

HKSAR Government explains work plan of Support Team from Central Government (with photos)

A spokesman for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government today (August 7) said the Mainland nucleic acid test support team (Support Team) formed in response to the request of the HKSAR Government has commenced work to assist in enhancing virus testing capacity, establishing temporary hospital as well as expanding the scale of the Community Treatment Facilities (CTF).

"The COVID-19 epidemic in Hong Kong remains severe. We expressed heartfelt gratitude to the Central Government for its proactive support to Hong Kong's anti-epidemic work and provision of needed assistance. Transparency is one of our principles in fighting the epidemic. Allowing the public to understand the work plan of the Support Team will help clarify public misunderstanding on its work and ensure the smooth implementation of relevant work," said the spokesman.

(1) Enhancing Hong Kong's virus testing capacity

The first batch of members of the Support Team set up by the Central Government arrived in Hong Kong on August 2 for familiarisation, and the leader of the Support Team, Mr Yu Dewen, who is the Second-level Inspector of the Health Commission of Guangdong Province, also arrived in Hong Kong on August 6. To meet the needs of the HKSAR Government to extend the coverage of community testing, the Support Team has assisted in the preparatory work for the temporary laboratory with a view to substantially ramping up the virus testing capability of Hong Kong. The work group on testing of the HKSAR, led by the Permanent Secretary for Food and Health (Health), had a working meeting with the Support Team this morning at the Central Government Offices to discuss the support from the Central Government rendered to Hong Kong to enhance COVID-19 testing capacity and to launch large-scale community testing. With the assistance of the Support Team, the Government will continue to implement and expand the voluntary Targeted Group Testing Scheme (TGTS), as well as to prepare for the Community Testing Scheme (CTS), so as to identify infected persons as early as possible.

Targeted Group Testing Scheme

The voluntary TGTS has been introduced in phases since mid-July covering groups with higher-risks including staff members of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) and nursing homes, staff of boarding section of special schools, taxi and public light bus drivers, restaurant staff, market tenants and staff, slaughterhouse staff, as well as frontline staff of the property management sector. The estimated number of individuals involved is around 500 000. In

view of the confirmed cases identified in several public housing estates in the Tsz Wan Shan area, the Government has in collaboration with non-governmental organisations provided virus testing services for some 40 000 residents of nearby public housing estates. Starting from today, the scope of testing will be gradually extended to cover 46 buildings in Wong Tai Sin district, Kwun Tong district, Tuen Mun district and Yau Tsim Mong district, involving about 86 000 residents.

As at August 5, a total of 54 samples are reported to be preliminary positive out of the 137 000 tests conducted for above target groups, or at a positive rate of 0.04%. Due to the cluster of infected cases among foreign domestic helpers (FDHs), the Government announced yesterday to extend the coverage of testing to FDHs staying in boarding facilities of employment agencies. Considering the infection risk of pregnant women and their need for delivery at hospitals, the Home Affairs Department will partner with Yan Chai Hospital to provide virus testing services for pregnant women.

With the significantly enhanced virus testing capacity under the assistance from the Central Government, the HKSAR Government is planning for the second phase of TGTS to cover hotel staff with contact with travellers, frontline staff of public transportation services, staff providing welfare and care services to elderly and other target groups, frontline employees of government departments with frequent contact with members of the public, and teachers and staff of secondary schools, primary schools, special schools, kindergarten and child care centres. The Government will keep in view the epidemic situation and continue to extend and refine the TGTS.

The second phase of the TGTS will also include targeted groups with genuine need for repeated testing, for example, staff members of RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes. It is expected to involve an addition of around 500 000 individuals. The second phase of the TGTS is expected to be rolled out gradually from next week the earliest for a period of two to three weeks for completion in early September. Together with the first phase, the Government hopes that some one million persons would be tested under the TGTS. The Food and Health Bureau and relevant departments will announce the details of the scheme in due course.

Community Testing Scheme

In addition to the TGTS, the HKSAR Government will introduce the CTS to provide virus testing services free-of-charge to all Hong Kong citizens who may join on a voluntary basis. The objective is to identify infected persons early, particularly those who are asymptomatic. The scheme is expected to be launched gradually after two weeks' time the soonest. Members of the public are encouraged to participate in the CTS. In implementing the CTS, the Government aims to complete the tests within the shortest duration, to ensure that specimen bottles are distributed in the community via different channels to facilitate easy collection by members of the public and to maintain social distancing. The relevant process will be conducted electronically as far as possible with specimen bottle duly tracked, in order to ensure that each submitted specimen will be arranged for testing.

The Support Team had discussed with the HKSAR Government to provide support through three testing services suppliers from the Mainland in order to implement the large-scale testing schemes set out above. These include BGI (via Sunrise Diagnostic Centre in Hong Kong), Kingmed Diagnostics (Hong Kong) and HybriBio (via Hong Kong Molecular Pathology Diagnostic Centre in Hong Kong) to expeditiously increase the capacity of testing in Hong Kong. These testing services suppliers have rich experience in COVID-19 testing and are well established third-party testing agencies in the Mainland. They are subject to regulation under relevant laws in Hong Kong. It is expected that these suppliers will perform close to 500 000 tests per day in Hong Kong following the ramping up of testing capacity.

