

2018 Year-end Review speech by Director of Fire Services

Following is the speech (translated from Chinese) by the Director of Fire Services, Mr Li Kin-yat, at the Fire Services Department 2018 Year-end Review press conference today (January 24):

Good afternoon everyone. At the start of 2019, my management team and I would like to wish you all good health and every success.

Over the past year, the Fire Services Department was faced with various challenges. Despite the headwinds, all my colleagues showed great devotion to duty and maintained a high degree of professionalism on all fronts, including firefighting and rescue, fire protection, ambulance services, and mobilising and communications, giving our best to protect Hong Kong. The year 2018 marked the 150th anniversary of the department. We organised a number of large events to commemorate such an important milestone, among which were the 150th Anniversary Grand Parade and the Through Thick and Thin: 150 Years of the Hong Kong Fire Services historical exhibition. We are most grateful for the support of the community and their participation in the events, which afford us a window to look back on the department's growth and development in the past century and a half, at a time when it embarks on a new era.

Now I am going to review the major work of the department in 2018, and shall take this opportunity to outline the key initiatives in our future plan.

Firefighting and Rescue Services

In 2018, the department received a total of 33,463 fire calls, representing a decrease of 1.4 per cent as against 2017. The number of No. 3 or above alarm fires was seven, an increase of four cases as against the three cases in 2017.

Last year, there was a total of 28,762 building fire calls, representing a decrease of 1.9 per cent as against 2017. Among these building fire calls, 93.8 per cent were handled within the graded response time, which was about 1.3 percentage points higher than our performance pledge of 92.5 per cent. Among the more notable cases were seven No. 3 alarm fires which mainly involved warehouses, a car scrapyards, a bakery factory and a domestic unit in various parts of the New Territories, as well as an industrial building in Wong Tai Sin.

On the special service call front, a total of 37,815 calls were received, representing an increase of 4.1 per cent as against 2017. Among the more notable cases were a few traffic accidents resulting in multiple casualties, including an accident in February in which a bus overturned on Tai Po Road, one in November involving a coach in Tsing Yi, and another in

December involving a school bus in North Point. Hong Kong was struck by six tropical cyclones in 2018, among which Super Typhoon Mangkhut inflicted the most devastating damage to the territory. During the storm, special service calls on tree failure, shut-in-lift and trapped-by-flood cases in various corners of Hong Kong came flooding in. In the face of the inclement weather, the department's fire and ambulance personnel demonstrated remarkable determination to save those in distress by working with the Mobilising and Communications Group and other logistic support units to protect the public's life and property. In particular, during the passage of Mangkhut, which refers to the period from the hoisting of tropical cyclone warning signal No. 8 till the lowering of all typhoon signals, the Fire Services Department handled a total of 662 tree failure cases and 401 shut-in-lift cases, and this exerted enormous pressure on our emergency services at that time. It is worth pointing out that after the storm, a team of volunteers formed by the department and all its staff unions and associations used their off-duty time to offer assistance unremittingly to the public in need by helping them to clear up the aftermath of Mangkhut. Their selfless dedication was much appreciated by the public.

In 2018, first responders attended to a total of 49,886 cases and provided services to 32,307 patients. Of them, 37 who had stopped breathing or had no pulse were resuscitated.

Fire Protection

The fire protection and regulatory work of the department covers a wide range of areas closely associated with people's livelihood. Indeed all facilities, buildings or premises, which have a bearing on people's day-to-day life and social development, are subject to requirements as stipulated under the relevant fire safety regulations. Amid rapid social development, fire regulatory work has become increasingly complicated and arduous. As a means to ensure the efficiency of such work, the department has all along been making untiring efforts to optimise various relevant arrangements and procedures, including, among others, vetting and acceptance of building plans, fire safety requirements, inspections and law enforcement on different licensed premises, regulation on dangerous goods and fire service installations, as well as promotion and public education on fire prevention. In this connection, the Fire Services Department is firmly committed to keeping Hong Kong entirely safe from fire risk, and we will do our utmost to ensure fire safety at all costs.

In 2018, the department conducted a total of 409,105 fire safety inspections. Among them, a total of 227,296 inspections of fire service installations and equipment in buildings were conducted last year to ensure their proper maintenance, resulting in 3,497 Fire Hazard Abatement Notices issued and 89 prosecutions instituted. Regarding the control of dangerous goods, our Anti-illicit Fuelling Activities Task Force carried out a total of 941 inspections and 96 surprise inspections and handled 142 complaints, while seizing a total of over 240,000 litres of illicit fuel and instituting prosecution in 132 cases last year.

