

LCQ20: Working arrangements for correctional staff

Following is a question by Dr Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Acting Secretary for Security, Mr Sonny Au, in the Legislative Council today (June 20):

Question:

It is learnt that the wastage rates of correctional staff have remained persistently high in recent years. As at the end of February this year, a total of 316 rank and file correctional staff members retired, resigned or were transferred out in the 2017-2018 financial year, representing a wastage rate of 6.8 per cent, hitting a record high in five years. On improving the work arrangements and environment for correctional staff, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that the Correctional Services Department (CSD) has been providing rehabilitative services to persons in custody for more than 20 years, whether the authorities will provide special allowances to frontline staff who have completed a diploma in social work programme, certificate course in social work, certificate course in psychological approaches in working with offenders or other courses recognised by CSD and the Qualifications Framework; if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether the authorities will, on the premise that the number of weekly working hours remains unchanged, extend the five-day work week arrangement to all correctional staff to enable them to have more rest time, and use this work mode as the basis for calculating the number of leave days to be deducted when they take vacation leave; if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether the authorities will provide transport for correctional staff working in remote correctional institutions to commute to and from work so as to reduce their commuting time; if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) given that while the authorities will, under extremely adverse weather conditions, arrange means of transport to pick up correctional staff to accommodation facilities to perform sleep-in standby duty, some means of public transport still maintain limited services under such conditions at present, whether the authorities will cancel the sleep-in standby duty arrangement and instead arrange means of transport to pick up staff at designated places to commute to and from work; if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) whether the authorities will, in view of the fact that the social environment and service demand have changed, consider reviewing, enhancing

and shortening the recruit training programmes for correctional staff, so that those staff members may perform frontline duties as early as possible; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(6) whether the authorities will consider reducing the weekly working hours of correctional staff from the current 48 hours to 44 hours in order to enhance their quality of life; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(7) whether the authorities will deploy resources and manpower for building "smart prisons", including the introduction of smart wristbands which can monitor the pulse rates of persons in custody and a closed circuit television system with facial recognition features in order to provide a safer custodial environment, thereby reducing the workload of frontline staff; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(8) as some correctional staff members have relayed that the foot protection capability of the leather shoes they wear will be undermined with the wear and tear of the shoes, causing strain injuries to them, whether the authorities will proactively consider improving the design of these shoes in accordance with ergonomics and by adopting advanced materials; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(9) given that as the gates in correctional institutions are mainly installed with mechanical locks at present, it is time-consuming to lock and unlock them and extensive and complicated procedures are involved in the safe keeping and transfer of keys, of the progress of the authorities' work to replace the locks of the gates in individual correctional facilities with electric locks; whether various correctional institutions will completely switch to using electric locks; if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the reasons for that; and

(10) as some correctional staff members have recently relayed to me that the staff common rooms in correctional institutions are small with insufficient number of beds and facilities, of the authorities' specific improvement measures?

Reply:

President,

Correctional staff have all along been dedicated and diligent in performing their duties, ensuring a safe and secure custodial environment and helping persons in custody rehabilitate. They have made significant contributions to the law and order and public safety of the society over the years. The Correctional Services Department (CSD) has always attached great importance to staff welfare and treatment. Various measures have been adopted to attract and retain talent to meet the continuous demand for manpower resources.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr Hon Elizabeth

Quat is as follows:

(1) CSD is committed to providing appropriate rehabilitation programmes for persons in custody to help them rehabilitate and reintegrate into society after serving their sentences. With a view to enhancing the professionalism of correctional staff and the quality of rehabilitation services, CSD encourages its staff to pursue further studies. CSD has been co-organising the Advanced Diploma in Applied Social Sciences (Corrections) programme with the School of Professional and Continuing Education of the University of Hong Kong for its staff and 405 staff have been sponsored to enrol in the programme. In addition, CSD sponsors frontline staff to enrol in the Certificate in Social Work for Correctional Services Officers programme and 592 staff have been sponsored.

(2) CSD has, where practicable, changed the shift arrangements in some correctional institutions, including implementing trials on the five-day work week, to enable colleagues to have more rest days, thereby promoting better work-life balance and reducing overall commute time, under the principle of no reduction in the conditioned hours of service. The trials are still in progress and CSD will review their effectiveness when appropriate. CSD is also studying the feasibility of other shift arrangements and will try out such arrangements in other suitable institutions. In the process, correctional staff will be fully consulted.

