

LCQ9: Assisting persons aged between 60 and 64 in securing employment

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (February 27):

Question:

Given that the eligible age for elderly Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) has been raised, since the 1st of this month, from 60 to 65, able-bodied persons aged between 60 and 64 may no longer apply for elderly CSSA and they may only apply for CSSA for the unemployed (CSSA-U). On the other hand, CSSA-U recipients are required to participate in the Support for Self-reliance (SFS) Scheme, in the hope that they can move towards paid employment and self-reliance as early as possible. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) Of (i) the number of participants in the SFS Scheme, (ii) the employment rate of the participants and (iii) the percentage of participants who left the CSSA net, in each of the past five years, with a breakdown by the age group (i.e. aged 15 to 25, 26 to 35, 36 to 45, 46 to 55, 56 to 59) to which the participants belonged;

(2) Whether it knows, in respect of those persons who successfully secured employment and left the CSSA net as mentioned in (1), (i) the types of the industries which they joined, and (ii) the distribution of their average number of working hours per month and average monthly wage in the past five years; if no such information has been kept, how the Social Welfare Department (SWD) evaluates and follows up the employment situation of the participants, and whether it will compile the relevant statistics in future;

(3) Of the targeted measures, taken by SWD under the SFS Scheme since the 1st of this month, to assist CSSA-U recipients aged between 60 and 64 in finding jobs, and whether prior consultation with various stakeholders has been conducted on such measures; whether it has increased the estimates of expenditure and manpower for the SFS Scheme to cope with the additional workload generated by the increase in the number of participants;

(4) Whether the Labour Department has compiled statistics on the current number of job vacancies in the labour market that are open for application by persons aged between 60 and 64; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) Of the new measures (e.g. provision of financial incentives) taken to encourage employers to hire persons aged between 60 and 64, and whether it will enhance the protection of the labour rights and interests of such persons; and

(6) Whether it will consider expeditiously enacting legislation against age discrimination in the employment field, so as to ensure that the relatively older persons are given fair treatment and protected from exploitation?

Reply:

President,

In view of the improved life expectancy of the population of Hong Kong and the trend of extending the retirement age to 65, the Government announced in the Policy Address in January 2017 that the eligible age for elderly Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) would be adjusted from 60 to 65. The Government has implemented the relevant arrangements on February 1, 2019. Persons aged between 60 and 64 who have received elderly CSSA before February 1, 2019 are "grandfathered" and will not be affected by the new arrangements. The CSSA payments of persons with disabilities or persons in ill health will not be affected either. They will, regardless of age, continue to receive CSSA payments which are higher than those applicable to able-bodied adults. It is also worth noting that around 70 per cent of the existing CSSA recipients aged between 55 and 59 are with disabilities or in ill-health.

As for the able-bodied recipients aged between 60 and 64 under the new arrangements, they will continue to be entitled to CSSA as able-bodied adults, and are eligible for the standard rates and special grants applicable to able-bodied adults. In addition, the Government has, since February 1, 2019, provided the Employment Support Supplement (ESS) to these able-bodied adults under the CSSA Scheme. At present, each eligible CSSA recipient will receive ESS at a fixed rate of \$1,060 per month (i.e. the difference between the CSSA standard rates applicable to elderly singleton and able-bodied adult singleton). This supplement seeks to encourage able-bodied adult recipients aged 60 to 64 to join the labour market. It is also applicable to employed able-bodied adult recipients in this age group to support them to remain in employment.

In addition, CSSA recipients may also benefit from the disregarded earnings arrangement with its maximum amount at \$2,500 per month. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) also provides employment support that suits the circumstances and needs of able-bodied adult recipients through the Integrated Employment Assistance Programme for Self-reliance (IEAPS).

My reply to the question raised by the Member is as follows:

(1) As individual IEAPS participants may leave or re-join the programme owing to short-term paid employment or change in their personal circumstances (such as their health conditions), SWD does not maintain statistics on the number of IEAPS participants including breakdowns as mentioned in the question.

SWD has compiled the cumulative number of IEAPS participants in person-times. From January 2013 to end-November 2018, there were 95 774 person-times participated in the IEAPS. The statistics of participating person-times broken down by age is as follows:

Age group	Person-times
15 to 19	6 853
20 to 29	11 358
30 to 39	15 149
40 to 49	29 798
50 to 59	32 616
Total	95 774

Out of the 95 774 person-times participated in IEAPS, 20 365 of them (comprising 21.3 per cent of the total number of participating person-times) successfully secured employment or returned to mainstream schooling. Amongst the 20 365, 4 317 left the CSSA net after participated in the IEAPS (comprising 4.5 per cent of the total number of participating person-times).

