

LCQ11: Coping with the epidemic by residential care homes

Following is a question by the Dr Hon Fernando Cheung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (October 28):

Question:

There are comments that the Government's refusal to completely close all boundary control points ended up at least 290 000 persons entering the territory with exemption from the quarantine requirement between February and July this year. This resulted in the outbreak of the third wave of the epidemic, with residential care homes (RCHs) for persons with disabilities and RCHs for the elderly bearing the severe brunt of the epidemic. Quite a number of such RCH residents were confirmed to be infected and died, while other residents living in the same RCHs were sent to quarantine facilities for quarantine. On coping with the epidemic by these two types of RCHs, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) Of the respective to-date numbers of (i) confirmed cases among the residents, (ii) deaths among the residents and (iii) confirmed cases among the staff, in respect of the two types of RCHs; the respective numbers and name lists of the two types of RCHs in which there have been confirmed cases among their residents or staff;

(2) Of the respective to-date numbers of (i) residents and (ii) staff members in respect of the two types of RCHs placed under quarantine, together with a breakdown by the quarantine facility concerned; whether guidelines on the relevant quarantine arrangements have been drawn up;

(3) Of the respective numbers of workers currently employed by the two types of RCHs who were imported under the Supplementary Labour Scheme; the respective numbers of imported workers working in those RCHs of the two types in which there have been confirmed cases among their residents or staff; whether there are requirements (i) for such imported workers to be subject to compulsory quarantine for 14 days upon arrival in Hong Kong and to pass the virus test, and (ii) for employers to take appropriate anti-epidemic measures at the accommodations provided for such imported workers;

(4) As it has been reported that the Social Welfare Department (SWD) collaborates with the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department to deploy staff to inspect the ventilation systems of private RCHs with relatively poorer environment and to assist such RCHs in carrying out improvement works (e.g. retrofitting of exhaust fans) in order to reduce the risk of an outbreak of the epidemic in such RCHs, of (i) the number and the name list of such RCHs with relatively poorer environment, and (ii) the number and the name list of those RCHs which need such improvement works, the items to be improved, the public expenditure involved and the progress of the works;

(5) Whether guidelines have been issued to RCHs on the arrangements for relatives and friends to visit the residents during the epidemic, in order to promote healthy communication among RCHs' staff, residents and their families;

(6) Whether guidelines have been issued to RCHs on the rehabilitation and living skills trainings that should be provided for the residents during the epidemic;

(7) Of the number of applications, received by the Government from RCHs for subsidies under the Innovation and Technology Fund for Application in Elderly and Rehabilitation Care, for procuring telephones and video telephony equipment to facilitate the residents' communication with their relatives and friends during the epidemic; the progress for the vetting and approval of such applications, and the numbers of approved applications and the RCHs involved; and

(8) Given that the Chief Executive indicated earlier on that quite a number of RCHs for the elderly in Hong Kong had difficulties in controlling infection due to their limited space, and that the Labour and Welfare Bureau received, as early as in May 2019, the report of the Working Group on the Review of Ordinances and Codes of Practice for Residential Care Homes set up by SWD, as well as planned to amend the Residential Care Homes (Persons with Disabilities) Ordinance (Cap 613) and the Residential Care Homes (Elderly Persons) Ordinance (Cap 459) and the related regulations, in order to adjust upward the statutory minimum floor space per resident of the two types of RCHs from the existing 6.5 square metres to between 8 and 9.5 square metres, of the progress of the legislative amendment exercise and when the public and this Council will be consulted on the amendment bills?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Food and Health Bureau, my reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) As at October 19, 2020, out of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) confirmed cases, there were 135 confirmed cases of residents from residential care homes (RCHs) (102 cases from residential care homes for the elderly (RCHes) and 33 cases from residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs)), 29 of them passed away. The number of confirmed cases involving RCH staff was 40 (24 cases from RCHes and 16 cases from RCHDs). A total of 29 RCHs had confirmed cases, including 19 RCHes and 10 RCHDs. The report of the "Latest situation of cases of COVID-19", which is updated daily by the Government, lists out clusters with 10 or more cases in RCHs. The website is www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/local_situation_covid19_en.pdf.

