

LCQ1: Policy on and support for street sleepers

Following is a question by the Hon Shiu Ka-chun and a reply by the Acting Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Caspar Tsui, in the Legislative Council today (July 4):

Question :

In the past four years, the number of street sleepers registered with the Social Welfare Department rose from 746 to 1 127 (representing a 50 per cent increase) and, among them, the number of female street sleepers rose from 35 to 104 (representing a two-fold increase). Moreover, the findings of a survey on homeless people who stay overnight in fast food restaurants operating 24 hours a day have shown that there were 57 such type of homeless people across the territory in 2013, whereas the number in four districts alone was 384 at the end of last year. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it will conduct a survey on the number of street sleepers (including homeless people) across the territory as well as the districts and locations where they sleep or stay, so as to provide reference when a policy on street sleepers is formulated;
- (2) whether it has studied the causes for the rise in the number of female street sleepers in recent years, and whether it will enhance the support for them, such as increasing the number of accommodation places provided for them; and
- (3) whether it will, by making reference to the service model of the Homeless Outreach & Mobile Engagement Street Action Teams in New York, set up a dedicated department to deal with the issue of street sleepers and send out outreach workers to show them care, provide immediate assistance as well as arrange long-term accommodation; if so, of the implementation timetable?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the Member's question is as follows:

- (1) To keep track of the demand for social welfare support services of street sleepers, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been collecting information about the particulars of street sleepers in Hong Kong, including the number of street sleepers and their street-sleeping locations, through the SWD's service units and four non-governmental organisations (NGOs) serving street sleepers. The relevant information is captured in the SWD's "Computerised Street Sleeper Registry" and will be updated continuously. The SWD will also review the methods for collecting data from time to time to ensure data

accuracy, and make reference to the relevant data for the purpose of service planning.

(2) The SWD did not conduct analysis on the reasons of changes in the number of street sleepers based on their gender. The number of female street sleepers in 2017-18 was 104. To address the emergency and short-term accommodation needs of street sleepers, the SWD provided 20 additional subvented hostel/shelter places in 2016-17 through deploying additional resources, of which five were female places, thus increasing the total number of subvented female places to 31. Together with the 132 female places provided by other NGOs on a self-financing basis, the total number of female hostel/shelter places provided is 163.

Besides facing the same problems and needs as male street sleepers, female street sleepers are more in need of social and emotional support to improve the motivation for receiving services and to change their street sleeping lives. In view of the increasing number of female street sleepers, in addition to increasing the number of female hostel/shelter places, the Integrated Services Teams for Street Sleepers (ISTs) subvented by the SWD have also enhanced the support facilities of their hostel/shelter places and, through early intervention and counseling during their stay in the hostel/shelter, strengthen their confidence and ability to re-integrate into the community.

(3) Street sleeping is a complex social problem, involving policies and work of various bureaux and departments. Various government departments and service units in districts have been collaborating closely to support street sleepers and improve their motivation for receiving support, with the hope to encourage them to quit street sleeping as soon as possible. The SWD is concerned about the welfare needs of street sleepers and has been providing them with appropriate social welfare support services.

At present, the SWD subvents three NGOs to each operate an IST to provide street sleepers with integrated services, including emergency shelter or short-term accommodation, emergency fund, personal care (e.g. bathing, haircut and meal arrangement), counselling, long-term accommodation arrangement, employment support and service referrals, etc. The ISTs also conduct day and late-night outreaching visits to approach street sleepers for early identification of their needs and render them the assistance needed. However, street sleeping may be due to various reasons. Personal factors and changes in socio-economic situation aside, street sleepers usually require more time before they will accept the services and make a change to re-integrate into the community. The ISTs will therefore render appropriate assistance to the street sleepers in accordance with the situation of each individual case.

The SWD considers that the existing strategies and support services can overall respond to the social welfare needs of street sleepers, but will continue to monitor the situation closely and take appropriate measures in response to the changing needs for social welfare services.