

LCQ11: Measures to support persons with hearing impairment

Following is a question by the Hon Gary Zhang and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (November 8):

Question:

Some concern groups have relayed that in its "Special Topics Report No. 63 – Persons with disabilities and chronic diseases" published in 2021, the Census and Statistics Department adopted a definition for "persons with hearing difficulty" (the updated definition) that is different from the one adopted in its previous surveys (the original definition). According to the updated definition, there were about 47 900 persons with hearing difficulty in 2020, while the number would be over 240 000 under the original definition. Such a change in definition would have an impact on the Government's policy towards persons with hearing impairment (HI) and might lead to reduced supporting resources for persons with HI. Regarding the measures to support persons with HI, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it will consider reverting to the original definition in compiling statistics on persons with HI;
- (2) as it has been learnt that the grant currently provided by the Social Welfare Department for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance recipients with binaural hearing loss is only enough for purchasing a monaural hearing aid with the most basic features, but quite a number of recipients have relayed that the given hearing aids are useless, whether the authorities will consider providing such recipients with binaural hearing aid fitting and upgrading the quality of the hearing aids, as well as reviewing the existing service mode;
- (3) whether it has compiled statistics on the current total number of sign language interpreters in Hong Kong; what specific policy is in place to ensure the service quality of sign language interpreters;
- (4) whether it has compiled statistics on the current number of counselling experts or psychologists who are able to provide services in sign language for persons with HI; in respect of improving the mental health of persons with HI, whether the authorities will formulate guidelines for counselling experts or psychologists on the provision of mental health services for persons with HI; and
- (5) of the existing channels through which students with HI may apply to the Education Bureau for the provision of sign language interpretation service in class; of the amount of funding set aside by the University Grants Committee for application by hearing impaired students with special educational needs in each of the past five years, and the number of students benefited

annually?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD), the Health Bureau and the Education Bureau (EDB) on the Member's question, I set out below a consolidated reply:

(1) The C&SD has updated the definitions for selected types of disability (including hearing difficulty) when conducting the survey on persons with disabilities and chronic diseases from August 2019 to December 2020 in relation to the latest international development in collecting statistical data on disability. This update was based on the recommended question sets developed by the United Nations Washington Group on Disability Statistics, which are based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, and have been widely adopted internationally. Before adopting the updated definition in this round of the survey, the C&SD had consulted stakeholders including relevant Government bureaux/departments (B/Ds), statutory bodies, the academia and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The responses were generally supportive.

In spite of the update in the statistical definition, in order to cater for the needs of different statistical data users on disability statistics, the C&SD continued to collect information on persons with disabilities under the original definition and released the survey results in "Special Topics Report No. 63". Data users can apply different sets of data depending on the situation. The C&SD plans to continue to collect and disseminate information on persons with disabilities under both definitions in future. Relevant B/Ds may take into account the survey results in the "Special Topics Report No. 63" as well as other factors such as the current service demand from persons with disabilities in their service planning.

(2) The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for people who cannot support themselves financially due to old age, ill-health, disability, single parenthood, unemployment, low-earnings or for other reasons to help them meet their basic needs. CSSA recipients with hearing impairment (HI) receive higher standard rates than able-bodied CSSA recipients, and are provided with a number of supplements and special grants to cater for their special needs.

In particular, CSSA recipients with HI may apply for a special grant from the Social Welfare Department (SWD) to cover the cost of hearing aids on an actual cost basis, subject to recommendations from recognised health professionals of the Hospital Authority (HA), Department of Health, the SWD or NGOs subvented by the SWD. The SWD will process such applications based on the assessment and recommendations of recognised health professionals. There are no restrictions on the types of the hearing aids.

(3) The Government does not maintain statistics on the number of sign language interpreters in Hong Kong. As regards the service quality of sign

language interpreters, the Labour and Welfare Bureau in September 2015 included sign language in the domain of language courses under the Continuing Education Fund (CEF) and accepted applications from course providers for registration of their sign language courses as the CEF courses. In addition, the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee and the Hong Kong Joint Council for People with Disabilities/Hong Kong Council of Social Service have established the List of Sign Language Interpreters in Hong Kong for voluntary registration since June 2016, which sets out the information of sign language interpreters (including professional qualifications, work experience and contact means) to facilitate organisations and the public to choose sign language interpretation services. It is expected that the setting up of the List can help promote the learning and use of sign language, and will also be conducive to fostering the development of sign language interpretation as a profession in the long run.

(4) The Government does not maintain statistics on the number of counselling professionals or psychologists who are able to provide services in sign language for persons with HI. The HA currently does not have guidelines for counselling professionals or psychologists on the provision of mental health services to persons with HI. Nevertheless, the multi-disciplinary psychiatric teams of the HA, comprising doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, occupational therapists, medical social workers, etc, have all along been providing holistic healthcare services for patients with mental health needs (including those with HI). Healthcare professionals will provide appropriate in-patient, out-patient, day rehabilitation training and community support services for patients according to their clinical condition and needs. In the course of medical treatment or consultation, the hospital or clinic concerned will arrange interpretation service (including sign language) to facilitate communication if required by patients or healthcare professionals.

(5) For primary and secondary schools, the Government adopts a dual-track mode in the implementation of special education. The EDB will, subject to the assessment and recommendation of specialists and with parents' consent, refer students with more severe HI or those students with HI who cannot construct knowledge because of inadequate speech abilities (i.e. those students who may need to use sign language in communication and learning) to the School for Children with Hearing Impairment to receive intensive support services. Other students with HI will attend ordinary schools for integrated education.

With the support of the EDB, the School has all along been implementing various projects of Sign-assisted Instruction, including the Development of New Vocabulary of Sign Language for New Senior Secondary Curriculum Programme and the Removing Communication Barriers in Sign Language and Oral Language Holistic Support for Students with Hearing Impairment Programme, to continuously integrate and develop new sign vocabularies needed in teaching for teachers. The School has also compiled a visual sign language dictionary that contains daily and subject-based sign vocabularies for public use. In addition, the School has set up a Sign Language Teaching Resources Centre to provide consultation services for students, parents and teachers in need.

As regards public sector ordinary primary and secondary schools, the EDB has all along been providing additional resources to support students with

special educational needs (SEN), including students with HI. If schools consider it more appropriate to adopt sign language or combine the use of sign language to assist students in learning, schools may deploy the additional resources, such as the Learning Support Grant, holistically and flexibly to employ teachers or teaching assistants who know sign language, or hire professional services including sign interpretation service to cater for the needs of the students with HI.

For the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities, they may, under the principle of institutional autonomy, flexibly deploy their recurrent subventions allocated in the form of a block grant by the Government for various purposes, including the allocation of resources to support students with HI. In addition, the UGC allocates additional resources to the eight UGC-funded universities in the 2022-2025 triennium by providing an additional special funding of \$67.5 million for the Special Grant to Enhance the Support for Students with Special Educational Needs, which seeks to enable the universities to enhance the teaching and learning experience of students with SEN, strengthen staff training and promote campus integration. All students with HI are among the beneficiary groups. Based on the data provided by the universities, the numbers of students with HI enrolled in the UGC-funded programmes in the past five years (2018/19 to 2022/23 academic years) are 98, 104, 89, 98 and 98 respectively.