In the past year, we sustained our efforts in a flexible and pragmatic manner to assist owners and/or occupiers of old-style commercial or composite and domestic buildings in enhancing the fire safety protection of these buildings. The compromise scheme, developed by the department in light of the limitations of composite and domestic buildings, significantly addressed many technical problems encountered in the improvement of these buildings. Meanwhile, the Fire Safety Improvement Works Subsidy Scheme, regarding which the Chief Executive announced in the 2017 Policy Address that the Government planned to devote \$2 billion to launch, has been open for applications since last year.

In response to the public's concerns over the fire risks of old-style industrial buildings, the Government proposed a new piece of legislation to make it mandatory for owners and occupiers of pre-1987 industrial buildings to install, among others, specific fire service installations and equipment as well as a fire alarm system. The Security Bureau conducted a public consultation on the proposal from August 2018 to October 2018 and, after that, introduced the Bill concerned into the Legislative Council for a second reading on December 12, 2018. The Bill is currently under deliberation by the relevant Bills Committee.

The Airport Expansion Projects team under the New Projects Division of the department was restructured to become the Airport Expansion Project Division (AEP Division), as a means to strengthen alignment with the infrastructure development of the three-runway system at Hong Kong International Airport. The AEP Division is responsible for vetting building plans of the three-runway system project at the airport, formulating fire protection requirements that can meet the needs of the premises concerned and cope with relevant risks, as well as inspecting relevant fire service installations.

In addition, the department assists the construction industry in securing approval for building plans and complying with the requirements for acceptance inspection of fire service installations. In this regard, we have made sustained efforts in enhancing the relevant procedures and work arrangements in the interests of improved efficiency. Fire safety compliance often comes at the last stage, and the most critical one, in a construction project or a licence application. Any non-compliance with fire safety requirements is bound to adversely affect the work of the department in terms of acceptance inspection, thereby generating a lot of pressure on our part. Last year, the department organised two major seminars to assist the industry in complying with these requirements. All relevant stakeholders, including representatives from real estate developers and government departments, architects, engineering consultants, fire service installation contractors and other professional bodies, were invited. The seminars clarified for the industry the requirements relating to building plan approval and acceptance inspection, while highlighting with practical examples of various unsatisfactory situations and reasons for non-compliance with acceptance inspection with a view to preventing recurrence of non-compliance cases, and in turn improving the approval rate of building plan submissions and the pass rate of acceptance inspection. The arrangements were well received by the

industry, and the department will continue to work closely with different stakeholders in the industry.

Ambulance Service

Despite an ever-growing increase in the number of ambulance calls last year, the overall level of service was satisfactory. The total number of ambulance calls received last year surpassed 800,000 to stand at 804,685, representing an increase of 2.3 per cent as against 2017. Of them, 748,777 were emergency calls, representing an increase of 2 per cent as against 2017. Among the emergency calls, 94.6 per cent were responded to within the target response time of 12 minutes, which was 2.1 per cent higher than our performance pledge of 92.5 per cent.

To ensure sufficient resources for the provision of ambulance services, the department has made sustained efforts in strengthening the management of ambulance resources and successfully increased the daily number of ambulances available for mobilisation by way of enhancing the analysis of the deployment data and flexibly deploying resources. Apart from increasing the number of ambulances in each day shift and night shift, the department also deployed more ambulances on short day shifts according to the service needs, so as to cope with the demand for ambulance services at different periods of time. In addition, the department set up the fifth special support unit in 2018. Members of the unit are tasked to perform special duties during major incidents or large-scale public events and provide standby services during daily peak periods when manpower is in greater demand, in order to enhance the operational efficiency of the emergency ambulance service and facilitate flexible strategic arrangements according to operational or service needs. These measures also play a significant part in the department's continued efforts to enhance the meal break arrangements for ambulancemen.

To enhance the quality and efficiency of emergency ambulance services, the department introduced a new system for provision of post-dispatch advice (PDA) in October last year. It enables personnel of the Fire Services Communications Centre to provide callers with appropriate PDA prior to the arrival of ambulance crew with the aid of the computer system, so that the callers can handle patients according to the PDA and help stabilise their conditions. As at end of 2018, the department provided PDA for 133,632 emergency ambulance service callers. Since the launch of the new service, the department has been able to help callers properly handle patients, including several acute cases involving, among others, cardiac or respiratory arrest, choking and childbirth, in which the callers, by following the PDA, succeeded in rescuing the patients from life-threatening situations before the arrival of an ambulance for conveyance to a hospital.

