

## LCQ22: Dead Removal Teams

Following is a question by the Hon Holden Chow and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (December 2):

Question:

The Dead Removal Teams (DRTs) under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department are tasked to handle or remove dead bodies found in public places and those in hospitals. Some DRT members have relayed that they need to perform duties under harsh environments (with the occasional need to tramp over hills and ridges). Their job is obnoxious and renders them susceptible to contracting infectious diseases. However, they only receive a remuneration package for Workmen II, with no difference from that for those Workmen II responsible for public cleansing duties. They consider that their job is laborious but poorly remunerated, which reflects that their contributions have not been recognized, and makes it difficult to attract new blood to join them. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the current total number of DRT members;
- (2) whether it will, in the light of the job nature of DRT members and the need for them to face risks such as contracting infectious diseases, (i) upgrade their rank, and (ii) raise the hardship allowance granted to them; if so, of the specific arrangements; if not, the reasons for that; whether it has assessed the additional annual expenditure to be incurred for upgrading their rank to Workman I;
- (3) as it has been reported that the majority of DRT members are in middle to old age, and that a number of members are due to retire next year, how the Government will attract young people to join DRTs to ensure that sufficient manpower is available for handling dead bodies; and
- (4) given that the epidemic persists currently, whether the Government will improve the relevant notification mechanism to ensure that DRT members grasp in advance whether the dead bodies to be handled by them are infectious, so that they can make adequate preparation in order to reduce infection risks; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised is as follows:

(1) There are 10 Dead Removal Teams (DRTs) under the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). The DRTs comprise 14 Gangers and 57 Workmen II, including relief staff.

(2) and (3) As the DRTs are required to work under obnoxious and harsh conditions, a team member meeting the monthly working hour requirement (i.e. the relevant work takes up not less than 50 per cent of his/her working hours in a calendar month) will receive a monthly hardship allowance totaling \$2,080. In the past few years, the FEHD did not encounter difficulties in recruiting Workmen II. The Department reviews the manpower of the DRTs from time to time. There has not been any difficulty in recruiting the relevant Workmen II and in retention of manpower. Currently, there is no vacancy in the DRTs. The remuneration of a Ganger of the Model Scale 1 is equivalent to that of a Workman I. When reviewing the ranking arrangement, the FEHD has to follow the prevailing mechanism, including reviewing the objectives of establishment, position and structure of the DRTs, and whether there has been a fundamental change in their job nature, complexity of work as well as duties and responsibilities.

(4) The FEHD attaches great importance to the health of its staff and issues pertaining to occupational safety and health. It has repeatedly reminded the DRT members to handle dead bodies strictly in accordance with the Precautions for Handling and Disposal of Dead Bodies jointly formulated by the Department of Health, the Hospital Authority (HA) and the FEHD in February 2020, and will continue to provide them with appropriate and adequate personal protective equipments as well as suitable training. The protective equipments include protective overalls, goggles/face shields, gloves, surgical masks, disinfectant alcohol, alcohol-based hand rub and other equipments and items. As for training, the Centre for Health Protection has organised sessions of training talks (including those specifically organised for the DRTs) for the relevant staff to provide them with information on COVID-19 and guidance on how to put on and off personal protective equipments. The FEHD has made a video record of the talks for further imparting the knowledge among its staff and keeping them abreast of the skills needed under the "train-the-trainer" approach.

Having regard to the arrangements newly introduced by public hospitals, the FEHD and the HA reviewed the notification mechanism and procedures for handling dead bodies in August 2020. Starting from August 31, 2020, healthcare professionals will, depending on need, conduct a risk assessment first when handling dead body cases in hospitals. If it is considered that there is a risk of COVID-19 infection of the deceased, a virus test will be arranged. Upon confirmation of the test result, the FEHD will be informed. The relevant staff who have been notified of the test result will dispose of the body according to the corresponding approach for the disposal of dead bodies under respective categories as specified in the guidelines. For special circumstances under which a dead body has to be removed before the test result is available, the hospital and the FEHD have required the relevant staff to deliver the body in a prudent manner pursuant to the consensus reached. The hospital must put the dead body in double bags and the staff must put on appropriate protective equipments, including disposable gloves, water resistant gowns and surgical masks, when handling the dead bodies. They must also use goggles and/or face shields to protect their eyes if there may be splashes. The FEHD will continue to maintain close liaison with the HA on the arrangements for handling dead bodies to ensure the safety

of the relevant staff.