To support the implementation of CTS, BGI has started preparation for air-inflated laboratory to enhance its testing capacity and utilise the support from the Support Team. This temporary laboratory seeks to substantially expand the testing capacity in Hong Kong in a short period of time, and relevant setting will be removed after completion of relevant tests. On site selection, having considered various factors including the space required for a temporary large-scale testing facility, the need to maintain certain distance between the site and nearby residence, as well as logistics and ancillary support, the HKSAR Government has selected the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park Sports Centre in Sai Ying Pun for BGI to set up its temporary air-inflated laboratory. The laboratory complies with the requirements of a Biosafety Level 2 laboratory and will implement relevant infection control measures to ensure hygiene and appropriate waste management without emission of harmful gas.

Handling of personal data

The personal information provided by members of the public who voluntarily participate in testing will be encrypted and stored in the servers of the Government's data centres. They will not be transferred beyond the boundary of Hong Kong. The testing services providers will only have access to the barcode of the specimen bottle for reporting the test result to the Government. They will not have access to the personal data of individual members of the public. This arrangement is similar to the current testing arrangement for staff members of RCHEs and taxi and public light bus drivers, under which the registration of persons undergoing testing will be carried out by relevant government departments, and the testing personnel collecting specimens will only be given specimen bottles with a barcode. They will not know the personal information of the person being tested.

The collection and use of any personal data for the purpose of above-mentioned testing shall comply with the provisions of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Cap. 486). Relevant data will only be available to the Department of Health or relevant departments for the purpose of disease control. The workflow does not involve the provision of personal data to any organisations or persons outside Hong Kong. The Government has adopted measures to minimise the need for personal data to be collected and accessed. Further, all testing will only be conducted in Hong Kong, samples

of which will not be transported outside Hong Kong and will be destroyed after testing.

Medical Laboratory Technologists (Special Exemption) Regulation and arrangement for introducing technicians from the Mainland

Given the impending need to carry out large-scale testing in the shortest possible time to protect public health, the Government requires a large number of testing personnel. However, after discussions with the medical laboratory sector, it is agreed that Hong Kong does not have sufficient laboratory testing personnel with adequate training and experience to perform COVID-19 testing to meet the need in undergoing the CTS. The Government considers it necessary to invite laboratory testing personnel who possesses relevant testing experience from the Mainland to come to Hong Kong to assist in performing COVID-19 tests for a short period of time so as to launch CTS within a short period of time. The Government will gazette today the "Medical Laboratory Technologists (Special Exemption) Regulation" to temporarily exempt laboratory testing personnel who has obtained National accreditation from the registration requirements for medical laboratory testing in Hong Kong under the Supplementary Medical Professions Ordinance (Cap. 359), such that relevant laboratory testing personnel who possesses sufficient testing training and experience can carry out the testing as soon as possible.

The HKSAR Government has liaised with the National Health Commission (NHC) to arrange members of the National accredited laboratory testing personnel who possess adequate training and experience on COVID-19 tests to come to Hong Kong to conduct tests in Hong Kong. They will only engage in COVID-19 related testing. Upon completion of CTS, they will return to the Mainland and will not stay in Hong Kong for other work.

The spokesman reiterated that the core duty of the Support Team coordinated by the Central Government and established by NHC is to help strengthen the HKSAR's virus testing capacity. Members of the Support Team will participate in the medical laboratory work, but not treatment of patients. The HKSAR Government also has no plan to admit medical and nursing staff from the Mainland to perform any patient treatment work in Hong Kong.

(2) Establishing temporary treatment facilities

Temporary hospital

To relieve the pressure on the demand on public hospital beds, the HKSAR Government, with the Central Government's assistance, is planning to construct a two-storey temporary hospital on a 3.2 hectare piece of land near the AsiaWorld-Expo (AWE), in order to provide negative pressure wards with 800 to 1 000 beds and relevant medical equipment. The detailed works and appliance arrangement, as well as number of beds and other details will be further deliberated between the work groups of the HKSAR and the Mainland.

Community Treatment Facilities (mobile field hospitals)

As regards CTF, colloquially known as "mobile field hospitals", the Hospital Authority (HA) has established its CTF in Hall One of AWE to provide 500 beds. The facility, commissioned on August 1, provides triage of confirmed cases and isolation for patients with mild symptoms who are in stable condition, in order to ease the pressure on the demand of isolation beds in public hospitals.

Meanwhile, HA is preparing to expand CTF to Hall Two of AWE. The Central Government, on the HKSAR Government's request, had urgently supplied 400 beds and other relevant equipment to HA last week to facilitate the set-up work at Hall Two of AWE, so that it could be completed as soon as possible to commence service. In addition, in order to better prepare for a potential next wave of the epidemic, the Government is planning to further expand CTF to some of the other halls in AWE to provide about 1 000 beds.

The Mainland's mobile field hospital teams have considerable experience in setting up similar treatment facilities. To further enhance CTF in AWE, the Government has invited the Central Government to assist in arranging the relevant teams to share their mobile field hospital experience with HA, provide professional advice and recommendations on the treatment facilities in AWE, and to supply the relevant hospital beds and equipment, including temporary negative pressure treatment facilities. The HKSAR Government is arranging a video conference next week between HA and the Hubei mobile field hospital expert team to kick-starting the relevant exchange and follow up work.

The Mainland mobile field hospital expert team will focus on venue design and set-up arrangements, and will provide professional advice to the operation of the relevant facilities. The team will not participate in any clinical work, and will therefore not require local professional medical or nursing registration.

The HKSAR Government is actively pursuing the above work. With the Central Government's support and the community's joint efforts in fighting the virus, it is hoped that the spread of epidemic will be curbed as soon as possible.

