

LCQ15: Supporting street sleepers amid the epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Martin Liao and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (February 24):

Question:

It has been reported that some street sleepers have recently been confirmed, one after another, to have been infected with the Coronavirus Disease 2019. As revealed by a survey conducted by a grassroots concern group and some media reports, the number of street sleepers has surged amid the epidemic. Among the street sleepers, quite a number of them have become street sleepers for the first time upon losing their jobs or are Hong Kong people who originally resided on the Mainland and have moved back to Hong Kong. Some children are even found street-sleeping with their family members. The situation of street sleepers is made more difficult under the stringent anti-epidemic measures. For example, some voluntary organisations have reduced the distribution of food and materials, street sleepers gathering and sleeping in the streets for mutual care may be in breach of the "No-gathering Order", and the closure of some public shower facilities has reduced the places available for street sleepers to keep their personal hygiene. The relevant situation has aroused social concern. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has assessed the risks of street sleepers contracting the epidemic disease and spreading it to the community, and whether it has put in place special support measures to help them fight against the epidemic, so as to protect their health and that of the relevant communities;
- (2) whether it has compiled statistics on the monthly numbers of street sleepers since the outbreak of the epidemic in December 2019 (and among them, the respective numbers of those who have become street sleepers for the first time upon losing their jobs and those who have moved back from the Mainland), and the main reasons leading to their street sleeping;
- (3) whether it has found underage street sleepers; if so, whether it will take special measures to provide them with appropriate support; and
- (4) of the respective numbers of street sleepers of new cases, since January 2020, who have been arranged to be admitted to residential places subvented by the Social Welfare Department and those operated by non-governmental organizations on a self-financing basis, and the number of street sleepers who have extricated themselves from street sleeping upon receiving other assistance?

Reply:

President,

With regard to the Member's question, having consulted the Food and Health Bureau (FHB), I set out the reply as follows:

(1) Street sleeping is a complex social problem involving policies and work of various bureaux and departments. Concerned government departments and local service units have been in close collaboration to assist street sleepers.

According to the information provided by the FHB, since street sleepers would generally use public bathhouses or public toilets more frequently, eat and rest in places with relatively poor environmental hygiene conditions and might not be equipped with or use appropriate protective gear, they might be more susceptible to infection. The Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health has enhanced collaboration with the Social Welfare Department (SWD), the Home Affairs Department and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in tracing confirmed cases involving street sleepers and strengthening anti-epidemic education, etc.

The SWD provides subvention to NGOs to operate three Integrated Service Teams (ISTs) for Street Sleepers. Through outreaching services, ISTs reach out to street sleepers for early identification of welfare needs and service referral. During the pandemic, ISTs continued to conduct outreaching visits so as to identify the social welfare needs of street sleepers and provide them with the services required, including dissemination of up-to-date pandemic-related information and distribution of protective gear. ISTs could make use of the SWD's emergency fund for meeting the urgent needs of street sleepers as and when required. In addition, to assist welfare units to step up preventive measures against the spread of the virus, the SWD has provided four rounds of special allowance to subvented NGOs (including service units serving street sleepers) and NGOs operating hostels for street sleepers on a self-financing basis to purchase personal protective equipment and disinfection supplies.

(2) According to the information collected by SWD-subvented NGOs which provide services to street sleepers, there were about 1 500 street sleepers in 2020, and the main reason for street sleeping was the inability to pay rent. The SWD does not have information on the monthly statistics on the number of street sleepers, number of persons who have become street sleepers for the first time upon losing their jobs and street sleepers who have moved back from the Mainland.

(3) ISTs have not reported any cases of street sleeper being a minor. If any such cases are found, ISTs will make referral to relevant social service units or departments for follow up in accordance with the case situation and service needs.

(4) In 2020, the cumulative number of admissions for residential service in emergency/temporary shelters/hostels/short-term hostels subvented by the SWD was 523, and the utilisation rate was 78 per cent. The number of cases having given up street sleeping after receiving support and follow-up from ISTs was

299 in the same year. The SWD does not have information on cases who have given up street sleeping after admittance to residential places operated by NGOs on a self-financing basis and receipt of other assistance.