

LCQ19: Anti-epidemic efforts targeted at foreign domestic helpers

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

Question:

The Government is currently implementing anti-epidemic stipulations such as prohibiting group gatherings (no-gathering order) and requiring the wearing of a face mask (mask order) in public places. However, during weekends and holidays, there are still quite a number of foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) gathering in public places, which increases the risk of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) spreading. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the cumulative number of cases, as at the 19th of this month, in which FDHs were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19;

(2) of the respective up-to-date numbers of FDHs issued with fixed penalty notices (FPNs) by the law enforcement agencies for violating the (i) no-gathering order and (ii) mask order, and set out in the table below by law enforcement agencies (a) the number of FPNs and (b) the type of locations where law enforcement took place (e.g. park and restaurant);

Law enforcement agency	(a)		(b)	
	(i)	(ii)	(i)	(ii)
Hong Kong Police Force				
Food and Environmental Hygiene Department				
Department of Health				
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department				
Leisure and Cultural Services Department				
Home Affairs Department				
Housing Department				
Total:			Park: ...	Park: ...

(3) whether it will consider prohibiting any person from setting up tents in public places during the epidemic, so as to discourage FDHs from gathering

and sharing meals in public places during weekends and holidays, thereby reducing the risks of the epidemic spreading; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) as the Government provides a one-off free COVID-19 test to all FDHs in Hong Kong from the 18th of last month to the 31st of this month, of the number of eligible FDHs, the number of FDHs who have undergone the tests so far, and whether it has assessed the effectiveness of the initiative; whether it will provide free COVID-19 tests for FDHs on a regular basis and designate FDHs as a targeted group subject to regular compulsory testing; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(5) of the new measures put in place by the Labour Department to provide FDHs and their employers with comprehensive anti-epidemic information and support, so as to prevent the occurrence of cluster outbreaks among FDHs?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the relevant bureaux and departments, my consolidated response to the Hon Wong Kwok-kin's question is set out below:

(1) As of January 17, 2021, there were 265 confirmed COVID-19 cases involving foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) who newly arrived in Hong Kong and 245 cases involving those who were already in Hong Kong.

(2) As of January 10, 2021, the statistics on fixed penalty notices issued by relevant departments to FDHs for contravening the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) are set out at Annex.

(3) The implementation of stringent and decisive social distancing was an effective measure in successfully containing the third wave of the epidemic. The social distancing measures in place at the current stage are similar to the arrangements implemented in response to the peak of the third wave of the epidemic during July and August last year, and are even more stringent in terms of the extent of the measures. In order to implement anti-epidemic measures effectively, it is essential that members of the public strictly comply with the various relevant measures. In this connection, the Government gazetted on December 4, 2020 amendments to Cap. 599G and Cap. 599I. For persons in breach of the requirements on mask-wearing and prohibition of group gatherings in public places under the regulations, the amount for discharging liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty has been increased from \$2,000 to \$5,000 with effect from December 11, 2020, in order to increase deterrence such that the public would strictly comply with the relevant requirements.

The Labour Department (LD) has all along been conducting mobile broadcasts in Chinese, English and major FDH languages in popular gathering places of FDHs and distributing promotional leaflets to FDHs on Saturdays and

Sundays to call upon them to comply with the regulations on mask-wearing and prohibition of group gatherings in public places. During holidays when there would be a relatively large number of FDHs gathering, the LD would collaborate with the relevant departments such as the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the Hong Kong Police Force (Police) and the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) to conduct joint operations against behaviour in contravention of social distancing measures and take appropriate enforcement action.

Same as other anti-epidemic work related to public health, solely relying on implementing restrictions through legislation or increasing penalties would not be sufficient for suppressing the epidemic. The Government appeals to the general public to co-operate and be self-disciplined, and to temporarily hold off social activities and avoid gathering during the crucial anti-epidemic period.

The Government will continue to review the effectiveness of the relevant measures from time to time in view of the development of the pandemic and will make adjustments as appropriate.

