

LCQ12: Ex-gratia cash allowance for 2019 Coronavirus Disease patients

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Pui-leung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (April 27):

Question:

The Government currently provides a one-off ex-gratia cash allowance of \$5,000 (cash allowance) for eligible locally confirmed 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) persons. One of the eligibility criteria is that the applicants face financial hardship whilst being hospitalised in public hospitals for treatment of the disease. There are views pointing out that due to the severe overloading of public hospital services earlier on, quite a number of confirmed patients could not be hospitalised for treatment and were thus ineligible to apply for the cash allowance. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of applications received, approved and rejected by the Government since the implementation of the aforesaid measure; if there were rejected applications, of the reasons for that; the average time taken for vetting and approving each application;

(2) as it is learnt that the government department responsible for vetting and approving the applications for cash allowance will only seek to verify the applicants' information with other government departments, the Hospital Authority and their employers as appropriate, whether the Government has conducted random checks on the applications in this regard to ensure that there is no abuse of the measure; if so, of the number of random checks conducted; and

(3) given that quite a number of confirmed patients could not be hospitalised in public hospitals for treatment earlier on, whether the Government will adjust the eligibility criteria for the cash allowance, e.g. an applicant is eligible for applying for the cash allowance on provision of proof of confirmed COVID-19 infection; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Regarding the question raised by the Hon Chan Pui-leung, my reply is as follows:

(1) As at April 4, 2022, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has received a total of 2 150 applications for the one-off ex-gratia cash allowance for locally confirmed COVID-19 patients (the Scheme). Among them, 1 395 applications were approved, 26 applications were rejected and 109

applications were withdrawn by the applicants. Reasons for the applications being rejected include the applicant being an imported COVID-19 case, the applicant not being a confirmed COVID-19 case, the applicant being entitled to paid sick leave, etc. The SWD does not have the average vetting time for each application.

(2) The SWD vets all applications according to the published eligibility criteria, including examining the information provided by the applicants, contacting the employers of the applicants or relevant personnel to verify relevant information, and confirming with the Department of Health (DH) whether the applicants were eligible locally confirmed COVID-19 patients. If needed, the SWD will also require the applicant to further provide supporting documents for inspection and verification. In addition, the SWD will, in accordance with the risk-based principle, conduct random checks to prevent abuse.

(3) The Community Care Fund launched the Scheme on November 27, 2020 to disburse a one-off ex-gratia cash allowance of \$5,000 to eligible locally confirmed COVID-19 patients. The Scheme aims to remove the concern of potentially infected persons from coming forward to take tests that they would suffer from financial hardship whilst being hospitalised in public hospitals for COVID-19 treatment if they were tested positive. An applicant has to be a Hong Kong resident confirmed by the DH to have contracted COVID-19 locally, currently employed but not entitled to paid sick leave or is self-employed, and faces financial hardship whilst being hospitalised in public hospitals for COVID-19 treatment. The above eligibility criteria are currently valid.

When the Scheme was first launched, Hong Kong was in the fourth wave of the epidemic. Community testing centres (CTCs) and mobile specimen collection stations in various districts had gradually commenced testing service since mid-November 2020. To implement the strategy of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment" and to slow down the transmission of the virus, the Government has promulgated the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) on November 15, 2020. It provides a legal framework for the Government to require certain categories of persons to undergo COVID-19 testing, and to allow specified medical practitioners to require symptomatic patients to undergo testing. The transmissibility and the number of infected persons of the fourth wave of the epidemic were lower than those of the current fifth wave. Local public hospitals were able to admit all confirmed patients for treatment at that time with their average length of hospitalisation being 14 days. Since this would have a greater financial impact to those who were employed but not entitled to paid sick leave and those who were self-employed, some members of the public might be hesitant to undergo testing. The Scheme was a supporting measure introduced under the aforesaid background.

Since the launch of the Scheme, concerns of the public in undergoing testing have greatly reduced. Compared to some 590 000 tests performed monthly at that time, more than 2.8 million tests were performed in CTCs and mobile specimen collection stations in March 2022. In addition, since March 7, 2022, more than 440 000 positive results from self-administered rapid

antigen test (RAT) were reported to the DH by members of the public. During the fifth wave of the epidemic, patients with relatively mild symptoms may be admitted to community isolation facilities or stay at home for isolation. Infected persons who have received at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccines may be discharged from isolation if they obtained negative RAT results consecutively on the sixth and seventh day of isolation. At present, about 80 per cent of the public have had received at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccines. Therefore, the number of days absent from work due to infection has significantly reduced, thus having lesser financial impact on the infected.

In view of the ever-changing situation of the epidemic, the Government has introduced various measures to assist sectors and people affected by the epidemic. For example, the Temporary Unemployment Relief Scheme was launched under the sixth round of the Anti-epidemic Fund, granting a one-off subsidy of \$10,000 to eligible persons who lost their jobs due to the fifth wave of the epidemic to reduce their financial stress before they find another job. Full-time or part-time employees, as well as self-employed persons may apply. The Government has also introduced a bill to amend the Employment Ordinance (EO) stipulating that employees' absence from work for the purpose of complying with requirements restricting their movement imposed under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance, including isolation due to infection or being made subject to "restriction-testing declarations", will be deemed as sickness days under the EO. Sickness allowance is to be provided to affected employees, subject to the fulfilment of the relevant criteria under the EO, to reduce the financial impact on them.

When considering whether the eligibility criteria of the Scheme should be relaxed, the Government has to take into consideration the changes of the epidemic situation, other supporting measures, the pressure on public finance brought by relaxation of the eligibility criteria and other relevant factors. Currently, the Government has no plan to adjust the eligibility criteria of the Scheme.