

Inter-departmental task force continues to take forward measures to support residential care homes in handling COVID-19 developments

A spokesman for the Labour and Welfare Bureau (LWB) today (July 27) said that the Inter-departmental Task Force to Enhance Residential Care Homes (RCHs)' Capabilities in Epidemic Fight led by the LWB continues to review the progress of various improvement measures, with a view to strengthening the protection and support to RCHs in handling the developments of the epidemic.

Building barriers to protect RCHs

For ventilation improvement, upon the Task Force's steer, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) in co-ordination with the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department (EMSD) and the Buildings Department completed inspections to over 700 private/self-financing RCHs and contract homes operated by private organisations in Hong Kong in end-June. RCHs' ventilation equipment were checked if they met applicable requirements, and improvement recommendations were made for RCHs. Short-term recommendations included the addition of air purifiers, installation of window-mount exhaust fans, etc, while medium- to long-term recommendations included the installation of door louvre, exhaust air ducts with exhaust fans, etc. The SWD will collaborate with the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust again, with the Trust providing funding support for the RCHs to implement improvement recommendations concerned.

On vaccination for RCH residents, the Government has recruited additional medical teams to participate in outreach vaccination. A special programme has been launched from July 25, under which medical teams are invited to visit their matched RCHs at least once a week to provide outreach vaccination service for a period of six weeks. The Government will also provide a special allowance to cover the additional manpower and transportation costs. Currently, the vaccination rates for the first and second doses among RCH residents are about 93 per cent and 87 per cent respectively, while that for the third dose is about 40 per cent. The next-stage target is to increase the vaccination rate of the third dose to at least 50 per cent by end-September, in accordance with the principle that persons suitable for vaccination should get vaccinated.

To strengthen the protection to RCH residents, the testing requirements for RCH staff and visitors will be adjusted. From the 73rd round of compulsory testing commencing today, all RCH staff irrespective of their vaccination status are required to take polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid tests (PCR tests) once every seven days. The Government's contractors will deliver PCR testing kits to RCHs to facilitate the staff to complete the tests by taking self-administered specimens, and will collect

the specimens. RCH staff can also choose to take free-of-charge tests at the Community Testing Centres or mobile specimen collection stations and will be accorded priority. In addition, from August 1, all RCH visitors will be required to provide negative PCR test results obtained within 48 hours before the visits. From August 28, the vaccination requirements for visitors will be enhanced to the latest requirements of the Vaccine Pass. Persons yet to fulfil the Vaccine Pass requirements should get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Strengthening support to RCHs

The SWD's one-stop e-platform launched from June 13 has been in smooth operation. RCHs report anti-epidemic-related information daily, assisting the Government in closely monitoring the developments of the epidemic. The dedicated RCH hotline activated by the SWD in collaboration with the Department of Health (DH), the Hospital Authority (HA) and the Fire Services Department since July 1 has been handling RCHs' requests for assistance promptly. Generally, cases received through the hotline were resolved on the same day.

The DH and the HA have formulated a standing contingency plan for liaising with RCHs and enabling efficient triage of RCH residents to treatment/isolation/quarantine facilities. The HA's Community Geriatric Assessment Team and liaison mechanism in each of its clusters also provide support to RCHs for the elderly and RCHs for persons with disabilities respectively.

Handling developments of the epidemic

Upon the Task Force's steer, holding centres (HCs) / quarantine centres (QCs) have been reactivated timely. The HCs at the Shek Kip Mei Park Sports Centre and Siu Sai Wan Sports Centre have commenced operation from June 25, with a total of about 340 beds providing isolation and care services to confirmed RCH residents who are asymptomatic or showing mild symptoms. The six halls in the AsiaWorld-Expo managed by the SWD are used as QCs for RCH residents being close contacts. With the QC at the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal in standby mode, a total of about 1 750 QC beds are available. The Task Force will continue to identify HC/QC venues.

For treatment facilities, the HA has enhanced co-ordination among its clusters to provide a total of about 12 000 beds, ensuring that confirmed patients will receive timely treatment.

The LWB spokesman said that the RCH sector is the Government's key partner in the epidemic fight. The Government expressed gratitude to RCH operators and practitioners for their tireless efforts and active co-operation in implementing various anti-epidemic measures. The Government will continue to maintain communication and join hands with the sector in handling the epidemic and protecting RCH residents.

The Task Force comprises representatives from the LWB, the Health Bureau, the Development Bureau, the SWD, the DH, the EMSD and the HA.