

Tightening group gathering and raising penalties amid COVID-19 surge

As foreshadowed by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at the press conference yesterday (November 30) announcing the latest package of measures to control the surge in the COVID-19 epidemic, the Government announced today (December 1) that at its meeting this morning, the Executive Council endorsed amendments to the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) to tighten requirements on group gatherings. Members also gave in principle support to increasing the penalties for breaching requirements under certain Regulations in order to create the necessary deterrence effect.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau said, "The local COVID-19 epidemic situation has entered into a critical stage. There have been several hundreds of confirmed cases reported from the large outbreak cluster caused by group gathering activities, notably dancing and singing, in indoor premises. In addition, the emergence of a considerable number of local cases with unknown sources indicates that there are many silent transmission chains in the community. It is imperative to tighten the requirements on group gatherings immediately, with a view to reducing people flow and social contact so as to stop the virus from spreading in the community."

"In order to suppress the latest wave of the epidemic, the community must fight the virus together by strictly complying with various anti-epidemic measures, including avoiding crowds, keeping social distance and maintaining personal hygiene. Such collective efforts by the community are essential for protecting ourselves, our families and the public at large especially the high-risk and disadvantaged groups. Preventing the medical system from being overloaded or even collapse is of utmost importance. Accordingly, the Government strongly urges all members of the public to stay at home as far as possible and stop all unnecessary social activities"

The details of the legislative amendments are as follows:

- (1) The number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places will be tightened from four to two. The requirement is also applicable to group gatherings in catering business and scheduled premises regulated under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F) in which the relevant requirements or restrictions are not complied with;
- (2) The number of persons allowed in wedding ceremonies at which no food or drink is served will be tightened from 50 to 20;
- (3) For shareholders' meeting of a listed company that is held in accordance with any Ordinance or other regulatory instrument that governs the operation of the organisation or its business, subject to no food or drink being served, the number of persons allowed in a room or partitioned area will be

tightened from 50 to 20; and

(4) The exemption on group gatherings in relation to religious activities and local tours will be removed.

The relevant legislative amendments will take effect from December 2, 2020. The list of exempted group gatherings as amended is at the Annex. Unless exempted, the prohibition on group gatherings at public places will continue during the 14-day period from December 2, 2020 to December 15, 2020, and the specification have been published in the Gazette. Any person who participates in a prohibited group gathering; organises a prohibited group gathering; owns, controls or operates the place of such a gathering; and knowingly allows the taking place of such gathering commits an offence under Cap. 599G. Offenders are liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Persons who participate in a prohibited group gathering may discharge liability for the offence by paying a fixed penalty of \$2,000.

In order to achieve the needed deterrence effect, the Executive Council has agreed in principle that the fixed penalties under Cap.599G, as well as the Prevention and Control of Disease (Wearing of Mask) Regulation (Cap. 599I) and the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) in relation to the respective requirements to wear a mask and take a COVID-19 test, should be increased by several times. The Government will shortly seek the Executive Council's approval to amend the relevant legislation, that is, Cap. 599G, Cap.599I and Cap.599J.

The spokesman said, "The coming two weeks are going to be critical. The Government has rolled out various measures which have enabled us to overcome previous waves of the epidemic. We are confident that with solidarity and concerted efforts of all, we should be able to fight this one together with a view to resuming normal economic and social activities."