

CE announces activation of Emergency Response Level in relation to novel coronavirus infection

In response to the latest development of the novel coronavirus infection, the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, yesterday (January 25) announced that the response level under the "Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance" (the Preparedness and Response Plan) would be raised to Emergency Response Level with immediate effect. She also rolled out a package of measures to tackle the disease and appealed to every member of public in Hong Kong to work together to fight against the virus.

"The development of the novel coronavirus infection is ever evolving and the situation is very serious, prompting tremendous public health concern and anxiety of the people. I have held a high-level meeting within the Government and listened to the advice of experts. I decided to raise the response level to Emergency and implement a series of strategies and measures as an all-out effort to tackle the disease," Mrs Lam said.

The strategies and measures announced by Mrs Lam today covered six areas.

(1) Enhancing mechanism and organisation structure to tackle disease

Mrs Lam announced that the response level under the Preparedness and Response Plan would be raised to Emergency level and she will chair a Steering Committee cum Command Centre with a view to formulating relevant strategies and measures according to the development of the disease as soon as possible. There are four Workgroups under the Steering Committee cum Command Centre. The Workgroup on Disease Prevention and Control led by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, is responsible for formulating strategies to manage infected cases and maintaining close liaison with relevant departments in the Mainland and the World Health Organization (WHO). The Workgroup on Responses and Actions led by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, will co-ordinate the work of various departments in fighting the disease. The Workgroup on Public Participation led by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Lau Kong-wah, will encourage the community to take part in activities to tackle the virus. The Workgroup on Communications led by the Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Mr Patrick Nip, will make sure that the latest and accurate messages are conveyed to all members of the public and stakeholders speedily and effectively.

An expert advisory group will be set up under the Steering Committee cum Command Centre to provide professional advice to the Chief Executive and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. Currently four

experts with rich experiences in public health, epidemiology and clinical aspect have been engaged to join the expert advisory group, including Professor Gabriel Leung, Dean of Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong; Professor Keiji Fukuda, Director and Clinical Professor of the School of Public Health of the University of Hong Kong and former Assistant Director General of the WHO; Professor Yuen Kwok-yung, Chair of Infectious Diseases, Department of Microbiology, Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong; and Professor David Hui Shu-cheong, Stanley Ho Professor of Respiratory Medicine and Director of Stanley Ho Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases.

(2) Strengthening immigration control

Given that all the current confirmed cases are imported ones, the HKSAR Government has decided to enhance immigration control to prevent the spreading of the disease. Specific measures in this aspect include:

(i) indefinitely suspending flight and high-speed train services to and from Wuhan of the Hubei Province;

(ii) expanding the arrangements of health declaration by in-coming travellers from the Mainland as soon as possible to all boundary control points, including the China Ferry Terminal, Hong Kong Macau Ferry Terminal, Tuen Mun Ferry Terminal, Kai Tak Cruise Terminal, Ocean Terminal, all land-based control points, in addition to the Airport and West Kowloon Station of the Express Rail Link (XRL), and to gradually pilot the use of e-health declaration system;

(iii) enhancing the manpower for conducting temperature checks and stationing at Border Control Points;

(iv) exploring temperature checks for departing passengers with priority on passengers departing to Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Macao;

(v) updating travel health advice and advising the general public not to visit Hubei Province in which there is community transmission of novel coronavirus; and

(vi) suspending all the Mainland exchanges, visits, cultural and sports activities organised by the HKSAR Government.

(3) Minimising risks of virus infection and spreading in local community

Although there is no local infection case at the moment, the HKSAR Government will cancel large-scale events in the coming future which it organises or arranges and are expected to be attended by many people. Apart from the International Chinese New Year Carnival and the Lunar New Year Cup football tournament which have been cancelled earlier, lantern carnivals organised by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department will also be cancelled. The HKSAR Government has reached a consensus with the organiser of

the Hong Kong Marathon that the event originally scheduled for February 9 will also be cancelled. In addition, as the HKSAR Government has to focus on fighting the disease, various types of Chinese New Year receptions hosted by the HKSAR Government, including the one hosted by the Chief Executive in the Government House, will be cancelled. The HKSAR Government appeals to community groups to take public health risks into account in organising any event.

