

LCQ4: Food assistance service

Following is a question by the Hon Vincent Cheng and a reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 12):

Question:

At present, eight non-governmental organisations are subsidised by the Government for operating the Short-term Food Assistance Service Projects to provide basic food assistance to eligible individuals and families for a period of up to eight weeks (which may be extended for cases with special needs). Moreover, some organisations currently operate non-government subsidised food assistance service. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows, in respect of the subsidised food assistance service since January this year, the number of approved applications, the number of person-times receiving the service and the number of approved applications for extended service, as well as the rates of change of such numbers when compared with those of the same period of last year; whether it has estimated, upon the regularisation of such service in August this year, the maximum number of person-times that can receive the service and the related administrative expenses to be incurred each year, and if the number of service operators will be increased;

(2) whether it knows the current number of organisations operating non-subsidised food assistance service, as well as the scopes of their service and the numbers of cases and person-times for which they provided service last year; whether it will provide subsidies for those non-subsidised food assistance service which are currently of a considerable scale, so as to increase the number of service locations; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it has plans to review the effectiveness of the existing subsidised food assistance service and make enhancements to the service, including following the practice of the Jockey Club Food Assistance Programme in providing flexible ways for collecting food (e.g. through automated cook-chill meals dispensers and online food ordering service), specifying expressly the current practice that self-occupied properties are excluded from calculating the applicants' assets, and stepping up the publicity for the service?

Reply:

President,

Since February 2009, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has been commissioning non-governmental organisations to operate the Short-term Food

Assistance Service Projects (STFASPs) which provide one-off basic short-term food assistance for a period of up to eight weeks to help individuals and families facing immediate financial hardship cope with their daily food expenditure. Operators of the STFASPs may extend the service period beyond eight weeks, depending on the special needs of individual applicants and their families. Operators will refer the service users in need to the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme or other mainstream services to address their long-term welfare needs. Upon the completion of the existing service contracts in late July this year, the Government will regularise the STFASPs, earmarking \$415 million in recurrent expenditure.

My reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) From January to March 2021, the number of approved applications and beneficiaries receiving the service were 5 076 and 10 708 respectively, representing increases of 40.6 per cent and 45 per cent respectively in comparison with those of the same period last year. There were 1 028 approved applications for extended service, representing an increase of 53.9 per cent compared with the same period last year. Upon regularisation, the service is expected to benefit about 60 000 to 80 000 service users each year. About 15 per cent of the provision is for administrative expenses, the main component of which is manpower cost. The number of service projects remains at eight.

(2) We do not maintain information or figures of other service projects that are not funded by the Government. In view of the territory-wide nature of the food assistance service funded by the SWD and the impending service regularisation, we do not have plans to integrate other non-governmental projects into the SWD's STFASPs.

(3) From time to time, the SWD reviews the implementation of the STFASPs and introduces enhancement measures if necessary to cater for the needs of different service users. Apart from the service regularisation, the SWD also added food coupons and hot meal coupons as additional options; extended the service period for beneficiaries from a maximum of six weeks to eight weeks; and from August 2021 onwards, provides additional special menus to meet the dietary needs of infants and young children, pregnant women, the elderly, the chronically ill and ethnic minorities. The SWD will continue to take into account the needs of service users in order to improve the service.

Self-occupied properties of the applicants or household members are excluded from the calculation of the asset limits of the STFASPs. The Finance Committee has approved funding for relaxing the asset limits of the STFASPs for 12 months with effect from June 1 this year by pitching them to those of the Working Family Allowance Scheme (for illustration, the asset limit of a four-person household will be relaxed from \$264,000 to \$548,000), which can benefit around 120 000 additional service users.

The objective, description, eligibility criteria and application procedures of the STFASPs are available on the SWD's website. Operators also promote the STFASPs to people in need through their community networks.