

Government implements a series of measures to reduce the health risks faced by foreign domestic helpers staying in boarding facilities of employment agencies

The Government announced today (August 6) that a series of measures will be implemented promptly to reduce the health risks faced by foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) staying in boarding facilities of employment agencies (EAs) and reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the community.

Free COVID-19 testing and distribution of masks

A Government spokesman said, "As the epidemic in Hong Kong has remained severe, to strengthen anti-epidemic efforts, the Government has decided to arrange virus testing for different high risk groups to safeguard public health. The Government will expand the testing scope to cover FDHs staying in boarding facilities of EAs. A free, one-off COVID-19 testing service provided by a testing agency (Prenetics Limited) will be arranged for relevant FDHs."

The testing agency will provide one-stop service covering specimen collection and testing. It will shortly deploy staff to licensed EAs providing FDH placement services to deliver specimen bottles for collecting deep throat saliva samples from FDHs staying in the EAs' boarding facilities. The specimens will then be collected by the testing agency after one to two days for testing. Cases with positive results will be relayed to the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health for follow-up. The testing agency will work closely with the Labour Department (LD) and determine the testing priority based on the number of persons staying in an EA boarding facility, manpower resources available, etc.

In addition, to strengthen protection of the relevant FDHs, the Government will, from August 8 to 10, 2020, distribute masks to FDHs staying in EAs' boarding facilities via licensed EAs providing FDH placement services. Also, to shorten the time that FDHs will need to stay in EAs' boarding facilities, the Immigration Department will process applications for changing employers in Hong Kong from FDHs whose employment contracts have expired as soon as possible.

Regulation of employment agencies

During the COVID-19 epidemic, LD has approached EA associations a number of times to remind the industry that they cannot arrange FDHs arriving in Hong Kong to undergo compulsory quarantine in EAs' boarding facilities; and that EAs should avoid arranging FDHs to stay in crowded environments, be

alert and remind FDHs to pay attention to personal hygiene and maintain social distance. EAs can make reference to CHP's "Guidelines on Prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) for the General Public" (www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/nid_guideline_general_public_en.pdf) and "A Guide to Personal, Home and Environmental Hygiene" (www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/a_guide_to_personal_home_and_environmental_hygiene_keep_clean_be_healthy_booklet.pdf).

Pursuant to the Code of Practice for Employment Agencies (CoP) promulgated by the Commissioner for Labour (the Commissioner), should an EA conduct any other activities (e.g. holding training classes or providing temporary accommodation) or non-EA related business at an EA's licensed address or other premises, the EA must comply with the relevant laws at all times. EAs in breach of the CoP may have their licences revoked or refused renewal by the Commissioner.

Publicity and education

On July 18, 2020, the Government gazetted the specifications under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H) to impose conditions based on public health grounds in order to further reduce the number of imported cases of COVID-19. A traveller who, on the day on which the traveller boarded a civil aviation aircraft that arrives at, or is about to arrive at Hong Kong, or during the 14 days before that day, has stayed in any specified place (i.e. Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and South Africa), he/she must meet the conditions specified by the Secretary for Food and Health. Since the relevant specifications came into effect at 0.00am on July 25, 2020, the number of FDHs coming from the specified places has dropped markedly.

The Government will continue to conduct publicity to FDHs and appeal to them to avoid non-essential gatherings, stay at home for rest as far as possible, and maintain strict personal and environmental hygiene at all times to safeguard their personal health and public hygiene. In particular, LD, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Police will conduct mobile broadcasts in Chinese, English and major FDH languages (including Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia and Thai) on August 8 and 9, 2020 at popular gathering places of FDHs to call upon FDHs to comply with the regulations on the prohibition of group gatherings and mask-wearing requirement in public places; conduct publicity to FDHs during the broadcasts; and distribute leaflets printed in FDH languages to appeal to them to maintain environmental hygiene, refrain from conducting unlicensed hawking activities, including cooked food or other hawking activities. Also, the Police will increase manpower to step up patrols at those places.

The Government spokesman said, "The Government announced on August 3, 2020 (www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202008/03/P2020080300770.htm) that it had gazetted directions and specifications under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) to

extend the social distancing measures already in place, including prohibition on group gatherings of more than two persons in public places and requiring a person to wear a mask at all times when the person is boarding or onboard a public transport carrier, is entering or present in an MTR paid area, or is entering or present in a public place (indoor or outdoor). Offenders are liable to prosecution. The Government reminds employers and FDHs to observe and comply with the relevant requirements and restrictions. As of August 2, 2020, a total of 12 FDHs had been fined a fixed penalty of \$2,000 for being in breach of the direction on prohibition of group gatherings in public places."

The spokesman continued, "When discussing rest day arrangements with their FDHs, employers should explain the current special circumstances and express mutual understanding in fighting the virus. Employers may encourage their FDHs to stay at home for rest, or take their rest day on weekdays instead of at the weekend. If FDHs choose to go out on their rest day, they should wear a mask, keep a distance of at least one metre from others where possible, avoid gathering and going to crowded places, and keep their hands clean at all times."

"Also, LD reminds employers that under the Employment Ordinance, if an employer requests an FDH to work on a rest day, the employer must substitute another rest day for the FDH within 30 days after the original rest day; the employer must also notify the FDH of the arrangement within 48 hours after he/she is required to work. Besides, an employer may substitute another rest day with the consent of the FDH, in which case it must be within the same month before the original rest day or within 30 days after it. An employer who compels his/her FDH to work on a rest day without the agreement of the FDH or fails to grant rest days to the FDH is in breach of the Employment Ordinance and is liable to prosecution and, upon conviction, to a maximum fine of \$50,000."

For any update and health information on COVID-19, please visit the Government's "COVID-19 Thematic Website" (www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng). Information in Chinese, English, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, Thai, Hindi, Sinhala, Bengali, Nepali and Urdu is available.