(2) Given the reason explained in part (1) of the reply, SWD does not maintain statistics as mentioned in the question.

(3) Following the Government's arrangements to adjust the eligible age for elderly CSSA from 60 to 65 on February 1, 2019, SWD will invite able-bodied adult CSSA recipients aged 60 to 64 to participate in IEAPS. Through participating in the IEAPS operated by non-governmental organisations, these recipients may obtain up-to-date labour market information, benefit from job placements, and receive personalised and focused employment services according to their needs. To this end, the Government has announced the extension of the service period of IEAPS with its current service mode to end-March 2020.

Apart from the above arrangements, the Government will strengthen the collaboration among SWD, the Labour Department (LD), the Employees Retraining Board and the non-governmental organisations, so as to provide more comprehensive employment and retraining services to able-bodied adult CSSA recipients. SWD will continue to listen to stakeholders' views with a view to further encouraging and assisting CSSA recipients to seek and stay in employment.

Of note, the total CSSA caseload as at end-December 2018 was 226 437, which was the lowest since 2000. In particular, the unemployment case was the lowest since 1996, and was 80 per cent lower than the historical peak.

(4) LD has not conducted any statistical survey on job vacancies in the labour market that are opened to job seekers aged 60 to 64. Generally speaking, LD does not agree that job vacancies in general should carry age restrictions. LD requires employers using its recruitment services not to impose any discriminatory entry requirements (including age) on their job vacancies submitted, and does not generally accept job vacancies with age restrictions. Therefore, the vast majority of vacancies published by LD are suitable for job seekers of different ages to apply. Job seekers with different backgrounds (including mature persons) may choose vacancies which

suit their personal circumstances, interests and needs, and apply directly to employers or through LD's employment services.

(5) The Government is committed to promoting employment of mature persons. On the basis of its Employment Programme for the Middle-aged, LD has enhanced the programme and renamed it as the Employment Programme for the Elderly and Middle-aged (EPEM) on September 1, 2018, so as to further encourage employers to hire job seekers aged 60 or above and provide them with on-the-job training at the initial stage of employment. Employers engaging job seekers aged 60 or above who are unemployed or have left the workforce are offered a monthly on-the-job training allowance up to \$4,000 per employee for a period of six to 12 months under EPEM. As for employers engaging each unemployed job seeker aged 40 to 59, the maximum amount of on-the-job training allowance remains at \$3,000 per month for a period of three to six months. EPEM covers both full-time and part-time jobs.

LD also implements various measures to support the employment of mature job seekers, such as staging large-scale job fairs for mature persons and the middle-aged, setting up special counters and organising district-based job fairs on part-time employment as well as employment briefings for them in its job centres, establishing a dedicated webpage for them on the Interactive Employment Service website, etc. to facilitate their access to updated employment information and search for suitable job vacancies.

Furthermore, LD has all along been actively encouraging employers, having regard to the individual circumstances of their enterprises, to adopt friendly employment practices for mature persons, and extend the working life of their employees so that mature persons who wish to work may stay in employment. LD will continue to promote a friendly working environment for mature persons through various publicity activities, such as publishing feature articles in newspapers, publicising relevant messages through different employers networks, etc.

LD will also continue to protect the statutory rights of all employees irrespective of their age.

(6) The Government is committed to eliminating any concepts and acts of discrimination through various measures. For employment matters, we encourage employers to "Count on Talent, Not Age in Employment" and use consistent selection criteria to assess the abilities of job seekers and employees. LD has issued the Practical Guidelines for Employers on Eliminating Age Discrimination in Employment since January 2006, setting forth the best practices for eliminating age discrimination in recruitment and workplace. To enhance public awareness and the importance of eliminating age discrimination in employment, the Government has been promoting equal employment through various measures, such as broadcasting announcements of public interest in the digital media and distributing the Practical Guidelines and leaflets to the public and employers.

To eliminate age discrimination in employment through legislation involves very complex issues, and needs to take into account carefully the impact on the socio-economic situation and the labour market in Hong Kong,

etc. The Government currently does not have any plan to legislate against age discrimination in employment. We will continue to publicise the message of equal employment, promote and safeguard equal employment opportunities, and enhance the employability of different age groups through strengthening training and re-training.