(3) As some of the correctional institutions are located in remote areas where public transport services are inadequate, CSD provides transport for correctional staff between designated locations and the relevant correctional institutions, thereby reducing their commute time. For instance, CSD currently arranges transport for correctional staff of Cape Collinson Correctional Institution, Tai Lam Correctional Institution, Tai Lam Centre for Women, Siu Lam Psychiatric Centre, Lo Wu Correctional Institution, Shek Pik Prison, Sha Tsui Correctional Institution and Tong Fuk Correctional Institution for commuting between these institutions and designated locations at specific timeslots respectively. CSD will, having regard to the ancillary public transport services for the institutions, discuss with the departments concerned the feasibility of providing transport for correctional staff to and from correctional institutions as appropriate.

(4) At present, correctional staff are required to stand by in the accommodation facilities near the correctional institutions during a typhoon. To facilitate staff to return to the accommodation facilities under inclement weather conditions, CSD arranges transport to pick up staff from designated locations to the concerned accommodation facilities within two hours after the Hong Kong Observatory has made the Pre-No. 8 Special Announcement. This arrangement ensures smooth handover of duties among staff of different shifts and that the security and normal operation of correctional institutions can be maintained during a typhoon. Taking into account the fact that public transport is now more convenient than in the past, CSD set up a working group in January 2018 to fully review whether the existing arrangement of standby in accommodation facilities during a typhoon should be suitably adjusted.

(5) CSD is conducting a comprehensive review of its induction courses, which will be refined from time to time having regard to operational needs. For example, CSD has introduced virtual reality scenario training to enhance trainees' capabilities in dealing with contingencies in correctional institutions through different training scenarios and settings, with a view to providing newly recruited correctional staff with more appropriate training.

(6) The current conditioned hours of work for correctional staff is 48 hours per week. Under the existing Government policy, a proposal to reduce the conditioned hours of work would only be considered if it complies with the three prerequisites of cost neutrality, no additional manpower, and maintaining the same level of service to the public, as well as the "same grade (or rank), same conditioned hours of work" principle. Having regard to the above prerequisites, the management, operation, schedules and custodial arrangements of persons in custody at correctional institutions, CSD has no plan for the time being to adjust the conditioned hours of work for correctional staff. That said, CSD will continue to explore possible measures for improving the work environment of correctional staff, which include introducing new technologies and streamlining existing procedures, and pilot different shift arrangements such that frontline staff can have more rest time.

(7) CSD will introduce various appropriate technologies from time to time to enhance operational efficiency, having regard to operational needs. For example, a project of "Replacement of Core Information Technology Systems with the Integrated Custodial and Rehabilitation Management System" is being implemented. For this purpose, CSD engaged a contractor in May this year to carry out the related work. The project is expected to be completed by 2022. Moreover, CSD is exploring how the use of information technology can further improve its operations, with a view to providing a safer and more secure custodial environment. This includes exploring the feasibility of applying motion analysis surveillance technology, location surveillance system technology, etc. by conducting small-scale tests.

(8) The shoes correctional staff wear while on duty have several functional characteristics, e.g. water-proof, breathable, arch supporting, breathable and shock absorbing insoles, etc. The slip and wear resistance of the soles has been accredited to meet internationally recognised standards. The overall design and specifications have already balanced the needs for wearing comfort and occupational safety and health of colleagues. At present, the life cycle of the shoes is 15 months. CSD will make arrangements for colleagues who need to have their shoes replaced earlier than scheduled according to established procedures. Furthermore, the Monitoring Group on Implementation of Field Dress of CSD will also regularly review and enhance the staff's uniforms and accoutrement, with a view to meeting operational needs and enhancing the occupational safety and health of colleagues.

(9) CSD has all along enhanced and improved ageing correctional facilities having regard to practical needs. It has installed electric locks security

systems in newly built and redeveloped correctional institutions, including Lo Wu Correctional Institution and Tai Lam Centre for Women (redevelopment area). In addition, the projects of installing electric locks security systems in Tai Lam Centre for Women (non-redevelopment area) and Stanley Prison are now in progress and are expected to be completed by the end of 2020 and 2025 respectively. CSD will also continue to study the feasibility of installing electric locks security systems in other correctional institutions.

(10) CSD is now upgrading the overnight accommodation for correctional staff by phases. The relevant renovation works in individual institutions have been completed. Moreover, CSD has recently provided newly designed beds for trial use by colleagues and is collecting their views.