

LCQ17: Support for Self-reliance Scheme

Following is a question by the Hon Tommy Cheung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (February 20):

Question:

Currently, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) requires able-bodied recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), who are aged 15 to 64 (the relevant age ceiling was 59 prior to February 1, 2019) and are unemployed or whose monthly earnings/working hours are less than the standard amount/number, to participate in the Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme, so as to encourage and assist them to move towards full-time paid employment and self-reliance. In addition, while SWD must deduct the employment earnings of such CSSA recipients in calculating the amounts of CSSA payments payable to them, a maximum amount of \$2,500 per month of the earnings may be disregarded. There are comments that since the amount of disregarded earnings (DE), which has not been adjusted since 2007, is on the low side as compared to the current wage level, and a considerable portion of the employment earnings will be offset by deduction in CSSA payments, CSSA recipients lack the motivation for finding employment. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) among the able-bodied CSSA recipients in each of the past 10 years, of the number and percentage of those who participated in SFS Scheme, and set out in the table below a breakdown by the age group (i.e. aged (i) 15 to 29, (ii) 30 to 39, (iii) 40 to 49 and (iv) 50 to 59) to which the participants belonged;

Year	Participants		(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)
	Number	Percentage				
2018						
.....						
2009						

(2) of the monthly average amount of wage and average number of working hours of those who secured employment in each of the past 10 years with the assistance of SFS Scheme; if such information is unavailable, whether it will consider collecting the relevant data, so as to evaluate the attractiveness of SFS Scheme;

(3) given that the wage levels have generally risen in recent years, whether the authorities will raise the DE ceiling, so as to encourage able-bodied

CSSA recipients who have the capacity to work to be more proactive in finding and remaining in employment; if not, of the reasons for that; if so, the details; and

(4) whether it has evaluated the effectiveness of SFS Scheme in assisting able-bodied CSSA recipients in moving towards self-reliance; if so, of the evaluation outcome, and the measures put in place to change the perception of some members of the public that SFS Scheme is a punitive measure?

Reply:

President,

The Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme aims to encourage and assist able-bodied adult CSSA recipients to secure and stay in employment, thereby achieving self-reliance. There are two components under the SFS Scheme, namely the Integrated Employment Assistance Programme for Self-reliance (IEAPS) and the disregarded earnings (DE) arrangement.

Since January 2013, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has commissioned non-governmental organisations to operate the IEAPS, so as to provide one-stop employment service and support to able-bodied adult CSSA recipients, as well as to assist them to overcome difficulties in finding jobs and strengthen their employability.

The DE arrangement refers to the earnings from employment that are disregarded when assessing the amount of assistance payable to a CSSA recipient. In simple terms, recipients with working income will have extra income on top of their CSSA payments.

My reply to the question raised by the Member is as follows:

(1) As individual IEAPS participants may leave or re-join the programme owing to short-term paid employment or change in their personal circumstances (such as their health conditions), SWD does not maintain the number of IEAPS participants, including data broken down by year and age.

SWD has compiled the cumulative number of IEAPS participants in person-times. From January 2013 to end-November 2018, there were 95 774 person-times participated in the IEAPS. The statistics of participating person-times broken down by age is as follows:

Age group	Person-times
15 to 29	18 211
30 to 39	15 149
40 to 49	29 798
50 to 59	32 616
Total	95 774

(2) SWD does not maintain the average monthly wage level and average number of working hours per month for IEAPS participants as mentioned in the question.

(3) The purpose of the DE arrangement is to encourage CSSA recipients to seek and stay in employment. At present, the maximum amount of DE is \$2,500 per month. The Government has announced that it would review the DE arrangements in this year, so as to consider how to strike a balance between further encouraging employment among CSSA recipients and the proper use of public money.

(4) As for the effectiveness of IEAPS, from January 2013 to end-November 2018, out of the 95 774 person-times participated in IEAPS, 20 365 of them (comprising 21.3 per cent of the total number of participating person-times) successfully secured employment or returned to mainstream schooling. Amongst the 20 365, 4 317 left the CSSA net after participated in the IEAPS (comprising 4.5 per cent of the total number of participating person-times). That said, whether an IEAPS participant could eventually secure employment depended on a number of factors, such as their personal circumstances. It is noteworthy that IEAPS not only enables participants to acquire up-to-date employment and retraining information, it also provides appropriate counselling service and other relevant welfare support to its participants.

The Government has announced the extension of the service period of IEAPS at its current service mode to end-March 2020. The Government will also strengthen the collaboration among SWD, the Labour Department, the Employees Retraining Board and the non-governmental organisations, so as to provide more comprehensive employment and retraining services to able-bodied adult CSSA recipients. SWD will continue to listen to stakeholders' views with a view to further encouraging and assisting CSSA recipients to seek and stay in employment.