

LCQ9: Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Wendy Hong and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (November 8):

Question:

Regarding the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the annual number of able-bodied CSSA recipients and their average time of stay on CSSA since 2021, and set out in the table below a breakdown by (i) economically active person (i.e. (a) employed persons and (b) unemployed persons) and (ii) economically inactive person (i.e. (c) homemakers, (d) students, (e) retirees and (f) unpaid carers);

Able-bodied CSSA recipients		2021	2022	2023 to date
(i)	(a)			
	(b)			
(ii)	(c)			
	(d)			
	(e)			
	(f)			
Total				
Average time of stay on CSSA				

(2) of the annual number of cases of participation in the Support for Self-reliance Scheme since 2021; among such cases, the number of cases in which the participants successfully secured employment, as well as the number of cases in which the participants withdrew from the CSSA Scheme upon employment and the average time taken to do so;

(3) given that there are views that the current absence of a time limit for CSSA entitlement of able-bodied recipients under the CSSA Scheme is unable to motivate such recipients to actively secure employment and leave the CSSA net, whether the authorities will consider setting a time limit for CSSA entitlement of able-bodied recipients (for example, setting a cap at six months, and if such recipients still need to apply for CSSA after the relevant time limit, they must submit an application afresh and undergo the income and asset tests, or switch to apply for the Working Family Allowance), so as to motivate such recipients to actively join the labour market; and

(4) given that there are views that as the income and asset tests are currently conducted on a household basis under the CSSA Scheme, the amount of

assistance received will be affected if individual family members join the labour market or have an increase in income, thus leading to objection by other family members to their employment, whether the authorities will consider disregarding the earnings of family members other than the CSSA applicants and their spouses when conducting the income and asset tests, so as to avoid affecting the CSSA applicants' continued entitlement to CSSA, and suitably raising the asset limits to allow CSSA recipient families to accumulate a certain amount of savings through work, thereby providing an incentive to encourage members of such families to join the labour market, and helping them become self-reliant and leave the CSSA net as early as possible?

Reply:

President,

The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for people who cannot support themselves financially due to old age, ill-health, disability, single parenthood, unemployment, low-earnings or for other reasons to help them meet their basic needs.

The CSSA Scheme not only provides cash assistance to needy persons, but also assists recipients who may work to overcome employment barriers to achieve self-reliance. In January 2013, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) launched the Integrated Employment Assistance Programme for Self-reliance (IEAPS), under which non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide services to relevant recipients to encourage and assist them to enhance employability and secure paid employment. In April 2020, the SWD launched the enhanced Employment Support Services (EmSS) to improve the NGOs' efficacy in providing the relevant services.

In general, unemployed able-bodied CSSA recipients aged 15 to 59 are required to receive the EmSS, unless they have justifiable reasons for not being able to work (such as pursuing studies, or having to look after young children, sick or disabled family members at home). They are required to undertake compliance with the relevant obligations (such as applying for a certain number of jobs within a specified period of time) in writing. In case of incompliance, they and their family members will become ineligible for CSSA and must repay overpaid CSSA. Able-bodied CSSA recipients aged 60 to 64 may receive the EmSS on a voluntary basis.

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

(1) and (2) The numbers of unemployed or low-earning able-bodied CSSA recipients aged 15 to 64 from 2021-22 to 2023-24 are set out in Table 1 at Annex, while the median durations of CSSA unemployed or low-earning cases receiving CSSA are set out in Table 2 at Annex.

From January 2013 to September 2023, about 138 000 recipients had participated in the IEAPS and/or received the EmSS cumulatively, while about

27 600 recipients successfully secured employment or returned to mainstream education, including about 7 690 recipients leaving the CSSA net.

The SWD does not have other information sought in these two parts of the question.

(3) and (4) As explained above, the CSSA Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for people who cannot support themselves financially. In this connection, rigorous means tests (including income and asset tests) are put in place to ensure that finite public resources are used to cater for needy people. The asset limits are adjusted annually according to the established mechanism on the basis of the movement of the Consumer Price Index (A).

Upholding the concept of mutual support amongst cohabiting family members, CSSA recipients should first make use of economic resources of their family members to meet their basic needs. In this connection, the SWD considers an applicant's eligibility for CSSA on a household basis. In special cases such as an applicant having poor relationship with his/her cohabiting family members, the SWD will prudently consider exercising discretion and allow the applicant with special circumstances to apply for CSSA independently. The SWD will also refer the case to appropriate social service units for assistance.

Apart from the EmSS, the Disregarded Earnings (DE) arrangement under the CSSA Scheme provides additional financial incentives to encourage CSSA recipients to seek jobs and stay employed. The amount of assistance payable to CSSA applicants or recipients is the difference between their or their family's recognised needs and assessable income under the CSSA Scheme. When assessing the monthly household income, earnings from employment can be disregarded up to a prescribed level to raise the recipients' incentive to work. In February 2021, the Government significantly increased the maximum level of DE by 60 per cent to \$4,000. Specifically, the monthly earnings that may be totally disregarded have been raised from the first \$800 to the first \$1,200, while up to half of the next \$5,600 of earnings (i.e. \$2,800) may be disregarded. The maximum total amount of DE is \$4,000 per month. In addition, from February 2021, the Government has increased the totally disregardable earnings from a recipient's new jobs from the first month's earnings to the first two months' earnings, on condition that the recipient has not benefitted from such DE in the past two years.

To verify recipients' continued eligibility for CSSA, the SWD conducts regular reviews, spot checks and investigations (upon receipt of reports) on approved cases, including conducting income and asset tests. Nonetheless, considering that the CSSA Scheme provides a safety net of last resort for those who cannot support themselves financially, and that the predicaments faced by recipients and their causes differ, setting a uniform time limit for receiving CSSA may lead to practical difficulties in recipients' lives.