

LCQ1: Assistance provided for the unemployed

Following is a question by the Hon Ho Kai-ming (Hon Luk Chung-hung to ask on his behalf) and a reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 27):

Question:

Quite a number of people have become unemployed due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic. In view of this, the Government has implemented, under the existing Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme (CSSA), a "Special Scheme of Assistance to the Unemployed" with relaxed asset limits, which is applicable for the six-month period from June 1 to November 30 this year. Recently, I have received quite a number of requests for assistance from unemployed persons applying for CSSA. They have relayed that the relevant application procedure is cumbersome and the eligibility criteria are stringent, and some officers of the Social Welfare Department (SWD) made things difficult for them, displayed poor attitude, and even persuaded them to give up their applications. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of CSSA applications received from the unemployed by SWD in each of the past 12 months and, among such applications, the number of those in which the applicants did not comply with the original asset limits but would have complied with the relaxed asset limits;

(2) of the procedure for SWD to vet and approve CSSA applications from the unemployed, as well as the number of such applications and when the vetting and approval of all such applications will be completed, as envisaged by it; whether it will consider expediting the vetting and approval procedure so that the unemployed may obtain the assistance as early as possible; and

(3) of the current staffing establishment of SWD for processing CSSA applications; whether SWD will, in the light of the aforesaid view, review the workload of the relevant officers and consider increasing the manpower, so as to improve the services and raise the efficiency of vetting and approval of CSSA applications from the unemployed; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme provides a safety net to help persons and families who cannot support themselves financially to meet their basic needs. The Scheme is non-contributory, but applicants have to pass a means test to ensure public resources are used on those who are genuinely in need.

Having considered the unprecedented challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Hong Kong, the Chief Executive announced on April 8, 2020 the second round of anti-epidemic measures including the provision of a time-limited unemployment support scheme through the CSSA system, with a view to providing timely and basic assistance to the unemployed during this difficult time. The Finance Committee (FC) of the Legislative Council approved the related funding on April 18. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) will temporarily relax the CSSA asset limits for able-bodied persons (including able-bodied adult singletons and able-bodied adults and children under family cases) by 100 per cent for six months. The relevant scheme will be effective from June 1 to November 30 (i.e. the asset limits will revert to the normal level on December 1). Separately, under the existing CSSA arrangement, the value of an owner-occupied residential property of households with able-bodied persons will be disregarded for a grace period of the first 12 months. This arrangement will also apply to applicants under the six-month unemployment support scheme.

The 2019 Policy Address has also announced a series of measures to improve the CSSA. These measures include increasing the maximum rent allowance significantly, raising the maximum level of disregarded earnings substantially from \$2,500 to \$4,000 per month, strengthening the employment services, and extending a range of supplement and special grants to eligible non-elderly able-bodied recipients, etc. The relevant proposal has already been submitted to the FC for approval, following which the Government will implement the measures as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the Government adjusts CSSA payment rates according to the price index movements every year to maintain the purchasing power of the payments. During the period between 2011 and 2019, the CSSA payments registered a cumulative increase of about 40 per cent. The Government has submitted a proposal to the FC this year to increase the CSSA payments by 3.6 per cent from February 1, 2020. Upon FC's approval, the relevant increase will take retrospective effect from February 1.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the community, the Government has implemented a series of disease control measures in view of the development of the pandemic. These measures include special work arrangement for civil servants and various arrangements to minimise social contact, etc. In this connection, the Social Security Field Units (SSFUs) of SWD has put in place restrictive measures on public services involving face-to-face contact since early February 2020 to reduce the risk of community infection. Nevertheless, SWD has been implementing special measures, such as facilitating applicants to make use of the application drop boxes outside the SSFUs, or to provide application information by post and email, etc to ensure timely processing of applications for the CSSA and timely disbursement of the relevant payments to eligible applicants and existing recipients. The SSFUs have also continued to arrange meetings with individual applicants as necessary in order to actively process their applications without delay. In view of the Government's announcement on the gradual resumption of public services made on April 28, all SSFUs of the SWD have resumed opening to the public starting from May 4.

SWD will keep in close view the development of the pandemic and adjust its arrangements as appropriate. I must also stress that SWD is committed to

serve those in need and provide various social welfare services for them. The Government believes that most of the unemployed CSSA recipients are only in need of temporary assistance to tide over the difficulties. During this difficult time, the society should lend a helping hand to those in financial needs by providing them basic assistance.

My reply to the Member's question is set out below:

(1) The number of CSSA applications under the unemployment category received by SWD in the past year (i.e. from May 2019 to April 2020) is set out in Annex. The six-month unemployment support scheme will be effective from June 1 to November 30, 2020.

(2) Generally, if CSSA applicants or their guardians/appointees provide all the necessary information, the application procedures can be completed in four weeks. During the period when the SSFUs shortened their opening hours in response to the pandemic, SWD has continued to process CSSA applications in a timely manner with the aforementioned special measures.

(3) At present, SWD has more than 1 300 social security grade officers working in various SSFUs in the territory. They are responsible for processing and approving applications and cases of CSSA and Social Security Allowance (including Old Age Allowance, Old Age Living Allowance and Disability Allowance). To cope with the recent and anticipated increase in workload related to the CSSA Scheme, SWD has adopted a two-pronged approach to step up the manpower of the SSFUs starting from May 2020. SWD has assigned additional staff to share the workload through temporary internal redeployment, and engaged over 70 experienced retired social security grade officers under the Post-retirement Service Contract Scheme to assist in processing and vetting CSSA applications.