

Government further tightens social distancing measures

The Government gazetted yesterday (July 13) amendments and directions under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) to further tighten social distancing measures. The above amendments and directions will take effect at 0.00am on July 15, 2020.

The epidemic situation of COVID-19 in Hong Kong has undergone drastic changes recently. Among the 52 confirmed cases announced on July 13, 2020, 41 were local cases. New cases recorded during the period from July 7 to July 13, 2020 include 181 cases without travel history during the incubation period. The recent emergence of local cases of unknown infection source indicates the existence of sustained silent transmission in the community. The latest public health risk assessment shows that the risk of a large-scale outbreak is extremely high.

According to the World Health Organization and health experts, COVID-19 would not be eradicated without effective treatment and vaccination. The Government thus is required to incorporate work in relation to disease prevention and control as well as infection management into the new normal of the daily operation of the society. To this end, the Government has all along adopted the "suppress and lift" strategy in order to quickly adjust epidemic control measures should there be inevitable small-scale community outbreaks. Subsequent to the announcement of the tightening of social distancing measures on July 9, in view of signs of further deterioration of the epidemic situation, the Government considers that there is a need to further tighten social distancing measures.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "The detection of quite a number of local cases with unknown sources of infection over a short period of time raises an important alarm, reminding the community that members of the public must not let down their guard in terms of epidemic prevention and control. In view of the latest public health risk assessment, in particular the higher risks brought about by activities conducted without wearing masks as shown in recent cases, we are of the view that it is now necessary to tighten social distancing measures, including imposing stringent limits on number of persons and capacity, and other infection control requirements on catering business and requiring the closure of scheduled premises."

The requirements and restrictions under the latest directions (details at Annex 1) are as follows:

Catering business

(1) On catering business, the number of customers at any catering premises at

any one time must not exceed 50 per cent of the normal seating capacity of the premises. No more than 4 persons may be seated together at one table within any catering premises.

(2) From 6pm to 4.59am of the subsequent day, save for specific premises (i.e. premises set out in Schedule 1 to Cap. 599F, such as hospitals, residential care homes, treatment centres, boarding schools, premises controlled or managed by the Government, and certain catering business designated by the Chief Secretary for Administration in accordance with Section 5 of the Regulation), a person responsible for carrying on a catering business must cease selling or supplying food or drink for consumption on the premises of the business; and close any premises, or part of the premises, on which food or drink is sold or supplied by the business for consumption on the premises. The premises concerned may still sell or supply food and/or drink for takeaway services and deliveries.

(3) Any premises (commonly known as bar or pub) that is exclusively or mainly used for the sale or supply of intoxicating liquors as defined in section 53(1) of the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance (Cap. 109) (intoxicating liquors) for consumption in that premises must be closed. Any part of a catering premises that is exclusively or mainly used for the sale or supply of intoxicating liquors for consumption in that part must be closed.

(4) Live performance and dancing must not be allowed in any catering premises. All karaoke and mahjong-tin kau activities carried on at any catering premises must also be suspended. Other requirements and restrictions in relation to catering business premises will be maintained.

Scheduled premises

(5) All scheduled premises set out below are required to suspend operation:

- (a) Amusement game centres;
- (b) Bathhouses;
- (c) Fitness centres;
- (d) Places of amusement;
- (e) Places of public entertainment;
- (f) Premises (commonly known as party rooms) that are maintained or intended to be maintained for hire for holding social gatherings;
- (g) Beauty parlours;
- (h) Establishments (commonly known as clubs or nightclubs) that are open late into the night, usually for drinking, and dancing or other entertainment;
- (i) Karaoke establishments;
- (j) Mahjong-tin kau premises; and
- (k) Massage establishments (save for those under Annex 2).

(6) Save for catering premises therein, all club-houses must be closed.

The above requirements in respect of catering business and scheduled premises will take effect from July 15, 2020 to July 21, 2020, for a period of seven days.

Group gatherings

(7) The number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places will be tightened from 50 to four, with effective from July 15, 2020. Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings at public places will continue during the 14-day period from July 15, 2020 to July 28, 2020.

(8) In view of the latest limit on the number of persons in group gatherings, the Government will accordingly adjust the exempted group gatherings under Cap. 599G (see Annex 3), including:

- (a) exempting group gatherings of not more than 20 persons during wedding ceremonies at which no food or drink is served;
- (b) for shareholders' meeting of a listed company that is held in accordance with any ordinance or regulatory instrument, subject to no food or drink being served, tightening the number of persons allowed in a room or partitioned area from 50 to 20; and
- (c) removing the exemption on group gatherings during religious activities.

All of the other directions issued earlier by the Secretary for Food and Health in accordance to Cap. 599F and Cap. 599G (i.e. the directions which took effect on July 11 and July 3 respectively) will be suspended on July 15 procedurally.

"We will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation and review the various measures in place from time to time with a view to making suitable adjustments taking into account all relevant factors. We also strongly urge the public to stay vigilant, maintain at all times strict personal and environmental hygiene, and maintain an appropriate social distance with other people as far as possible in their daily lives to prevent the virus from spreading in the community," said the spokesman.

Persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses and the managers of scheduled premises that contravene the statutory requirements under Cap. 599F would have committed a criminal offence. Offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$50,000 and imprisonment for six months. Separately, any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering; organises a prohibited group gathering; owns, controls or operates the place of such gathering; and knowingly allows the taking place of such gathering, commits an offence under Cap. 599G. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Persons who participate in a prohibited group gathering may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.