

LCQ5: Compulsory testing at cordoned-off public rental housing building blocks

Following is a question by the Hon Joephy Chan and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (February 16):

Question:

At the end of last month, the Government exercised the power under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) to make "restriction-testing declarations" and issue compulsory testing notices, under which persons within three buildings at Kwai Chung Estate with an outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic (i.e. Yat Kwai House, Ying Kwai House and Ha Kwai House) were required to stay in their premises and undergo compulsory testing. During the operations, some residents expressed dissatisfaction with the chaotic arrangements of the authorities (particularly about the testing and the environmental hygiene of the buildings). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the total number of staff involved in the aforesaid operations, with a breakdown by government departments, relevant authorities and outsourced service contractors;

(2) of the daily number of (i) compulsory tests conducted for the residents by the authorities (among them, the number of door-to-door tests conducted for residents with special needs), and (ii) staff deployed to undertake the relevant work, during the aforesaid operations;

(3) whether the authorities regularly removed household waste from each floor of the buildings, as well as cleaned and disinfected the entire buildings, during the aforesaid operations; if so, of the details (including the frequency and manpower);

(4) of the total number of requests for assistance made by residents which were received by the authorities (including the one-stop service hotline 1823) during the aforesaid operations, and the follow-up actions taken; and

(5) whether it will learn from the experience gained in the aforesaid operations, and designate a government department to take charge of the co-ordination, set up hotlines for affected residents, and procure the required services and supplies in advance, so as to avoid the recurrence of the chaotic situation; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Food and Health Bureau (FHB), the consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon JoePHY Chan is as follows.

Since early 2021, the Government has exercised the power under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) to make "restriction-testing declarations" (hereafter referred to as "Declaration") to specify "restricted area" in various districts, having regard to the risk levels. Under the Declaration, people within the specified restricted areas are required to stay in their premises and undergo compulsory testing according to the Government's arrangement (hereafter referred to as "restriction-testing declaration (RTD) operation"). Such operations aim to identify infected households in order to cut the virus transmission chains in the community as soon as possible.

Every RTD operation involves the collaboration of various government departments. The FHB is responsible for determining the buildings which should be subject to RTD operation; deploying testing contractors; determining the number of tests to be carried out each day; determining whether the "restricted area" can be reopened according to the testing results; and the corresponding timing and arrangement for the reopening. The local co-ordinating department will facilitate the collaboration among all departments involved, testing contractors and other staff in performing their respective duties during the RTD operation. It will also put in place appropriate arrangement (such as operating telephone hotlines) for the affected households to make enquiries or seek assistance, and attend to households with special needs as far as possible. If the RTD operation has to be extended due to the presence of a significant risk of infection in the "restricted area", the Government will provide food and necessities to the affected households.

During the period from January 1 to February 14, 2022, the Housing Department (HD) co-ordinated 34 RTD operations, involving 24 public rental housing estates with over 63 000 residents. These operations include an unprecedented 7-day operation at Yat Kwai House and Ying Kwai House of Kwai Chung Estate respectively, and a 5-day operation at Ha Kwai House of Kwai Chung Estate. In respect of the large scale operations of the three blocks in Kwai Chung Estate, a total of about 2 600 units and 7 100 residents were involved.

Many government departments, including the HD, the Police Force, the Department of Health, the Home Affairs Department, the Social Welfare Department, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Water Supplies Department, the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, the Transport Department, the Customs and Excise Department, the Security Bureau and the Auxiliary Medical Service, etc. had deployed staff to participate in the above-mentioned large-scale RTD operations at Kwai Chung Estate. For each domestic block in the Kwai Chung Estate, about 230 staff were deployed to participate in the operation each day. Relevant cleansing and security service contractors also geared up the deployment of cleansing workers and

security guards to handle the heavy duties on cleansing and crowd control.

As regards testing, the HD and the Police Force collaborated with the testing contractors to set up restricted areas and temporary specimen collection stations in the above-mentioned RTD operations at Kwai Chung Estate. The HD also co-ordinated the staff deployed from various departments to ask households, on a door-to-door basis, to go downstairs in batches to undergo one testing per day in accordance with the Declaration. The tests were conducted by three testing contractors, who set up three temporary specimen collection stations with a total of about 40 specimen collection booths. The HD liaised with the testing contractors to arrange in-flat specimen collection for people with impaired mobility. In the above-mentioned operations, a total of around 37 700 person-time were tested, including about 60 times in-flat specimen collection each day.

As the above-mentioned RTD operations at Kwai Chung Estate lasted for five to seven consecutive days, the Government arranged meal-delivery services to each household three times per day during the operations. In order to shorten the delivery time so that the meals could be delivered to the residents as early as possible, the Government deployed a large amount of manpower to assist in the transportation and delivery of meal-boxes. The Government also arranged special meals for residents with special needs, including Halal and vegetarian food.

The cleansing tasks during the RTD operations also posed huge challenges. Cleansing workers responsible for the cleansing duties of Kwai Chung Estate were sent to the quarantine centres the day prior to the operation in batches. Upon the second day of the operation, more than 40 workers were sent away. The HD promptly arranged another cleansing service contractor who deployed 40 workers on the third day of the operation to provide cleansing service to Kwai Chung Estate. Moreover, the garbage quantity of the three blocks concerned increased significantly during the operations. The HD had requested the cleansing service contractor to increase the number of workers for handling the garbage at each floor. At the same time, the HD also requested the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department to increase the frequency of garbage collection by refuse collection vehicles. In addition, the cleansing workers also stepped up disinfection of the common areas in the residential blocks, in particular the common areas of the relevant floors, lifts and lobbies, etc. after the transfer of infected persons or their close-contact by the Department of Health, in order to minimize the risk of cross-infection.

The HD set up various hotlines during the large-scale RTD operations at Kwai Chung Estate to handle enquiries of the residents. A total of about 5 700 enquires were received. The Department of Health also deployed staff to set up medical enquiry station in the command centre to handle residents' medical enquiries referred from the hotlines, including rescheduling of medical appointments, etc. The Home Affairs Department set up a materials booth to provide daily necessities to the residents. At the same time, the Social Welfare Department also set up hotlines to handle the residents' emotional issues.

The Government will, in light of the development of COVID-19 epidemic situation and the experience gained in the operations, continue to make appropriate arrangements for residents while enhancing the anti-epidemic efforts.