(2) The Department of Health (DH), the Hospital Authority and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) have jointly formulated guidelines on the quarantine arrangements regarding cases of infectious disease at RCHes and RCHDs. As at October 19, 2020, the cumulative number of RCH residents subjected to

quarantine was 487 (409 persons from RCHes and 78 persons from RCHDs). The cumulative number of RCH staff subjected to quarantine was 241 (171 persons from RCHes and 70 persons from RCHDs). Among the RCH residents subjected to quarantine, 464 residents were quarantined at Jockey Club PHAB Camp (97 persons), Cheung Muk Tau Holiday Centre for the Elderly (107 persons) and AsiaWorld-Expo (260 persons) respectively. The remaining 23 residents were quarantined on-site or in other facilities. As for RCH staff, they were arranged to be quarantined at general quarantine centres.

(3) Pursuant to the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap 599C) and the Compulsory Quarantine of Persons Arriving at Hong Kong from Foreign Places Regulation (Cap 599E), all persons, including imported workers, having stayed in areas outside Hong Kong for any period during the 14 days preceding arrival in Hong Kong, regardless of nationality and travel documents used, will be subject to compulsory quarantine for 14 days. Breaching a quarantine order is a criminal offence and offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. Besides, those arriving Hong Kong via the Hong Kong International Airport (the Airport) who are asymptomatic are required to proceed immediately upon arrival to the Temporary Specimen Collection Centre set up by DH in the Airport for collecting their deep throat saliva samples for COVID-19 testing.

Based on information from the Immigration Department, as at end-August 2020, RCHes and RCHDs employed 2 672 and 135 imported care workers under the Supplementary Labour Scheme respectively. Among them, 44 and two respectively were working in RCHs with confirmed cases of COVID-19 among residents or staff.

(4) Improving indoor ventilation of RCHs can help reduce spread of virus. In this regard, the SWD has arranged for staff of the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department to visit eight RCHes and RCHDs to inspect and advise on their ventilation conditions. The SWD together with the relevant departments are exploring practicable options for improving indoor ventilation of RCHs.

(5) During the epidemic, the SWD has reminded RCHs from time to time to observe the "Guidelines for Residential Care Homes for the Elderly or Persons with Disabilities for the Prevention of COVID-19" (the Guidelines) issued by the Centre for Health Protection of the DH and step up various infection control and personal and environmental hygiene measures, including making suitable arrangements for visits. The SWD issued a letter on July 8 this year to remind all RCHes and RCHDs to refer to the Guidelines that visiting is not allowed unless on compassionate grounds or for official visits. When arranging visits for individual residents under special circumstances on compassionate grounds, RCHs must step up and take prudent and effective measures (including checking body temperature of the incoming visitors, requiring them to perform hand hygiene and wear surgical mask, recording the date of visit and other relevant information, arranging visits at a designated place with proper segregation and frequent sanitisation, maintaining a proper social distance, etc). Moreover, only one visitor is allowed for each resident at a time to minimise the risk of infection. The SWD has also advised RCHs to give every possible assistance to family

members/relatives of their residents so that they can maintain contact with the residents through other means (such as telephone and video communication), or send videos of everyday life to the residents.

(6) All RCHEs and RCHDs have continued to provide residential care services during the COVID-19 epidemic, and receive services from the Visiting Medical Practitioner Service. The SWD has reminded RCHs from time to time to refer to the Guidelines and maintain social distance during the provision of daily care and training for their residents. Besides, the SWD has urged service operators to utilise practicable means such as telephone and video communication equipment, etc, to maintain contact with and provide support to service users and their family members/carers.

(7) Since its launch in December 2018, the Innovation and Technology Fund for Application in Elderly and Rehabilitation Care has received applications in three tranches. In the last tranche of applications which closed on April 27, 2020, the Secretariat to the Fund received a total of around 70 applications for technology products related to telephone and video communication equipment. As at end-August 2020, the Secretariat to the Fund has vetted and approved over 60 applications.

(8) The Working Group on the Review of Ordinances and Codes of Practice for Residential Care Homes (Working Group) set up by the SWD completed the review in May 2019. Following a comprehensive and in-depth study as well as extensive deliberations, the Working Group has put forward 19 recommendations on various aspects of monitoring of RCHEs and RCHDs. Some of the recommendations have to be implemented by way of legislative amendments. The Government consulted the Legislative Council (LegCo) Panel on Welfare Services; and the Joint Subcommittee on Long-term Care Policy under the LegCo Panel on Welfare Services and Panel on Health Services in April 2019 and June 2020 respectively, and the Elderly Commission, the Social Welfare Advisory Committee and the Rehabilitation Advisory Committee in the second half of 2019. Four district stakeholder engagement sessions were also organised in the first half of 2020. The Government is conducting preparatory work for the legislative amendments.