

# 立法會 *Legislative Council*

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## **Panel on Welfare Services**

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat  
for the meeting on 10 July 2023**

### **Support services for homeless people**

#### **Purpose**

This paper provides background information and summarizes relevant discussions of the Panel on Welfare Services on issues relating to the support services for homeless people.

#### **Background**

2. According to the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, homelessness<sup>1</sup> has become a significant issue in Hong Kong requiring the involvement of various Government departments.<sup>2</sup> The Social Welfare Department (“SWD”) has been providing subventions to non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”) under the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System to operate Integrated Services Teams for Street Sleepers (“ISTs”). These ISTs provide emergency and short-term hostel placement for homeless people.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, developed by the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless, provides a useful reference for understanding homelessness. It has no internationally agreed definition, but it includes people who sleep on the streets and those living in non-conventional dwellings, emergency accommodations, accommodations for the homeless, and institutionalized individuals staying longer than needed in health or penal institutions due to lack of housing prior to release.

<sup>2</sup> The Government departments include Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Housing Department, Highways Department, Lands Department, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Hong Kong Police Force and Home Affairs Department.

3. As at end March 2023, SWD's street sleepers registry ("SSR")<sup>3</sup> recorded 1 441 individuals who were sleeping on the street. SWD has been subsidizing three NGOs, namely the Salvation Army, St James' Settlement and the Christian Concern for the Homeless Association, to each operate an IST. ISTs offer a range of integrated services to help street sleepers (including homeless people) give up street sleeping and re-integrate into the community. Services provided by ISTs include day and late-night outreaching visits, counselling and group activities, personal care (e.g. bathing and hair-cutting), employment guidance, escorting, emergency fund to cover various expenses (e.g. short-term payment of rent and living costs, rental deposit and removal expenses), emergency shelter/hostel placement and service referral. Besides, the Integrated Family Service Centres ("IFSC")/Integrated Services Centres ("ISC") under SWD and NGOs also provide outreaching, counselling, financial and accommodation assistance, referral for treatment and other support services for homeless people. In 2021-2022, SWD's expenditure for the abovementioned social welfare support services amounted to about \$30 million.

## **Deliberations by Members**

### Homelessness statistics

4. Members expressed concern that the number of street sleepers recorded by SSR was much lower than the statistics provided by other community organizations. They urged the Administration to streamline the procedures and review the criteria adopted by SWD for registration of homeless people, so that the data collected would reflect accurately the magnitude of the problem and help the Administration plan their work in addressing the problem.

5. The Administration pointed out that the number of registered homeless people increased during the epidemic but has since decreased as the epidemic situation improved.<sup>4</sup> The Administration clarified that SSR covered only those who slept in the streets. Currently, social workers assessed the welfare needs of homeless people and obtained their consent before submitting information to the SWD. They were also required to

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<sup>3</sup> The Street Sleepers Registry is a computerized registry set up by the Social Welfare Department ("SWD") to collect information about street sleepers through various casework units under SWD and non-governmental organizations dedicated to serving street sleepers.

<sup>4</sup> During the epidemic, the number of registered street sleepers increased from 1 423 (as at end-March 2020) to 1 564 (as at end-March 2022). With the epidemic situation subsiding, the number of street sleepers dropped to 1 441 (as at end-March 2023).

promptly update SSR with any changes in the individuals' situation to ensure data accuracy. As each case was unique, it might not be feasible and practicable to adopt standardized criteria for compiling statistics. SWD would monitor the changing welfare needs and periodically review registration procedures and statistical criteria for SSR to identify areas for improvement.

#### Accommodation needs of homeless people

6. Some Members expressed concern over the inadequate availability of emergency shelters or urban hostels for single individuals, which made it difficult to address the immediate accommodation needs of homeless people in a timely manner. To address this issue, Members suggested that the Administration should require applicants for welfare or religious facilities to provide overnight accommodation for homeless people as a condition of approval for "Government, Institutional, or Community" sites. Moreover, Members enquired whether the Administration would consider establishing permanent centres for homeless people to address their accommodation needs, as temporary shelters were only open during extreme weather conditions.

7. The Administration explained that SWD provided subventions for NGOs to offer short-term accommodation for homeless people. Currently, there were 626 emergency and short-term accommodation places available, comprising 228 SWD subvented places and 398 self-financed places. Social workers assisted homeless people during their stay, including identifying more stable accommodation or residential care services. The Administration would consider Members' suggestions and identify suitable premises to increase short-term accommodation for homeless people, subject to resource availability.

8. Members enquired why some homeless people refused to move into emergency shelters or hostels operated by NGOs, and why some of them return to street sleeping after being arranged to stay in these facilities, despite the fact that they were not at full capacity. The Administration noted that homeless people might refuse to move into emergency shelters or hostels for various reasons, including difficulties in finding affordable housing, family problems, recent discharge from hospitals/prisons/addiction treatment centers, financial instability, mental health or drug abuse issues, and a desire to stay in familiar communities. Homeless people with urgent housing needs should apply for public rental housing units under the Compassionate Rehousing arrangement through the Housing Department.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As a form of special housing assistance, such arrangement aims at providing housing assistance to individuals and families who have genuine and imminent long-term housing needs but, owing to their social and medical needs (if applicable) under specific circumstances, have no other feasible means to solve their housing problems.

9. Members expressed concern about the unoccupied upper bunk beds in single-person hostels due to the age or mobility issues of many homeless people. They urged the Administration to review the quality of services provided by these hostels, including their opening hours and the utilization of upper bunk beds. The Administration explained that some NGOs reserved lower bunk beds for homeless people with special needs and allocated upper bunk beds to those with better physical conditions. While NGOs typically set opening hours for hostels, residents working odd hours or late shifts are given flexibility.

