

LCQ6: “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile app

Following is a question by the Hon Lai Tung-kwok and a reply by the Secretary for Innovation and Technology, Mr Alfred Sit, in the Legislative Council today (January 26):

Question:

Quite a number of members of the public have relayed their dissatisfaction that there are time lags in the dissemination of messages such as notifications of compulsory testing notices and exposure notifications in respect of Coronavirus Disease 2019 by the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app. In addition, users need to, through the small screens of their mobile phones, read the relevant press releases which are up to thousands of words and search through tables of a number of pages before they come to know the dates on which and the numbers of times for which they are required to undergo compulsory testing. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) if it has gained an understanding of the time generally taken from the Government's dissemination of the two aforesaid notifications through the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app to users' receipt of them;

(2) whether it has set up a mechanism to handle the following situation: a "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app user visited a number of venues and such venues were also visited by confirmed patient(s) at about the same time, resulting in the user receiving a number of the aforesaid notifications, and the dates on which the user is required to undergo compulsory testing overlapping or the user having to undergo testing for several consecutive days; and

(3) whether it has plans to improve the user experience of the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app, for example, setting out the dates on which and the numbers of times for which users are required to undergo testing in the notifications of compulsory testing notices and, by making reference to the practice of providing real-time parking vacancy information through the "HKeMobility" mobile application, providing real-time visitor flow information of the various community testing centres and mobile specimen collection stations through the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app, so as to facilitate members of the public to choose locations with fewer visitors for undergoing testing, thereby alleviating their suffering from lining up and waiting for testing?

Reply:

President,

The HKSAR Government has been committed to using various technology solutions to assist in the anti-epidemic work over the past two years. On one hand, we have made continuous efforts to enhance the effectiveness of various

technological anti-epidemic measures to support the anti-epidemic strategy of guarding against the importation of cases and the spread of domestic infections. On the other hand, we also assisted members of the public to better cope with the pandemic under the new normal as well as to prepare well for the economic recovery.

Apart from large scale testing and vaccination, a rapid and effective contact tracing is also crucial to the prevention of the spread of virus in the community. Having due regard to the anti-epidemic needs and actual situation of the community, the Government launched in November 2020 the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app to provide members of the public with a convenient digital tool for recording the time of their visits to different venues without the need for real name registration of personal details. Such visit records are encrypted and stored in the app of the users' mobile phones.

With regard to Hon Lai Tung-kwok's question, in consultation with the Food and Health Bureau, my replies are as follows:

(1) Generally speaking, the app will send notifications of exposure risk or compulsory testing notices (CTNs) provided by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) to users on an hourly basis. When users connect their mobile phones to the Internet service, the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app will check the system for updates, automatically download the latest information of visit records of the confirmed or suspected confirmed patients during the communicable period and perform matching with the user's visit records in their mobile phones to generate notifications to remind concerned users to undergo testing as soon as possible so as to reduce the risk of further spread of the virus. The time that individual users who will actually receive notifications may be affected by various factors such as their network service and phone operation. As all data matching and notification issuing will only be performed in the user's mobile phone and the results will also be stored in the user's mobile phone only, we do not have statistics on the actual time it takes for users to receive notifications of exposure risk or CTNs. Therefore, we recommend that users should connect their mobile phones to the Internet regularly to receive notifications of exposure risk or CTNs as early as possible.

The "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app is not designed for tracing purpose, but the CHP is empowered by law to require confirmed patients to upload their visit records to a central database of the Department of Health to assist in conducting epidemiological investigations, tracing the paths along which the virus spreads, and identifying high-risk individuals in order to break the chain of transmission in the community as early as possible. The visit records uploaded by confirmed patients will also assist the CHP in sending notifications of exposure risk and CTNs through the app to users who have visited the same venue that a confirmed patient has visited at about the same time, requiring them to undergo compulsory testing as stipulated by the notice.

So far, the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app has issued notifications of over 10 250 venues to the public about the infection risk. Over 320 000 citizens

have undergone testing at the testing centres after receiving the "LeaveHomeSafe" notifications.

(2) The "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app will send notifications to users, on the advice of the CHP, prompting them to check the content of the CTNs. Those who fall into the categories specified in the CTNs must undergo testing as soon as possible according to the procedures specified in the CTNs. The CTNs will prescribe different testing requirements in details, including the number of tests and the respective deadlines, depending on the risk of each venue. Should the risk of exposure has increased under the latest epidemic development, new CTNs may be issued for the same venue with updated testing requirements. The "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app will issue notifications for each CTN as soon as practicable to enable respective users to know their risk situation. If a user has visited multiple high-risk places or the relevant place is subject to multiple CTNs, it is possible for the user to receive multiple notifications on CTN, while the user should undergo one test on each of the required testing dates in accordance with the testing requirement specified in the relevant notices.

Recently, to guard against the Omicron variant from spreading in the community, the Government has tightened the compulsory testing arrangement to identify possibly infected persons by increasing the testing frequency for persons who have been to places visited by cases confirmed/suspected to be carrying the Omicron variant at an early stage, with a view to achieving "early identification, early isolation and early treatment of the infected". Starting from December 31, 2021, residence, workplaces, and places visited by persons of all cases confirmed/suspected to be carrying the Omicron variant will be included in the CTN. Persons who resided, worked and visited the relevant premises will be subject to compulsory testing on specified dates. The CTN will specify the required testing dates. Given the high transmissibility of the Omicron variant, members of the public who visited the high-risk places included in the CTN should undergo testing on the required testing dates pursuant to the requirement of the relevant notices.

(3) Since the launch of the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile app, the Government has made continuous efforts to enhance the app for improving user experience with due consideration to the feedback from the public and the industry, including the launch of version 2.0 in June 2021 to enable the public to store their vaccination and testing records in the app for easy display where necessary; and the launch of version 3.0 in December 2021 to support the implementation of the Hong Kong Health Code.

The CHP has already enhanced the content of the CTN to list out the number of tests and required testing deadlines in a clear manner. Members of the public can utilise the 24-hour online booking system of community testing centres (CTCs) which shows the booking status of CTCs for the coming two weeks, including any available quotas or full bookings at individual centres on the day of booking and subsequent days. They can provide simple personal information and select a suitable centre and time slot for testing, and CTCs will accord priority to serve individuals with advance bookings with a view to minimising their waiting time.

In view of recent suspected transmission chains in certain areas, relevant residents and workers have heeded the Government's call for voluntary testing, resulting in a large increase in testing demand. The Government has arranged to publicise information on queueing situation in some temporary specified testing service points in busier areas (e.g. Kwai Chung Estate), and the Home Affairs Department would also arrange staff to remind those in queue to visit service points with shorter queues. We will maintain contact with relevant departments and contractors, closely monitor the usage and demand at service points and adjust testing service arrangements in accordance with circumstances.

We will continue to, having regard to the anti-epidemic needs, explore various technical solutions so as to carry out more precise and effective anti-epidemic work under the "vaccine bubble", and to improve the user experience.

Thank you, President and once again thank you Hon Lai's for the question. The Under Secretary for Food and Health, Dr Chui Tak-yi, and I, stand ready to respond to the follow-up questions raised by the Members. Thank you.