Other Major Initiatives

The best way to ensure public safety is for members of the public to be mindful of fire safety, increase their own fire protection awareness and adopt preventive measures. Apart from the implementation of various fire safety education programmes, the department will continue to press ahead with

the Fire Safety Ambassador Scheme and the Building Fire Safety Envoy Scheme. We will also keep up our efforts in further promoting fire protection messages, enhancing the monitoring of building fire safety and strengthening the public's knowledge on how to escape in case of emergency and how to put out a fire. The department will also continue its endeavour to promote different publicity and promotion programmes on ambulance services for the purpose of educating the public on the proper use of the service and on giving way to ambulances. On top of that, we have also encouraged, on an ongoing basis, members of the public to get themselves acquainted with cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and the use of automated external defibrillators (AEDs) since 2017, so that more people could offer timely help to cardiac event patients and try to save others.

In order to further the public education and publicity work mentioned above, the department established the Community Emergency Preparedness Division (CEPD) in October last year to integrate and increase the manpower of the fire stream and ambulance stream for the handling of publicity and public education activities, with a view to enhancing public awareness of emergency preparedness in a holistic manner, strengthening the public's response capability in the event of emergencies or contingencies and imparting knowledge to the public on extinguishment and prevention of fire, self-help and helping others as well as escape and evacuation. It is our view that education on emergency preparedness is most effective in schools. We will continue to roll out the relevant projects at kindergartens, primary and secondary schools. Plans are also underway to extend the projects to post-secondary institutions to enhance students' knowledge on ambulance aid and fire protection.

The CEPD will surely make the most of "Anyone" in social media, a virtual character that has been well received by netizens, to publicise the message in a light-hearted manner that anyone can save lives and that the way is simple as long as he or she dares to do what is advised. We aim to educate more members of the public on CPR and the use of AEDs, while encouraging them to provide first aid to patients before the arrival of ambulance personnel at scene. The CEPD will continue to promote the "three basic skills on emergency preparedness", namely extinguishment and prevention of fire, self-help and helping others as well as escape and evacuation. Our goal is to educate members of the public in such a way that they are able to remain calm when they are caught in various emergency situations, such as feeling unwell or finding themselves in a fire, a natural disaster or even under terrorist attack, so that they could save themselves as well as others. I would also like to take this opportunity to encourage organisations, owners of premises and buildings, management companies as well as relevant parties to consider purchasing more AEDs, so that an AED could be readily available if and when someone suffers from a cardiac event.

Separately, the official Facebook Page of the Fire Services Department was launched in November last year. We disseminate messages on emergency preparedness and educational information through the Page, through which the public can see and share fire safety messages at any time, thereby making Hong Kong an even safer city and achieving the goal of "making Hong Kong safe

by like & share".

The department also attaches great importance to providing support for ethnic minority communities. Last year, we continued to recruit Building Fire Safety Envoys in areas with a higher ratio of ethnic minority people in the hope that they could help disseminate fire safety messages in their communities. As at end of last year, a total of 713 members of ethnic minorities were recruited as Building Fire Safety Envoys across the territory. The department, in collaboration with the relevant Fire Safety Ambassador Honorary Presidents' Association or District Fire Safety Committee, also organised various fire safety activities for ethnic minorities in respective districts to enhance their fire safety awareness.

Meanwhile, to cater for members of ethnic minorities who are interested in joining the department, we also enhanced collaboration with schools with a relatively high enrolment of ethnic minority students and ethnic minority organisations in holding career talks to help them better understand the requirements for various posts in the department and prepare for recruitment. In light of their language proficiency, the department also made appropriate arrangements to help them pass the recruitment exercises and foundation training courses.

There are nearly 380,000 foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong, and they provide substantial support to their host families. More importantly, they can assist or even help rescue family members as first responders in the event of emergencies such as fires, injuries or sickness. In light of this, the department collaborated with various organisations to conduct fire safety education programmes for foreign domestic helpers, with a view to raising their awareness of household fire safety and emergency response capability. Among such programmes were the "Fire Safety x Press to Shock, Save a Life" training programme for foreign domestic helpers jointly organised by the department and the Philippine Consulate General in Hong Kong since July 2018. The programme encompasses Fire Safety Ambassadors training and teaches foreign domestic helpers how to perform CPR and use AEDs. We also provided training for domestic helpers of other nationalities, such as Indonesian helpers. As at end of last year, more than 450 Filipino domestic helpers and 60 Indonesian domestic helpers received relevant training.

Regarding firefighting and rescue facilities, subsequent to the completion of the large-scale cross boundary infrastructure projects such as the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge and the Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link (XRL) last year, the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge Fire Station cum Ambulance Depot commenced operation on June 14 last year. Rail-Road Fire Appliances acquired to cater specifically for the XRL operation were also put into service in Pat Heung Fire Station.