#### Funding for service providers

10. Members urged the Administration to allocate additional resources to expand the services of ISTs and increase the provision for emergency fund, while also relaxing the requirements for applying for additional funding. In response, the Administration stated that each IST was allocated \$90,000 annually, and NGOs could apply for additional funding when the emergency fund balance dropped to \$22,500. The revised estimate for subventions to NGOs providing integrated services for street sleepers in 2021-2022 was \$29.6 million. The Administration also indicated that it would monitor the emergency fund balance of individual ISTs and make funding arrangements as needed.

#### Financial assistance and employment support to homeless people

11. Members enquired whether the Administration would provide rental allowance for homeless people who were not on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (“CSSA”) scheme and had difficulties in meeting rental expenses. The Administration advised that the maximum rent allowance under CSSA had been increased in June 2020 with a view to relieving the rental burden of CSSA recipients. In the meantime, ISTs could make use of emergency fund granted by SWD for meeting the urgent needs of homeless people as and when required, such as short-term payment of rent and living costs, rental deposit and other removal expenses. Some NGOs had also set up funds to provide emergency financial assistance to homeless people.

12. Members enquired whether the Administration had provided assistance to individuals who became homeless due to the COVID-19 epidemic, including helping them find employment and providing unemployment benefits and shelters to “first-time” homeless people. The Administration pointed out that individuals in need might approach the Labour Department for assistance. The Employment Support Scheme under the Anti-epidemic Fund had also provided time-limited financial support for employers to retain employees. Besides, homeless people who

had become unemployed were encouraged to apply for CSSA to meet their basic needs. On the other hand, SWD had specifically requested ISTs to reach out to “first-time” homeless people and assist them in addressing their short-term accommodation need.

13. Members expressed concern that some homeless people were unable to provide prospective employers with necessary information, such as an address and telephone number, which hindered their ability to find employment. They suggested providing free storage facilities or lockers to alleviate the burden of carrying belongings when job-seeking or going to work. The Administration explained that the addresses of the three ISTs could be used for employment purposes, and the ISTs could lend second-hand mobile phones to homeless people for use in finding jobs. The Administration advised that currently there was no plan to provide storage facilities for homeless people.

#### Other welfare support services to homeless people

14. Members urged the Administration to proactively strengthen support for homeless people by providing necessary assistance to those in need. The Administration explained that homeless people could approach SWD’s social workers, IFSCs, or ISTs for assistance. ISTs conducted outreach visits and provided tailored services such as counselling, referrals, short-term accommodation, and food assistance. In 2020-2021, SWD increased resources to enhance welfare support services, including social worker and nurse manpower. SWD would continue to collaborate with stakeholders and Government departments to provide appropriate support services and help homeless people quit street sleeping.

15. Members raised concern over negative attitudes towards homeless people, who might cause environmental hygiene issues or seek shelter in 24-hour fast food restaurants. They called on the Administration to take measures to promote a compassionate and inclusive environment in society for homeless people. The Administration acknowledged that the number of individuals seeking shelter in fast food restaurants might increase during hot weather. They noted that air-conditioning had been installed in all subvented hostels to improve living conditions.

16. Members expressed concern about the removal of bedding and personal belongings of homeless people during weekly cleaning operations at pedestrian subways without prior notice. They called on the Administration to protect the rights of homeless people and ensure respectful treatment by relevant Government departments. Members suggested that relevant Government departments should provide advance notification before these cleaning operations, allowing time for

homeless people to remove bedding and personal belongings beforehand.

17. The Administration emphasized that homeless people would be treated with respect, and measures such as the use of fenders during cleaning operations were implemented to avoid wetting their bedding. Notices would be posted in prominent locations before the joint cleaning operations, and staff would be deployed to remind those affected at least one day in advance. On the operation day, an area would be designated for homeless people to dispose of their belongings.

18. Members held the view that current support measures for homeless people were inadequate and ineffective. They urged the Administration to formulate a comprehensive policy that balanced the interests of both homeless and affected residents. Members also called for enhanced collaboration between Government bureaux and departments (“B/Ds”) involved in addressing homelessness and the establishment of an inter-departmental task group comprising officials, Legislative Council Members, and homeless people to improve support services.

19. According to the Administration, relevant B/Ds played specific roles in addressing the emergency needs of homeless people and helping them become self-reliant. These B/Ds would monitor the situation and develop inter-departmental action plans and strategies based on homeless people’s actual circumstances and needs. They also took appropriate measures to jointly assist homeless people and meet their changing service needs.

### **Relevant papers**

20. A list of the relevant papers on the LegCo website is in the **Appendix**.

## Appendix

### Relevant papers on Support services for homeless people

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Welfare Services	10 June 2013 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a>
	13 February 2017 (Item IV)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a>
	9 April 2018 (Item V)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a>
	11 May 2020 (Item V)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a>
Panel on Home Affairs Services and Panel on Welfare Services	22 July 2013 (Item II)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a>
Subcommittee on Poverty	16 February 2016 (Item I)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a>
Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	27 March 2017 (Item II)	<a href="#">Agenda</a> <a href="#">Minutes</a>
Legislative Council	10 June 2020	<a href="#">Question raised by Hon Chan Hoi-yan on “Support provided for street sleepers”</a>

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Paper</b>
	24 March 2021	<a href="#"><u>Question raised by Hon Alice Mak on “Assisting street sleepers”</u></a>
	22 June 2022	<a href="#"><u>Question raised by Hon Chan Pui Leung on “situation of street sleepers”</u></a>
	6 July 2022	<a href="#"><u>Question raised by Hon Chan Kin Por on “Providing support for street sleepers”</u></a>
	3 May 2023	<a href="#"><u>Question raised by Hon Priscilla Leung on “Measures to assist homeless people”</u></a>

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