

LCQ13: Manpower shortage of care sector

Following is a question by the Hon Judy Chan and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 4):

Question:

Some members of the care sector have pointed out that the Cambridge Nursing Home and the Bridge of Rehabilitation incidents and the Children's Residential Home incident revealed a serious imbalance in the ratio of care workers to care recipients in residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and residential homes for children in Hong Kong, as well as a serious lack of local labour joining the care sector. Although the sector may currently import labour through the Supplementary Labour Scheme, the manpower shortage situation has shown no improvement. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has assessed the impacts of a prolonged manpower shortage on the service quality of various types of residential care homes (RCHs); if so, of the assessment outcome; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether the Social Welfare Department will formulate the ratios of care workers to care recipients in RCHs based on the services provided by various types of RCHs, and study the enhancements to policies concerning the statutory minimum staffing requirements for various types of RCHs; and

(3) whether it will improve the labour importation regime based on the services provided by various types of RCHs, and consider providing more room for the care sector to recruit care workers from the Mainland; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In 2021, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) collected, through questionnaire, staffing information of front-line care workers in service units (including residential and day service units) from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating subsidised elderly, rehabilitation and family and child welfare services. According to the information provided by the NGOs, as at January 1, 2021, 7 405 personal care workers, 1 663 ward attendants and 1 132 home helpers were employed by these subsidised service units. The vacancy rates of the three said posts were 17.6 per cent, 14.0 per cent and 20.3 per cent respectively. Under the Lump Sum Grant Subvention System, subject to their compliance with the requirements of the Funding and Service Agreements and the statutory staffing requirements, the subvented NGOs may determine their staffing establishments in accordance with their

human resources policies and flexibly deploy resources and employ staff to achieve the service output and effectiveness required.

The prevailing statutory minimum staffing requirements in respect of care workers/ancillary workers/child care workers of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs), child care centres and residential child care centres are set out in Annex. To enhance the quality of RCHEs and RCHDs, the Government plans to introduce an amendment bill into the Legislative Council in the first half of 2022 to amend the Residential Care Homes (Elderly Persons) Ordinance (Cap. 459), the Residential Care Homes (Persons with Disabilities) Ordinance (Cap. 613) and their subsidiary legislation. The legislative proposals include raising the minimum staffing requirements of RCHEs and RCHDs. As for residential child care services, the SWD will conduct a review in 2022-23, including the staffing establishment of these services, so as to keep pace with the long-term development need.

In accordance with the Government's established policy, employers must accord priority to local workers in filling job vacancies. If employers have genuine difficulties in finding suitable staff locally, they may apply to import workers at technician level or below through the Supplementary Labour Scheme (SLS). Currently, private and self-financing RCHEs and RCHDs may apply to import care workers through the SLS. The Government will continue to proactively train and encourage local workers to join the care sector through the Navigation Scheme for Young Persons in Care Services, the "First-Hire-Then-Train" Scheme implemented by the Employees Retraining Board, etc. At the same time, on the premises of safeguarding local employment, consideration will be given to meeting the manpower needs of residential care homes (RCHs) through importation of labour.

To alleviate the grave challenge of manpower shortage in the care sector under the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government has relaxed, on a time-limited basis, certain requirements for the care sector to import care workers through the SLS from March 1 to May 31, 2022. The relaxed requirements include exempting the sector from undergoing four-week local recruitment under the scheme, flexibly approving the number of care workers to be imported having regard to the needs of individual RCHs and suspending the circulation of each application to the Labour Advisory Board for views. Subvented and contract RCHs may also apply for importation of care workers in accordance with the same requirements. As at April 22, the Labour Department (LD) had approved 431 applications involving 2 334 imported care workers.

In early March 2022, the SWD for the first time directly recruited temporary contract care workers with an employment contract period of three months, and received more than 5 500 applications. The several hundred short-term care workers recruited have been assigned in batches to provide assistance at RCHs facing serious manpower shortage. Discounting those who have reported for duty, among the applications received by the SWD, there are nearly 5 000 persons who have indicated interest in working at RCHs but yet to be placed into jobs. In view of this, the Labour and Welfare Bureau, the LD and the SWD are collaborating with the Hong Kong Association of Gerontology to roll out a one-off Special Referral Programme for RCH Care

Workers to refer these job seekers to RCHs with manpower needs. After initial matching, job seekers will be arranged to attend job interviews with the persons in charge of RCHs and receive relevant training, so as to assist RCHs in filling their vacancies as soon as possible.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the manpower situation of the sector and explore suitable enhancement measures.