the Government has been arranging testing on a regular basis or by random sampling for target groups, including high-risk groups, staff of critical infrastructure services and high-

exposure groups. The staff of a number of government departments are covered under the target group testing scheme. The CSB has requested departments to arrange testing for frontline staff engaged in high-risk duties (e.g. staff working at quarantine facilities) or staff of critical infrastructure services (e.g. staff working at Castle Peak Bay Immigration Centre of the Immigration Department) on a regular basis; staff belonging to high-exposure groups (e.g. staff of government wholesale food markets) should undergo testing on a sentinel basis. With the full resumption of public services on 28 February 2021, departments have been requested to arrange a new round of target group testing to safeguard the health and safety of government employees and their families. As of mid-April 2021, the Government has arranged about 123 000 tests, covering the majority of frontline staff and staff engaged in high-risk duties.

16. For testing on a voluntary basis, the Government launched the Universal Community Testing Programme (UCTP) in September 2020 and offered the public a one-off free test. CSB called on all employees to support UCTP for the benefit of themselves as well as that of other people. As a facilitative measure, the CSB has invited B/Ds to make appropriate arrangements to release government employees to get tested during duty hours. To enable individuals who perceive themselves as having a higher risk of exposure or experience mild discomfort to undergo free testing, starting from July 2020, the public can obtain specimen collection packs at 188 specimen collection points across 18 districts in Hong Kong, and return their specimens at designated specimen collection points. These include 23 at Government premises, which facilitate both the public and government employees taking tests.

VACCINATION

17. With the smooth operation of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme (CVP) since its launch on 26 February 2021, over one million eligible persons have received their first dose.

18. At the initial stage of the CVP, the Government identified five priority groups for vaccination having regard to the vaccine supply, including personnel participating in anti-epidemic related work, personnel maintaining critical public services, as well as those providing cross-boundary transportation or working at control points and ports, etc. covering a considerable number of frontline staff engaged in high-risk duties. With the expansion of the priority groups of CVP to more groups and ages, all government employees are now eligible for vaccination. As a facilitative measure, the CSB has, upon the commencement of the CVP, invited B/Ds to make appropriate arrangements to release government employees to get vaccinated during duty hours. Where necessary, government employees may also apply for leave to recuperate after vaccination. In addition,

the CSB has set up a small scale vaccination centre at the Central Government Offices (CGO) which is open to government employees working in the CGO and other government buildings/offices in the vicinity and their family members to get vaccinated.

19. To safeguard the health of our frontline colleagues and to ensure that they will not be the source of new cluster of infection in carrying out their duties, we will adopt vaccination as the main protection measure for frontline government employees, allowing enhanced Targeted Group Testing Scheme for those who, for various reasons, are not yet vaccinated. Starting from 31 May 2021, a vaccination in lieu of regular testing (VRT) approach will be adopted for specific group of frontline government employees. Under the VRT arrangement, B/Ds will identify and draw up a list of frontline staff, covering those who are regularly involved in enforcement, inspection and investigation duties having frequent and close contact with members of the public, or involved in high risk duties. B/Ds will strongly encourage them to get vaccinated and provide facilitation for them to do so as soon as possible. As mentioned in paragraph 18 above, such facilitation may include allowing them to get vaccinated during duty hours without taking leave, and the granting of leave to recuperate after vaccination. Those who have received the first dose of vaccine and provided their vaccination record could be exempted from regular testing. If in case a member of frontline staff is unfit for vaccination due to medical conditions or is planning to but has not yet been vaccinated, he/she is required to undergo polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid testing for COVID-19 (PCR tests) using combined nasal and throat swabs on a bi-weekly basis.

20. To enhance public willingness to get vaccinated, the Government has been carrying out publicity through different channels (including the TV/radio interviews, TV and radio announcements, posters and leaflets, etc.) and disseminating correct and science-based messages in a timely manner. Adhering to the principle of full transparency, the Government has introduced a vaccination dashboard on the CVP thematic website, which include the number of adverse events following immunisation and relevant references to ease the concerns of the public. Twice the Secretary for the Civil Service wrote to all colleagues to encourage them to proactively receive vaccination and reiterated that it is the obligation of all civil servants, as a team serving the public, no matter in meeting the expectation of the community or safeguarding the health of fellow colleagues or the people being served, to get vaccinated. Various civil service central consultative councils and major service-wide staff unions expressed support for the CVP and called on fellow colleagues to get vaccinated as early as possible. Many colleagues at the directorate level have also taken the lead and have been encouraging their colleagues to follow suit via internal communications, and at the same time been inviting parties from relevant sectors

to join hands and promote vaccination in the community, as well as to offer facilitative measures to their staff.

21. The Government will continue to implement various measures in a flexible manner in the light of the development of the epidemic and practical needs, and take forward the anti-epidemic work with the health and safety of government employees in mind.

ADVICE SOUGHT

22. Members are invited to note this paper.

Civil Service Bureau
May 2021