

LCQ5: Immigration quarantine for foreign domestic helpers

Following is a question by the Hon Yiu Si-wing and a reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (September 29):

Question:

The Government has, since August 30, allowed foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) from Indonesia or the Philippines to enter Hong Kong in an orderly manner. They are required to undergo quarantine at a designated quarantine hotel or the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre upon entry into Hong Kong. Calculating on the basis that each FDH is subject to quarantine for 21 days, the daily quota for quarantine is 70 on average. It has been reported that as there are currently about 6 000 to 7 000 FDHs waiting to come to Hong Kong, a majority of such FDHs will have to wait for several months before they can enter Hong Kong. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as quite a number of hotels have indicated that they are willing to be designated as quarantine hotels for FDHs, whether the Government will increase the number of quarantine hotels and the quarantine quota for FDHs in the near future, so as to alleviate the shortage of FDHs as soon as possible; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as quite a number of families (especially those with young children, the elderly and the sick) urgently need to hire FDHs, whether the Government will take measures to alleviate the pressure on such families' living before their FDHs assume duty, or accord priority to the FDHs hired by such families in being allocated the quarantine quota; and

(3) whether it knows, in the event that FDHs are unable to come to Hong Kong as scheduled due to the Government's invocation of the place-specific flight suspension mechanism, who will bear the expenses in relation to the rooms booked for quarantine of FDHs, and whether any mechanism is currently in place to reduce that party's loss?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Security Bureau and the Immigration Department (ImmD), my consolidated response to the Member's question is set out below.

(1) and (2) Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and international air travel restrictions, the number of foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) coming to work in Hong Kong has decreased. Families employing FDHs are in face of difficulties and pressure because of the shortage of supply.

To facilitate FDHs to come to work in Hong Kong, the Government

implemented new border control measures on August 9, 2021. For FDHs who have been fully vaccinated in Hong Kong before they left Hong Kong, they can come to work in Hong Kong. Starting from August 30, FDHs who have been fully vaccinated in Indonesia or the Philippines and hold a vaccination record that has been affirmed by the relevant authorities of these two countries may also come to work in Hong Kong. They have to undergo compulsory quarantine in a Designated Quarantine Facility (DQF) after arriving at Hong Kong.

To prevent imported cases, the Government must resume the admission of FDHs to Hong Kong in a gradual and orderly manner. The first DQF has been in operation since August 30, providing 409 rooms for quarantine of FDHs. The Government has opened a total of 800 units in Phases 1 and 2 of the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre (PBQC) on Lantau Island starting from September 20 for quarantine of FDHs who have been fully vaccinated in Group A specified places (currently the applicable regions are Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates). To further address the needs of employers of FDHs, the Government announced on September 28 that an additional 200 units in PBQC will be provided for quarantine of FDHs starting from October 22.

Families employing FDHs have different needs and it would not be easy to accord priority for making reservations at PBQC, as it would generate controversies and would be complicated administratively. The Government will continue to refine the reservation arrangements for PBQC and will consider the need for further increasing the number of DQFs, having regard to the worldwide and local epidemic situation.

Apart from facilitating FDHs to come to Hong Kong in a gradual and orderly manner, the Government has implemented various flexibility measures since early 2020 to assist FDHs and their employers to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures include:

(a) to allow employers to extend the validity period of the contracts with their existing FDHs for a maximum period of three months with the latter's consent. The flexibility arrangement aims to assist those employers whose contracts with their existing FDHs are due to expire soon, but that their newly-hired FDHs cannot fly in to commence the new contract. The above flexibility arrangement applies to FDH contracts expiring on or before September 30, 2021. The Government announced on September 28, 2021, the continuation of this measure. Employers may apply to the ImmD for extension of all FDH contracts that will expire on or before December 31, 2021. The maximum period of extension is lengthened from three months to six months. If the contract with the current FDH has already been extended under the flexibility arrangements announced on June 28, 2021, the employer may also apply for further extension of the validity period of the contract for a maximum period of six months; and

(b) under the prevailing mechanism, an FDH on a renewed contract with the same employer, or starting a new contract with a new employer upon the expiry of an existing contract, may apply to the ImmD for deferring return to the place of origin for not more than one year after the existing contract ends, subject to agreement of his/her current employer or new employer. If an FDH

is unable to return to his/her place of origin within the aforementioned one-year period, he/she may, upon agreement with his/her employer, apply to the ImmD for a further extension of limit of stay until the end of his/her contract such that he/she may return to the place of origin within that period.

(3) If a change or cancellation of room booking is required because an FDH is tested COVID-19 positive before arrival in Hong Kong, or because of a change or cancellation of flights by the airline or a lockdown, the DQF will not charge a handling fee for changing the booking, or charge a room fee for cancellation of booking if relevant supporting documents are submitted in advance.