

HKSARG Leverages support of Central Authorities to curb epidemic

Promptly following up on the consensus and achievements from the second Mainland-Hong Kong thematic meeting on COVID-19 epidemic jointly hosted by the Chief Secretary for Administration of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), Mr John Lee, and the Deputy Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the State Council, Mr Huang Liuquan, on February 12, the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held an internal high-level meeting yesterday (February 13) and appointed the convenors from the HKSAR Government for five task forces. The convenors will co-ordinate with the representatives of the relevant ministries and commissions of the Central Authorities, as well as the Guangdong Provincial Government, to press ahead with the implementation work to tackle the aggravating situation of the fifth wave of the epidemic in Hong Kong.

The Chief Executive said, "The Central Authorities have all along been providing its strongest support for the HKSAR. Since the onset of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Central Authorities have conveyed to me on various occasions their care for the people of Hong Kong and their full support for the city's anti-epidemic efforts. On behalf of the HKSAR Government and the people of Hong Kong, I would like to express our sincere gratitude to them. Assuming the primary responsibility for the fight against the epidemic, the HKSAR Government will spare no effort to implement the strategy of 'preventing the importation of cases and the spread of the virus in the community' in pursuit of 'dynamic zero infection'; and leverage the Central Authorities' guidance based on their experience in fighting the epidemic, as well as their manpower and resource support, to further boost Hong Kong's capability of 'early identification, early isolation and early treatment' of the infected."

Indeed, in view of the rapid development of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the HKSAR Government has taken immediate actions and, with its own continuous efforts, striven to contain the virus by a multi-pronged approach, including boosting the capacities of community testing and sewage surveillance and strengthening contact tracing. At the same time, the Government has adjusted its quarantine and isolation strategies in a timely manner, including the launch of the "StayHomeSafe" Scheme on February 8 to arrange close contacts and household contacts of close contacts who are deemed appropriate after assessment to undergo home quarantine for 14 days and four days respectively, followed by the setting up of a 24-hour telephone hotline for the Scheme starting on February 10. As at yesterday noon, over 4 000 people were subjected to home quarantine under the Scheme, which has been operating generally smoothly thus far.

The Chief Executive continued, "The onslaught of the fifth wave of the epidemic has dealt a heavy blow to Hong Kong and overwhelmed the city's capacity of handling. The tremendous surge in the number of confirmed cases in recent days has lengthened the lead time for admitting people tested

positive to isolation facilities. The situation is highly undesirable and the HKSAR Government feels worried and sorry about it. The Government will start working through the task force with the Mainland as soon as possible to enhance Hong Kong's capabilities of testing and isolation facilities by all means; meanwhile, it will implement measures to alleviate the anxieties of those members of the public waiting at home for isolation, including the distribution of information kits, setting up of a designated enquiry hotline, and provision of online diagnostic services. The Food and Health Bureau and the Hospital Authority will map out and announce details as soon as possible."

To cope with the new wave of the epidemic, the HKSAR Government has mobilised all available manpower with different bureaux and departments joining hands to form a robust anti-epidemic team. Many staff members working in the office have joined colleagues at the frontline to participate in "restriction-testing declaration" operations, handle hotline enquiries and provide door-to-door support services. At the internal high-level meeting yesterday, the Chief Executive further assigned different Directors of Bureaux to take forward various areas of work with the Mainland as follows:

(1) the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, will be responsible for the task force of epidemiologists, co-ordinating the Department of Health, the Hospital Authority and local experts to liaise with Mainland experts to assist Hong Kong in conducting pathological investigations and analyses;

(2) the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Erick Tsang Kwok-wai, will be responsible for the task force of enhancing the capability of nucleic acid testing, including the co-ordination of community testing facilities and ancillary work in Hong Kong;

(3) the Secretary for Development, Mr Michael Wong, will be responsible for the task force of co-ordinating and working with the corresponding Mainland authorities to construct community isolation and treatment facilities, including the identification of suitable locations in Hong Kong for the provisioning of such facilities;

(4) the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, will be responsible for the task force of ensuring medical supplies, including the co-ordination of the delivery, in an orderly manner, of such anti-epidemic supplies from the Mainland as rapid antigen test kits in large quantities, beds, furniture for isolation and treatment facilities, masks and protective gear to Hong Kong, and the distribution of them to the relevant departments, organisations and residents; and

(5) the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, will be responsible for the task force of ensuring other supplies from the Mainland, including the co-ordination of the detailed logistical arrangements for the supply of fresh food, vegetables and daily necessities to Hong Kong.

The above Directors of Bureaux will work together with colleagues of the departments under their purview and disseminate information in a timely

manner to the public to keep members thereof posted on the progress and effectiveness of the various anti-epidemic measures. The Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr John Lee, will be responsible for co-ordinating the task forces in drawing up and taking forward concrete measures, report to the Chief Executive thereon and hold thematic meeting(s) with the Mainland authorities as and when required.

The Chief Executive said, "In the face of such a challenging epidemic situation, we fully understand the anxieties of the public. The HKSAR Government will work as a team and do its best to implement and strengthen at full steam the various existing anti-epidemic measures. With the full support to Hong Kong by the Central Authorities together with the Governments of Guangdong Province and Shenzhen through the above-mentioned task forces, I believe that our measures will give their full play to curb the epidemic. Meanwhile, boosting the local vaccination rate as soon as possible is our top priority. The HKSAR Government will continue to increase vaccination venues, recruit more medical staff to administer vaccination for residents of elderly homes, lower the minimum age for receiving the Sinovac vaccine to three years old, and implement the "vaccine pass" initiative with a view to achieving a vaccination rate of over 90 per cent to strengthen Hong Kong's immune barrier against the epidemic.

"The HKSAR Government will also fully strengthen the dissemination of up-to-date anti-epidemic-related information to the community on all fronts to keep the public abreast of the latest epidemic development, as well as the corresponding measures of the HKSAR Government, and enhance their sense of vigilance by dispelling any unfounded rumours in a timely manner. As public service broadcaster, the Radio Television Hong Kong will support the work above through its television and radio channels and websites. May I appeal to the members of the public to stay confident and continue to comply with the anti-epidemic measures of the HKSAR Government, go out less, maintain good personal hygiene and take preventive measures to guard against the virus."

As regards the sixth round of the Anti-epidemic Fund to be rolled out soon further to the announcement by the Chief Executive, the HKSAR Government will provide the Legislative Council (LegCo) with a detailed document today (February 14) to apply for an injection of \$27 billion into the Anti-epidemic Fund for scrutiny by the Finance Committee at the meeting scheduled for February 15. The HKSAR Government is confident that it will receive the support of LegCo members for the early approval of the funding so as to implement the various support measures as early as possible.