

LCQ5: Support for families which need to hire domestic helpers

Following is a question by the Hon Starry Lee and a reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (June 9):

Question:

It is learnt that due to the impacts of measures such as immigration quarantine and the place-specific flight suspension mechanism, there has been a significant drop in the number of foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) coming to work in Hong Kong in recent months, with the daily number declining from more than 500 before the epidemic to about 100 in recent days. As a result, quite a number of families have been unable to hire FDHs, and FDHs' wages have surged. There are views that the importation of Mainland domestic helpers (MDHs) may alleviate the aforesaid problems. In addition, as quite a number of families hire FDHs for the purpose of taking care of their elderly members and less language barrier is encountered when MDHs communicate with the elderly, the elderly may receive better care. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the epidemic in FDH source countries has yet to be brought under control, what measures the Government will put in place to cope with the situation of a persistently low number of FDHs coming to work in Hong Kong; whether such measures will include introducing new source countries for FDHs and relaxing the current policy, with reference made to Macao's practice of importing MDHs, so that a certain number of MDHs may be imported under a pilot scheme; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether specific measures are in place to encourage more local women to work as domestic helpers; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) of the measures in place to further assist families which hire FDHs to take care of their elderly members, and whether it will regularize the "Pilot Scheme on Training for Foreign Domestic Helpers in Elderly Care", which is being implemented by the Social Welfare Department?

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) At present, there are close to 370 000 foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) working in Hong Kong, with most of them coming from the Philippines and

Indonesia. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government has been making its best effort to provide assistance and facilitation to FDHs and their employers subject to changes in and the need for prevention and control of the pandemic. Since early 2020, the Labour Department (LD) and the ImmD have put in place various measures to help FDHs and their employers cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, including allowing employers to extend the validity period of the existing contracts with their outgoing FDHs for a maximum of three months, and further extending the special arrangement for FDHs to defer their return to their place of origin. In general, FDHs may apply for a one-year deferral for returning to their place of origin, subject to agreement with their employers. During the pandemic, if an FDH is still unable to return to his/her place of origin within the first one-year deferral, he/she may apply to the ImmD again for a further extension of limit of stay until the end of the contract before returning to his/her place of origin. The above special arrangements are subject to agreement between the FDH and the employer.

In 2020 and 2021 (January to May), the ImmD approved close to 190 000 and over 150 000 applications respectively for further employment of FDHs (including applications from FDHs for contract renewal with the same employer, and from employers for extending the validity period of contracts with FDHs as well as from FDHs for further deferral of return to their place of origin under the special arrangements). The aforesaid had facilitated families in need to continue to receive support from FDHs as far as possible. In the past year (May 2020 to May 2021), the ImmD also approved around 23 000 applications for change of employers in Hong Kong after premature termination of contract owing to the special circumstances of the pandemic. On the other hand, the ImmD understands the need of local families for FDHs amid the pandemic, and has proactively deployed its manpower to expedite the processing of new applications so that FDHs could report duty in Hong Kong as soon as possible. The ImmD will continue to expedite the vetting and approval procedures.

The Government has all along strived to maintain Hong Kong as an attractive work place for FDHs and actively explores new source countries of FDHs, including relaxing the visa requirements of Cambodian nationals in March 2017 to allow Cambodian domestic helpers to come to work in Hong Kong. The LD will also continue to keep in contact with the governments of FDH source countries and their consulates general in Hong Kong to encourage their nationals to come to work as FDHs in Hong Kong to meet the long-term demand of local families.

Owing to immigration control and security considerations, the current entry arrangement for admission of domestic helpers does not apply to Chinese residents of the Mainland, the Macao Special Administrative Region and Taiwan, as well as nationals of Afghanistan, Cuba, Laos, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Nepal and Vietnam. The Government has no plan to make changes. Save from the above, the Government has not imposed any restrictions on, nor does it promote the employment of FDHs of, any particular nationalities. Employers may, having regard to individual needs, decide to hire FDHs from any countries and regions other than those specified

above.

(2) To satisfy the demand of local employers for domestic services, the Labour and Welfare Bureau and the LD have all along been assisting local job-seekers to participate in domestic helper jobs, including providing them with training, recruitment and employment services.

The Employees Retraining Board (ERB) provides training courses for the unemployed, underemployed and other persons in need (including women), assisting them to join the employment market. The ERB currently offers 15 training courses related to the skills of domestic helpers, providing about 3 100 training places for relevant courses in 2021-22. The ERB's "Smart Living" Scheme provides free, one-stop referral services for graduates and household employers registering job vacancies. The "Smart Living" Scheme received registration of over 20 000 vacancies in 2020-21.

In addition, the LD provides employers and job-seekers with convenient and easy-to-use recruitment and employment services, including domestic helpers. From January to May 2021, The LD's Interactive Employment Service website posted more than 1 200 local domestic helper positions, of which more than 1 000 were part-time positions. As some women are not able to work full-time due to various reasons such as the need to take care of children/family, the LD has especially set up a dedicated webpage on part-time vacancies on the Interactive Employment Service website to facilitate their search for suitable job vacancies (including local domestic helpers). The subject webpage of Employment under GovHK also provides points-to-note and other practical information on hiring local domestic helpers for employers' reference.

(3) If newly-hired FDHs are temporarily unable to come to Hong Kong due to the pandemic, or the current FDHs are not able to return to their place of origin, employers may make use of the special arrangements implemented by the LD and the ImmD in Part 1 above to allow their current FDHs to continue to stay in Hong Kong to take care of the elderly in the household.

In terms of training, as FDHs play a major role in caring for elderly persons in many families, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has implemented the Pilot Scheme on Training for Foreign Domestic Helpers in Elderly Care to better train FDHs in skills for caring for elderly persons, such as assisting elderly persons with feeding and taking medicines, first aid, and assisting elderly persons with bathing and oral care, etc, thereby enhancing the elderly's quality of life in the community and supporting their ageing in place. Phase I of the Pilot Scheme is held from March 2018 till September 2021, providing 300 training places initially and an additional 950 training places in May 2019. The SWD will implement Phase II of the Pilot Scheme from October 2021 to September 2023 and provide a total of around 1 350 training places. Under Phase II, using a different approach adopted in Phase I, the SWD will commission a training institute as a pilot to provide training for FDHs. After reviewing the outcome of Phase II of the Pilot Scheme, the SWD will decide on the way forward for the Scheme.