

LCQ13: Food assistance services

Following is a question by the Hon Wu Chi-wai and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 6):

Question:

At present, eight non-governmental organisations are subsidised by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) for operating short-term food assistance service projects (subsidised food banks) to provide low-income persons with basic food items on a short term basis (generally not more than eight weeks each time). In addition, quite a number of charities operate food banks on a self-financing basis to provide food assistance to the people in need. It has been reported that as the economy of Hong Kong has been badly hit in recent months by the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic, quite a number of families have encountered financial difficulties, which has caused a surge in the demand for food assistance. However, quite a number of self-financing food banks have curtailed their services amid the epidemic for reasons including a sharp reduction in the quantity of food donated to them, shortage of volunteers for food handling, and avoidance of group gatherings for epidemic prevention. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) Of the following details of the food assistance services provided by the subsidised food banks in each month from January last year to April this year: the number of applications received, the service quota, as well as (i) the number of meals served and (ii) the duration for which food assistance was offered in respect of each approved case on average; whether the Government has the corresponding figures regarding the self-financing food banks; if so, of the details;

(2) Of the following details of the short-term food assistance service in each District Council district at present: the service quota, the number of service users, and the maximum number of meals that can be offered per month; whether such service is found to be lacking in particular districts; if so, whether there are plans to provide such service in those districts;

(3) Given that the self-financing food banks have curtailed their services amid the epidemic, whether SWD will relax (i) the eligibility criteria for applying for, and (ii) the stipulation on the time limit for receiving, the short-term food assistance; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) Whether SWD has assessed if the food assistance services currently provided by the subsidised and self-financing food banks can meet the demand against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating economy in Hong Kong; whether SWD has plans to increase the funding for the subsidised food banks and provide subsidies to the self-financing food banks; if so, of the details; and

(5) Given that different thresholds have been set for application for the assistance provided by the Government under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme and the two rounds of relief measures, and that it takes time to vet and approve the applications, whether the Government will provide immediate assistance to low-income and unemployed persons so as to reduce their reliance on the food banks; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

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

(1) According to the latest information of the Social Welfare Department (SWD), the details of the services provided by the operators of the Short-term Food Assistance Service Projects funded by the SWD for the period January 2019 to February 2020 are as follows:

Month	Number of applications	Number of service users	Number of meal-days served
January 2019	772	2 100	183 948
February 2019	716	2 152	120 275
March 2019	1 070	3 063	166 393
April 2019	1 114	3 289	192 398
May 2019	1 412	4 164	228 620
June 2019	1 038	3 100	233 806
July 2019	1 000	2 922	238 571
August 2019	1 077	3 068	220 591
September 2019	1 222	3 697	212 465
October 2019	1 279	3 758	242 368
November 2019	1 231	3 578	237 246
December 2019	1 211	3 514	248 651
January 2020	1 047	3 092	227 705
February 2020	1 012	2 824	189 405
Total	15 201	44 321	2 942 442

Note 1: On average, a service user is granted food assistance for a period of 66 days (i.e. around 9.5 weeks).

Note 2: A "meal-day" refers to breakfast, lunch and dinner required on a day.

â€‹The SWD does not possess the relevant figures on similar programmes not funded by the SWD.

(2) The Short-term Food Assistance Service Projects provide territory-wide services. The details of the services, broken down by the SWD's administrative districts, are as follows:

Service area	Number of applications	Number of service users	Number of meal-days served
	January 2019 to February 2020 (14 months)		
Hong Kong Island, Islands, Tsuen Wan and Kwai Tsing	2 744	7 899	429 934
Kwun Tong	2 068	6 474	574 290
Wong Tai Sin and Sai Kung	1 316	3 868	356 289
Sha Tin, Tai Po and North	2 586	7 390	362 860
Sham Shui Po	1 732	5 190	286 623
Kowloon City, Yau Tsim Mong	2 242	6 323	351 547
Tuen Mun	643	1 813	166 824
Yuen Long	1 870	5 364	414 075
Total	15 201	44 321	2 942 442

(3) The Short-term Food Assistance Service Projects provide a one-off basic food assistance to eligible individuals or families for a period of up to eight weeks. Operators may extend the service period beyond eight weeks, depending on the special needs of individual applicants and their families. Currently, the SWD has put in place established vetting principles and eligibility criteria, and anyone who is in need and eligible (including those with income reduction or unemployed due to economic downturn, as well as their families) may apply for food assistance. Operators will refer service users with long-term welfare or other service needs (such as Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA)) to the suitable service unit.

(4) Given the prevailing local economic conditions and outlook, the Government has proposed in the Estimates this year an increase in the commitment for the Short-term Food Assistance Service Projects by \$85 million to cope with the rising service demand. The SWD does not have plan to fund similar programmes currently not funded by the SWD.

(5) The Chief Executive announced on February 14, 2020 that the Anti-epidemic Fund would provide a special allowance to eligible Working Family Allowance households and Student Financial Assistance households, regardless of whether they are unemployed or under-employed, so as to support low-income households to weather the deteriorating economic and employment conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The disbursement of the special allowance will commence by end-June 2020 in batches. It is expected to benefit about 200 000 households, and involve a total expenditure of about \$990 million.

Furthermore, having considered the unprecedented challenges posed by the

pandemic, 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. Specifically, the SWD will temporarily relax the CSSA asset limits for able-bodied applicants by 100 per cent for six months (from June 1 to November 30, 2020). Moreover, under the existing CSSA arrangement, the value of an owner-occupied residential property of able-bodied households will be disregarded for a grace period of 12 months. This arrangement will also apply to applicants under the six-month unemployment support scheme. It is roughly estimated that the above-mentioned scheme will benefit about 40 000 households, and involve a total expenditure of about \$3,520 million.