

LCQ2: Caring and Sharing Scheme

Following is a question by the Hon Paul Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr James Lau, in the Legislative Council today (May 15):

Question:

The Government announced in March last year the Caring and Sharing Scheme, under which each eligible member of the public would be granted a sum of up to \$4,000. The Working Family Allowance Office (WFAO), which is responsible for implementing the Scheme, has anticipated that an administrative cost of \$300 million will be incurred and the recruitment of more than 700 non-civil service contract staff members is needed for handling the relevant work. It has been reported that while the WFAO received a total of over 3.2 million applications when applications closed at the end of last month, it approved only 70 000 applications or so (i.e. 2.2 per cent of the total number of applications) by the beginning of this month. It is estimated that the WFAO will take 357 more days to complete the processing of all the applications. Quite a number of members of the public have criticised that this Scheme for cash handout has been administered with surprisingly low efficiency, and is a waste of public money and time. Besides, some of the contract staff members have found it hard to stand the work pressure involved (as each person is required to input the information of more than 200 applications each day), resulting in an upsurge of resignations, which may possibly cause the time needed for completing the processing of the applications to be lengthened. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has set a deadline for completing the processing of all the applications; if so, of the deadline, and whether it has assessed if additional staff members have to be recruited, so as to ensure that all applications will be processed by the deadline; if so, of the details; if not, whether it will conduct an assessment immediately;

(2) as there has been an upsurge of resignations of contract staff, whether it has gained an understanding of the causes, and considered recruiting additional staff so as to share the heavy workload and boost staff morale; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) as it has been reported that some people called upon, on the Internet, those persons who had been admitted to Hong Kong from the Mainland to study or work (commonly known as "drifters in Hong Kong") to submit their applications regardless of whether they were eligible or not, thereby pushing up the number of applications significantly, whether it has compiled statistics on the percentage of those applications submitted by this kind of ineligible persons in the total number of applications;

(4) as the Caring and Sharing Scheme, originally intended for sharing the fruit of Hong Kong's economic success with the public, has attracted fierce

criticisms from the public, whether the Government has learnt a lesson, and assessed if it has overestimated the administrative efficiency of government departments and the competence of its officials; whether the civil service college, upon its commissioning in future, will cite the implementation of this Scheme as a negative example; and

(5) as it is learnt that earlier on, Mr Tang Lung-wai, a Hong Kong permanent resident who has been sent to jail in the Philippines, submitted an application through his family members, of the current progress for vetting and approval of his application; whether the Government will approve his application expeditiously, so as to alleviate his imminent financial hardship?

Reply:

President,

The Caring and Sharing Scheme, announced by the Government last year, is implemented by the Working Family Allowance Office (WFAO) of the Working Family and Student Financial Assistance Agency. The application period of the Scheme is from February 1 to April 30, 2019. The WFAO received a total of around 3.44 million applications. In respect of the applications received, the WFAO will conduct data matching with relevant government departments, vet the applications against the eligibility criteria and disburse payments to successful applicants. As at May 10, the WFAO has issued acknowledgements to 3.39 million applications and instructed banks to disburse payments and encash cash cheques for about 112 000 successful applications.

In consultation with relevant bureaux and departments, my reply to the various parts of the question is as follows:

(1) and (2) The WFAO aims to complete the processing of all applications by the end of this year.

As at May 10, about 700 staff were recruited for the implementation of the Scheme. A total of some 30 staff have resigned so far and the reasons for their resignation are not known. The WFAO has not required its staff to fulfill a daily quota of work. The WFAO will flexibly deploy its manpower to vet the applications and disburse payments with a view to completing the task properly and expeditiously, as well as review its manpower and staffing requirements from time to time. Additional staff will be recruited as and when necessary.

(3) One of the eligibility criteria under the Scheme is that applicants must hold a Hong Kong Identity Card as at December 31, 2018. They include new arrivals, but exclude Hong Kong non-permanent residents who have been admitted to Hong Kong to work, study, or receive training and their dependants, and exclude individuals who have entered Hong Kong as visitors. Such information has been published as early as April last year and uploaded onto the website of the Scheme. Upon receipt of the applications, the WFAO will conduct data matching with relevant government departments, including the Immigration Department, to verify the information and ascertain the

applicants' eligibility. As it takes time for the WFAO to process the applications received, the number of applications submitted by ineligible persons is not available at this stage.

(4) The Government apologises for the public discontent on the implementation of the Scheme. As the WFAO needs to process and acknowledge a huge number of applications, which involves calculations of tax rebates, rates concessions, etc., it needs time to complete the relevant procedures. Since the launch of the Scheme, the Government has continued to roll out improvement measures to facilitate application submission and payment collection by members of the public.

Although the Scheme is a one-off measure, the Government will learn from this experience to strive for improvement.

The Civil Service Training and Development Institute will regularly review the training needs of civil servants and provide appropriate training programmes to help them cope with different challenges in work.

(5) Hong Kong residents who are detained or serving sentences outside Hong Kong are considered as meeting the requirement of ordinarily residing in Hong Kong under the Scheme as long as they have not emigrated. They are eligible for application if they meet other criteria under the Scheme. The Government will not discuss any cases in public but the WFAO will follow up on and process the applications received as soon as possible.