When members of the public engage in leisure activities on the amenity lawns in the parks under LCSD's purview, on the premise that it would not affect the operation of the venue and cause danger or obstruction to other venue users, members of the public may, during the daytime opening hours, use some light appliances for shade which are smaller in size and do not need to be specially constructed. However, when members of the public make use of LCSD's parks, they must comply with the requirements under the aforementioned Cap. 599G and Cap. 599I. The LCSD has also taken targeted special measures in its parks, including putting up relevant notices at venue entrances or in conspicuous places, stepping up cleansing work at the venues, as well as deploying more manpower to inspect and give advice, in order to remind users of the relevant requirements and that offenders will be prosecuted.

(4) The Government will continue with the three-pronged strategy of compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis, and implement various testing measures to achieve the objective of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment", with a view to cutting the transmission chains as soon as possible.

For targeted testing on an obligatory basis, the Government continues to arrange testing for various targeted groups based on risk assessment. Regarding FDHs, the Government is providing a free one-off testing service for FDHs in Hong Kong from December 18, 2020 to January 31, 2021. From December 18, 2020 to January 10, 2021, more than 25 000 FDHs received free testing at community testing centres, of which seven samples were found to be positive and had been referred to the Centre for Health Protection for confirmatory tests and follow-up.

The LD arranged in August 2020 a free one-off COVID-19 testing service for all FDHs who were staying in boarding facilities of employment agencies (EAs). In response to confirmed infection cases of FDHs who had stayed in

boarding facilities which were not operated by EAs, the Government had expanded the scope of the testing service to cover FDHs whose previous employment contracts have expired or have been terminated and who are waiting to join the new employers' family (this group of FDHs are most likely to be staying in boarding facilities while waiting to change employers). The LD had already provided a total of three rounds of free testing service to such FDHs from August to December 2020. In total, more than 9 000 FDHs benefitted from the aforementioned testing services. The LD would continue to provide free testing service from January to February 2021 for FDHs waiting to join their new employers' family.

The testing figures above show that quite a number of FDHs have received testing voluntarily. Also, it is understood that some employers would arrange FDHs to receive testing at private organisations on their own.

The LD has all along been encouraging FDHs who are staying in boarding facilities while waiting to change employers to actively participate in the free testing to safeguard their health and the health of others. The LD has appealed for EAs' active assistance in arranging these FDHs to undergo testing and strongly advised employers to check that their new FDHs have a valid negative test result before joining the family.

As to the suggestion to mandate FDHs to receive testing regularly, the Government has to carefully consider the justifications for implementing targeted mandatory measures, including objective justifications such as the development of the pandemic, infection cases, risk management, effective use of resources, etc. and to undertake detailed analysis. The Government will closely monitor the situation and examine and implement effective anti-epidemic measures.

(5) To reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the community, apart from conducting the mobile broadcasts mentioned in part 3 above, the LD has, at the same time, repeatedly provided anti-epidemic information to FDHs and their employers through channels such as press releases, the FDH Portal, FDH groups, employer groups and the Consulates-General of FDH-sending countries in Hong Kong; encouraged FDHs to stay home for rest on their rest day as far as possible and avoid gathering when going out to safeguard their personal health; and appealed to employers and FDHs to have candid discussions on rest day arrangements as well as recommending employers to arrange their FDHs to take rest days on a weekday instead of during the weekend as far as possible, so as to minimise the health risk of participating in social activities.

In addition, the LD approached EA associations multiple times to remind the industry to avoid arranging FDHs to stay in a crowded environment and remind FDHs to comply with personal and environmental hygiene and social distancing guidelines issued by the Centre for Health Protection, including performing hand hygiene frequently, regularly cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces, maintaining an appropriate social distance with other people, etc. In addition, the LD also reminded EAs not to arrange FDHs to gather in boarding facilities and to register the record of FDHs who are staying at or have visited the boarding facilities to facilitate tracing of possible infection cases.