To lower the risk of disease transmission among students in schools, the HKSAR Government will extend the Chinese New Year holidays of secondary schools, primary schools, kindergartens, child care centres and special schools so that they will resume classes on February 17. During the original school days, all of them will keep their school premises open and arrange a suitable number of staff to take care of students in need and continue to handle school matters. As for other schools, including post-secondary institutions, the Education Bureau will maintain liaison with them so as to strengthen anti-epidemic measures.

The Social Welfare Department has written to organisations operating subsidised social welfare services, including residential care home and day care centre services, providing them with additional resources to facilitate the cleaning and disinfection of the premises of their service units as well as reminding them to conduct body temperature checks for residents, working staff and visitors. Various Government departments will also step up the cleaning work in public facilities under their purview, including public markets, libraries, playgrounds, swimming pools, etc. Some children's play rooms may even be closed. The HKSAR Government has also reminded public transport operators and private property management companies to step up cleaning work to prevent the disease from spreading and protect public health.

(4) Enhancing personal hygiene of the public

The Centre for Health Protection has issued guidelines reminding citizens to be aware of personal hygiene. The HKSAR Government will proactively increase the supply of masks to ensure sufficient supply to public organisations and facilitate citizens to purchase masks. To meet the future demand for masks in Hong Kong, the Government and suppliers would work together to strive for restoring stable supply in short term. Besides maintaining close contact with the suppliers, the Chief Executive has personally written to the State Council seeking their assistance in mask supply from the Mainland to Hong Kong. Furthermore, the HKSAR Government will closely monitor the market supply of other hygiene products such as hand sanitizer, alcohol-based handrub and bleach, and will speed up the procurement process as far as possible to ensure adequate supply for government departments in meeting the practical needs of anti-epidemic efforts.

(5) Improving anti-epidemic facilities and services

Among the two quarantine facilities, Lady MacLehose Holiday Village has been officially activated to receive persons who are required to be quarantined and Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village is also ready. To cope with the quarantine need in future, the Department of Health is contacting other non-governmental organisations to borrow or requisition their holiday villages, and coordinating with the Housing Department to convert Fai Ming Estate, an unoccupied public estate in Fanling, into temporary flats for quarantine and observation of close contact persons without symptoms if needed. Healthcare staff in need may also be accommodated there.

To further enhance port health measures, the Department of Health has put in place additional thermal imaging systems in the Hong Kong International Airport and Hong Kong West Kowloon Station of the XRL for checking body temperature of travellers with increased frequency of random checking.

The Hospital Authority (HA) has been closely monitoring the development. Our current strategy is, through "early notification", "early isolation" and "early testing", identify as soon as possible patients suspected to be infected and arrange them to receive isolation treatment in hospitals, with a view to preventing transmission into the community. At present, 603 isolation beds are ready for use in the public hospitals with occupancy of around 40 per cent. The HA and hospitals in all clusters will continue to keep a close watch on the situation and allocate resources to mobilise the other isolation beds when required. Regarding testing in public hospitals, the HA expects that rapid testing could be provided in laboratories of public hospitals in early February the soonest. The Public Health Laboratory Centre of the Department of Health has enhanced testing service with a view to ascertaining whether a patient is infected as soon as possible.

In addition, the HA is ready to activate designated clinics timely if there is community outbreak in Hong Kong or neighbouring region (e.g. Guangdong Province), to support the hospitals in handling a higher number of suspected cases or follow-up action in order to alleviate the pressure on Accident and Emergency Departments (AEDs). Designated clinics would generally be responsible for handling mild cases, such that AEDs could focus on the more severe cases.

(6) Allocating sufficient resources for the strategies and measures

To ensure effective implementation of the above strategies and measures, Mrs Lam emphasised that the HKSAR Government would render full financial support in meeting any additional resources reasonably required by government departments, the HA and organisations undertaking related studies in the tertiary institutions, so long as they contribute to anti-epidemic efforts.

"The HKSAR Government has always taken public health as the paramount consideration. We will closely monitor the development of the situation and seek expert advice. We will not hesitate to introduce more measures when necessary to protect the health of the citizens. I appeal to the public to

work together with the HKSAR Government in fighting the disease," Mrs Lam said.