

LCQ19: Assisting street sleepers

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

Question:

It has been reported that the number of street sleepers has obviously increased since the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic in January last year. The reasons for them to street sleep include: inability to afford paying rent as a result of the loss of jobs due to the epidemic, the immigration restrictions and quarantine measures making it difficult for persons who travelled between the Mainland and Hong Kong on a daily basis before the epidemic to cross the boundary to return home, and the fast food restaurants operating 24 hours a day where homeless people used to stay at night being required to suspend operation at the specified hours as directed by the Government. Furthermore, as a result of voluntary organisations cutting back on their services of distributing free food items to street sleepers due to the epidemic, street sleepers are facing a more difficult situation. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has compiled statistics on how the number of street sleepers has varied with the fluctuations of the epidemic situation during the past 12 months; if so, of the outcome;
- (2) whether it has endeavoured to provide meals on an emergency basis for street sleepers amid the epidemic;
- (3) whether it will consider opening temporary shelters at night for street sleepers to stay overnight on a temporary basis;
- (4) whether it will follow the following practice adopted in countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Australia: renting hotel rooms to provide temporary accommodation for street sleepers in the light of the severe epidemic situation; whether it will allocate additional resources and increase the manpower of social workers to enhance the service of assisting street sleepers in finding more stable accommodation; and
- (5) whether it will set aside some of the transitional housing units for street sleepers to wait for admission?

Reply:

President,

Street sleeping is a complex social problem involving policies and work of various bureaux and departments. With regard to the Member's question, having consulted the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) and the Transport and Housing Bureau (THB), I set out the reply as follows:

(1) and (2) The Social Welfare Department (SWD) provides subvention to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to operate three Integrated Service Teams (ISTs) for Street Sleepers. ISTs reach out to and visit street sleepers for early identification of their needs to provide appropriate social welfare support and service referral. During the pandemic, ISTs have stepped up outreaching visits so as to reach out to street sleepers in need and provide them with the services required, including the short-term food assistance specifically mentioned in the question. In 2019 and 2020, SWD-subvented ISTs and related units contacted about 1 300 and 1 500 street sleepers respectively.

(3) According to the information provided by HAB, under the existing mechanism, the Government will open temporary shelters when tropical cyclone warning signal No. 8 or above, landslip warning, red/ black rainstorm warning signal or cold/ very hot weather warning is in force or during the outbreak of a major fire to provide temporary accommodation for people in need, including but not limited to street sleepers. Moreover, HAB pointed out that as the COVID-19 epidemic has persisted, members of the public should continue to maintain social distancing and avoid crowding so as to reduce the risks of the spread of the virus and a large-scale outbreak in the community. HAB is therefore unable to implement the proposal to open temporary shelters at night for street sleepers in view of the risks involved and the consideration that it is not in line with the policy objectives mentioned above.

(4) and (5) There are 228 SWD-subvented emergency or short-term hostel places operated by NGOs. During the street sleepers' stay, IST social workers will continue to provide them with assistance, including the identification of a more stable accommodation.

According to THB, generally speaking, the beneficiaries of transitional housing projects shall meet the following criteria:

- (i) waiting for public rental housing for not less than 3 years; or
- (ii) living in severely inadequate housing conditions and are in urgent need for housing.

The operating organisations will draw up the detailed criteria for application according to their service specialties.