Last year, to cope with the increasing work commitments on fire protection, the department not only allocated more manpower to the relevant fire protection units, but also set up 12 Fire Safety Inspection Teams in a progressive manner under the three operational commands, which are specifically tasked to handle complaints of imminent fire hazards so as to

further ensure public safety and alleviate the workload of the frontline personnel.

The department also launched a Risk-based Building Fire Safety Visit Programme. Under the programme, risk-based building inspections are carried out across the territory in order to identify hidden fire risks in the public areas inside the buildings, promote risk-related fire safety education to relevant stakeholders proactively, and enable the frontline personnel to have a better grasp of the conditions of the buildings in their respective districts, so as to lay solid groundwork for firefighting and rescue operations. The department started a six-month pilot programme in 13 fire stations in July last year, which will be rolled out to other fire stations in phases from January 2019.

Plans for the Year Ahead

The department will continue to recruit different grades of staff this year. Last year, we recruited a total of 627 fire and ambulance personnel, including 91 officers and 536 rank-and-file staff. Due to recruitment difficulties for the Station Officer grade, the department has commenced year-round recruitment exercises for such officers since September 2018 in the hope that through greater flexibility in recruitment, vacancies can be filled in a timely manner while ensuring that our work is not adversely affected. It is estimated that some 819 fire and ambulance personnel, including 176 officers and 643 rank-and-file staff, will be recruited to fill vacancies in 2019.

The development of the department's Fourth Generation Mobilising System is well underway. Two active Fire Services Communications Centres will be established for this system to ensure uninterrupted mobilisation of resources. Apart from text messages and conversations, the new system will also support the transmission of real-time photos and videos to provide a better grasp of the situation at the incident scene. Separately, the department will explore the feasibility of including a function that identifies a mobile phone caller's location. This new function, along with an enhanced geographic information system and the newly introduced real-time traffic information system, will enable a more accurate identification of the location of an incident, precise tracking of resources deployment and identification of the fastest route to an incident scene, all of which will allow fire appliances and ambulances to arrive on the scene more promptly. The new system is expected to be commissioned in the first quarter of 2023.

To tie in with the measures relating to Smart City outlined in the "Chief Executive's 2018 Policy Address", the department will actively explore the application of big data technology for the integration and analysis of our operational data in order to raise the effectiveness of strategic planning and resources deployment, which are crucial to the enhancement of fire safety strategies. We will also actively study the feasibility of bolstering the efficiency of our emergency services as well as the regulation of fire service installations with the aid of technology.

Regarding the implementation of the Registered Fire Engineer Scheme, the Fire Services (Amendment) Ordinance 2017 was passed by the Legislative Council (LegCo) in March 2017, opening doors for the making of subsidiary legislation (new regulation) for the scheme. We consulted the industry on the relevant implementation details during the period from December 2017 to January 2018 and learned that members of the trade were generally in support of the scheme. We are now drawing up the implementation details of the new regulation by making reference to the views from the industry. We aim to introduce the new regulation to the LegCo for scrutiny within this year.

Conclusion

That's all for the review of our work in 2018 and the outline of our future initiatives. I am confident that all personnel of the department will stand united and spare no effort in accomplishing our work. At the same time, we will continue to carry out the grade structure review of the disciplined services, making sure that aspirations of the various grades and views from members of the department are properly and fully relayed to the Standing Committee on Disciplined Services Salaries and Conditions of Service.

The various aspects of our work have been widely recognised by the community, thanks to the wholehearted dedication of our personnel to fulfilling our mission of "Serving with courage, passion and commitment". The year 2018 marked the 150th anniversary of the FSD. It is an important milestone for the department. Building on our long history of excellence, which spans over one and a half centuries, all of us in the department will keep abreast with the times and press ahead to move towards an even more technology-oriented fire brigade which stands out with ever-improving professionalism. This will place the FSD in a strong position to meet the challenges arising from rapid social development and extremes of weather, as well as ageing population and buildings.

The Year of the Pig will arrive in less than two weeks' time, during which shopping malls, places of entertainment and restaurants across the territory, particularly those "Ginza-style" commercial buildings, will certainly be more crowded with patrons than usual. I would like to take this opportunity to call on the persons-in-charge and management companies of these premises to make enhanced efforts in ensuring that the means of escape are free from obstruction. They must not allow any articles being placed for the sake of convenience which interfere with the means of escape, also causing obstruction and safety risks to patrons. Meanwhile, the department will step up efforts on inspection and, if required, consider taking direct prosecution actions.

Last but not least, on behalf of my colleagues, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the various sectors of society for their support and encouragement over the past year. May I also wish our media friends and the people of Hong Kong in advance joy, good health and prosperity in the coming year. Thank you.