

LCQ1: Enhancing support for homeless women

Following is a question by the Hon Lam So-wai and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (February 28):

Question:

A study report has pointed out that society lacks support services which target the needs of homeless women, while homeless services are male user-oriented, and the number of accommodation places for homeless women is quite limited. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the annual number of female street sleepers in the past five years; whether the authorities have studied the underlying causes for the change in the number of female street sleepers and formulated corresponding plans; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that according to the aforesaid study report, homeless women have greater emotional needs when compared with homeless men, whether the authorities have reviewed the adequacy of emotional and mental health support services currently provided by the Social Welfare Department and other non-governmental organisations for homeless women; and

(3) whether it will, by drawing reference from the practices in overseas countries, provide doubleton accommodation for the homeless without limitations on gender and relationship, so as to cater for their interpersonal needs, assist them in building a mutual support network, and further facilitate follow-up and intervention by social workers, such that the homeless can more easily quit street sleeping for good; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Street sleeping is a complex social problem, involving the policies and work of different bureaux and departments. Government departments and local service units concerned have been in close collaboration to assist street sleepers. Having consulted the Health Bureau, I provide a consolidated reply to the question as follows:

(1) According to the information submitted to the Computerised Street Sleeper Registry, owing to the pandemic and economic reasons, the number of female street sleepers increased from 139 (as at end-December 2019) to 179 (as at end-December 2021). With the epidemic situation easing, the number of female street sleepers decreased to 114 (as at end-December 2023) due to various

reasons such as having been allocated accommodation arrangement and family reunion. The number of female street sleepers in the past five years is tabulated as follows:

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of female street sleepers (as at year end)	139	162	179	158	114

(2) Regarding the welfare support for street sleepers, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been subventing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to operate three Integrated Services Teams for Street Sleepers (ISTs) to conduct day and late-night outreach visits for proactively reaching out to street sleepers and understanding their reasons for street sleeping. The ISTs render integrated services according to the actual welfare needs of street sleepers and their willingness to receive services. These services, including counselling, service referral, short-term accommodation and application for financial assistance, etc, are provided to address the urgent welfare needs of street sleepers, thereby helping them live off the streets and reintegrate into the community.

Since 2020-21, the SWD has been allocating additional resources to the three ISTs and the Care and Support Networking Team to increase the manpower of social workers, psychiatric nurses and drivers as well as the funding of related items. The ISTs will provide appropriate services according to the needs of female street sleepers, including reaching out and supporting the female street sleepers through outreaching visits, arranging caseworkers of the same gender to handle cases to improve the effectiveness of relationship building, promptly handling the arrangement of short-term accommodation for female street sleepers, providing counselling services on female emotional management and referring them for appropriate welfare services, etc. In addition, to address the emotional need of some female street sleepers, the psychiatric nurses will provide mental health talks, group activities, personal counselling and referral services, etc. Additional psychiatric nurses can also more effectively identify and handle street sleepers (including female street sleepers) with physical and mental health problems, provide early intervention and refer them for appropriate medical services.

The Government spares no effort in mental health promotion and public education towards persons of different age groups (including female street sleepers). The Advisory Committee on Mental Health implemented the "Shall We Talk" mental health promotion and public education initiative, so as to enhance public knowledge about mental health and encourage members of the public in need to seek help and intervention in a timely manner. Besides, the Health Bureau launched the "18111 – Mental Health Support Hotline" in December 2023 to provide one-stop, round-the-clock support for people with mental health needs, rendering them immediate mental health support and referral services.

(3) The SWD-subsidized short-term accommodation service provides transitional accommodation for street sleepers to tide them over to stable living arrangements. Among the existing 228 SWD-subsidized places, a total of 203 places are provided in rooms that accommodate five to 14 people (some separated by partitions) depending on the floor area and layout. Taking into account the operational needs and views of other residents, street sleepers will be accommodated in single-sex rooms. The remaining 25 places are provided by NGOs through renting single and double rooms from licensed guesthouses to provide short-term accommodation service to street sleepers in need.

Regarding the accommodation needs of street sleepers and their partners, social workers will make appropriate accommodation arrangements with reference to their wish and individual welfare needs, such as using emergency fund to pay short-term rent or rental deposits for street sleepers to rent guesthouses or private flats, or referring them for transitional housing.