

Transcript of remarks by SLW and SCED (with video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, and the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau, at a media session on the commissioning of a special training programme by the Employees Retraining Board (ERB) and measures to support the tourism sector today (September 27):

Reporter: Can I first ask Mr Yau about the new training programme? Right now, from what we are seeing in the tourism sector, much fewer tourists are coming to Hong Kong, so how do you see those training programmes providing short-term or even immediate help to the travel industry? We are seeing a significant drop in tourist arrival numbers. I have a couple of questions for Dr Law as well. First of all, for this anti-extradition crisis, there were two things that are of main concern for some Hong Kongers. One is people are noticing a lot more suicides and the second thing is they are seeing the arrest of social workers while they are doing their job on the front line trying to stand in between clashes of protesters and the Police. What sort of assistance or increase in measures are you planning to take on these two fronts? Thank you.

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: Thanks for the question. The tourism industry is facing a very tough time because of the reduction of visitors coming to Hong Kong. Our approach is multi-pronged. First of all, in the eventuality when the time comes back where things have settled more peacefully, we will "relaunch" Hong Kong in overseas and the emphasis would be on short-haul visitors initially and then some targeted markets. We have been talking with the Hong Kong Tourism Board and the business sector about how best we can come up with a strategy. Basically a lot of people in the industry are onside, so we would plan ahead, but the challenge is to pick the best timing for this major relaunch.

Having said that, we are also doing some ongoing things. To take an example, last week when we were in Los Angeles, we also launched a programme together with the Hong Kong Tourism Board to update people on highlights of Hong Kong at this point of time.

Facing this very stiff economic time, we also need to help the travel industry people by relieving their costs. So all the measures I introduced and highlighted today are there to reduce their business running costs, e.g. exempting certain fees and charges, and also helping them to go out to promotional events by subsidising.

In the meantime, the travel industry relies on a lot of talents and experienced staff. In our discussion with the trade, the last thing they want to do is to lay off people. So in this difficult time, how to keep the workforce intact and also enrich their experience or upkeep their strength is

another thing we need to do. That's why I think the ERB programme and the exemption of fees for them to do continuing professional development training are all important. We hope that we can preserve not just the trade or business but also that the workforce remains intact. Thank you.

Secretary for Labour and Welfare: Whenever there is any political, social or economic turmoil in society, the suicide rate will go up. The best strategy to deal with suicide is to act, but not to talk about it because suicide is contagious. I take this opportunity again to plead to the media that the least we talk about suicide the better, but definitely to act. We need the support of a number of NGOs (non-governmental organisations) that are providing the services, particularly for those who are having ideation of suicide or people who are under severe depression. Because depression in fact is a state which creates most of those suicide acts. So, in the past few months the Social Welfare Department has been working with the NGOs to strengthen the services so that we can both outreach or when they approach us, we can provide immediate support.

Relating to the second question, yes, indeed in the past months there were a number of social workers being arrested. The Social Welfare Department has been discussing this issue with various social welfare organisations and hope that we can obtain a better or mutual understanding on the way that we should deal with those circumstances that social workers may be facing these days. There is also a need for us to look at some of the guidelines that are related to how social workers, in particular, can help in dealing with particular people, the juveniles, when they are facing these justice systems. We are looking at it and whenever there is a need, we will strengthen the communication between the NGOs, the Social Welfare Department and the Hong Kong Police Force.

Reporter: Can you first tell us the coverage of the skills of industry covered by this programme and how many people are expected to benefit from it? The second question is to ask about yesterday. Can you tell us what happened in the four hours after the Community Dialogue finished? Did any of the officials actually think of confronting the people waiting outside calling for dialogue?

Secretary for Labour and Welfare: Answering the first question, as the Chairman (Chairman of the ERB, Mr Yu Pang-chun) has just mentioned, we have 36 training courses (on vocational skills) covering 19 industries. The ERB will be releasing the details of those 36 different training programmes for different types of vocational skills. I don't think I should read them out because it is a very long list. Please look forward to the press release.

Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development: The short answer is that yesterday's dialogue was conducted very smoothly, we are grateful to all those who took part, and those who tried to come but because of limited seats, might not be able to come.

Another gain from the dialogue is that some people asked for a second chance to stay behind for a deeper and longer conversation, and we took down

their names and would contact them in future occasions. Although there was some delay in us leaving the premises, it is exactly the purpose that we didn't want to cause any confrontations. Although there were some people waiting and some people picking bricks and blocking certain roads, we believe that a peaceful dialogue, a heart-to-heart talk and a very candid open conversation between and amongst government officials and members of public would help bring a more conducive environment for more conversations to carry on. We hope we would be able to carry on (such dialogue) in a not very distant future. Thank you.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)