

LC Urgent Q1: Measures to immediately improve the management of the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre

Following is an urgent question by the Hon Edward Leung under Rule 24(4) of the Rules of Procedure and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 19):

Question:

A female security guard working in the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre (PBQC) was suspected of having infected with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 in PBQC last week. A few days later, a security guard working in PBQC who had close contact with her was also confirmed to have been infected. With the epidemic situation worsening recently, a large number of members of the public have been sent to PBQC for isolation. However, with PBQC alleged for its mismanagement and unsatisfactory hygienic condition, coupled with the fact that the transmission chains of the Omicron variant have yet to be cut as of now, the public are concerned about PBQC's failure to properly implement infection control measures, which may result in the spread of the virus or cross-infection at PBQC and even in the community. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council how it will immediately improve the infection prevention measures of PBQC and its management, so as to prevent its staff from being infected and spreading the virus to the community?

Reply:

President,

When tackling the COVID-19 epidemic, the Government has been adhering to the principle of "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of the virus in the community". In order to prevent the spreading of the virus in the community, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) has remained vigilant by strictly implementing contact tracing, testing and quarantine measures for confirmed cases involving the mutant strain detected in the community. Currently, the CHP arranges all close contacts of confirmed cases to undergo quarantine at quarantine centres.

As persons undergoing quarantine at quarantine centres are contacts with higher risk levels, the Government places an emphasis on the anti-epidemic efforts at quarantine centres so as to ensure the safety of colleagues who work there and prevent the virus from spreading to the community through quarantine centres.

Currently, all persons working at the quarantine centres must wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). If these persons have to enter high-risk areas to perform duties, they must wear a full set of PPE

(including surgical mask, face shield, cap, gown and gloves) and strictly follow infection control measures. Staff of quarantine centres, including security workers, are categorised as groups of very high risks. The DH requires all security workers to complete the course of vaccination by receiving two doses of vaccine and, in accordance with requirements of the Food and Health Bureau, be tested once every two days.

The Government is highly concerned about the COVID-19 diagnosis of the two contract security workers who work at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre. Upon knowledge of the incident, the Civil Aid Service (CAS), which is responsible for the management of the quarantine centre, immediately arranged for cleaning and disinfection of the areas where the security workers had worked. The CAS had also reminded relevant persons to seek medical attention immediately should they feel unwell. Moreover, after conducting epidemiological investigations, the CHP had identified about 18 security workers as close contacts and arranged for them to undergo quarantine at quarantine centres.

Due to the development of the epidemic, the number of contacts undergoing quarantine at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre had increased substantially in recent days, among which were isolated incidents of individuals who could not receive tests before the end of quarantine period, resulting in delays in leaving the quarantine centre. We apologise for the inconvenience caused to the persons under quarantine, and have immediately carried out improvement measures, including enhancing manpower at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre, strengthening the communication mechanism with persons under quarantine and reviewing the operation of various departments in the quarantine centre, so as to avoid similar incidents from happening again.

I wish to take this opportunity to explain to Members the various enhancement measures, mainly involving four aspects, taken at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre:

- Enhancing manpower: the DH and CAS had immediately deployed additional manpower to work at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre and enhanced manpower from the contractors so as to strengthen the operation of the quarantine centre. The Fire Services Department had also temporarily deployed staff to assist in the daily operation of the centre. Currently, the manpower at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre had increased from about 600 to about 1 000;
- Checking the information in the computer system: the CAS had arranged for more experienced staff to be responsible for data entry and cross-checking of information of persons under quarantine every night so as to ensure the accuracy of records of persons checking in and out;
- Strengthening communication with persons under quarantine: we note that

the number of enquiries received at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre had drastically increased in recent days, resulting in a longer turnaround time for enquiries. Other than enhancing manpower in handling enquiries from persons under quarantine, the quarantine centre also disseminates the latest information to persons under quarantine at appropriate times through messaging and instant messaging applications, so as to reduce the number of repetitive enquiries. The DH had also temporarily set up a 24-hour dedicated hotline for persons under quarantine to enquire about the checking-out arrangements; and

- Cross-departmental coordination group: the coordination group is formed by various departments responsible for the operation of the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre and led by the DH. When needed, such as when the number of persons under quarantine drastically increased or when there are updates in the quarantine arrangement, the coordination group will operate to strengthen the communication among various departments and expedite the work of the quarantine centre.

I fully understand that the quarantine arrangement will bring inconvenience to members of the public, but quarantine is an important part of the policy of "preventing the spreading of the virus in the community" and has proven to be effective. In the nearly two years that have passed, a total of about 68 000 persons underwent quarantine at the quarantine centres, among which more than 2 700 (around 4 per cent) confirmed cases were discovered. I once again thank the effort of the frontline colleagues, and also hope that members of the public will understand the relevant measures and fight the virus together. We will also learn from this experience and improve the quality of the operation of the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre in order to protect the health of members of the public.