

LCQ18: Increasing resources for ambulance service

Following is a question by the Hon Edmund Wong and a written reply by the Secretary for Security, Mr Tang Ping-keung, in the Legislative Council today (May 18):

Question:

During the period when the fifth wave of the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic was extremely severe, the Hong Kong Fire Services Department (FSD) experienced a surge in the demand for ambulance service. However, as a result of absence from work of ambulancemen/ambulancewomen who had been infected with the disease and the shortage of ambulances, the performance of ambulance service fell far short of the performance pledge made. There are views pointing out that the Government needs to increase the manpower and equipment for ambulance service as well as increase the number of ambulances, so as to make preparations for the sixth wave of the epidemic or incidents of major public health crisis in case they emerge. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the current total number of ambulances in Hong Kong, with a breakdown by vehicle age; the number of ambulances, in each of the past six months, which could not attend to service calls due to damage, malfunctioning, regular examinations and maintenance, as well as the number of ambulances which could attend to service calls on average each day; whether it has plans to allocate additional resources to the FSD for procuring additional ambulances and replacing ambulances which are relatively old; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(2) of the staffing establishment of the Outbreak Control and Response Team (OCRT) set up by the FSD during the epidemic and the expenditure involved; whether the FSD will consider including the OCRT in the permanent establishment; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Fire Services Department (FSD), the reply to the Member's question is as follows:

(1) As at May 6, 2022, the FSD has a total of 437 ambulances with the age profile as follows:

Age of ambulances	Number of ambulances
Less than 1 year	44

1 to 2 years	62
2 to 3 years	54
3 to 4 years	72
4 to 5 years	62
5 to 6 years	58
Above 6 years	85
Total	437

During the half-year period from November 1, 2021 to April 30, 2022, the monthly average number of ambulances which are unavailable for deployment due to maintenance and repair, and the monthly average number of ambulances which are available for deployment are tabulated below:

(Monthly average number)	November 2021	December 2021	January 2022	February 2022	March 2022	April 2022
Ambulances unavailable for deployment because of maintenance and repair	79	76	72	63	47	55
Ambulances available for deployment	358	361	365	374	390	382

Since 2010, the FSD has put in place a steadier and more predictable ambulance replacement programme with a view to more effectively monitoring the age profile and serviceable conditions of ambulances, facilitating the planning and managing of the replacement of ambulances over a reasonable timeframe. In general, the normal serviceable life of an ambulance is about seven years. Under this replacement programme, the FSD will arrange the replacement of ambulances which are aged above seven years, so as to maintain the age of ambulances at a healthy level and the reliability of the fleet. The FSD will also seek resources through the existing resource allocation mechanism to procure additional ambulances when necessary according to the demand for emergency ambulance service.

(2) The FSD has set up the Outbreak Control and Response Team (OCRT) in October 2021. Its major work includes monitoring the latest development of infectious diseases (including COVID-19) in the globe and Hong Kong, so as to formulate the department's contingency plan and assist in co-ordinating inter-departmental operations; co-ordinating with relevant stakeholders at specific high-risk infected areas, medical facilities and community isolation facilities for conducting risk assessments and formulating guidelines in advance for the operations of frontline ambulance personnel, with a view to

ensuring that the operations can be completed efficiently with minimum infection risks; formulating departmental instructions and operational guidelines relating to infectious diseases in consultation with the department's medical director, providing training to members of the department on the prevention of infectious diseases, reviewing and improving the work flow in the handling of infectious disease cases, thereby reducing the risk of staff being infected; providing training and conducting random spot checks on the disinfection of ambulances to reduce the risk of the spread of virus in the community; and specialising in the handling of cases related to High Consequence Infectious Diseases (such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome or Ebola Virus Disease, etc.). The OCRT comprises members with relevant professional knowledge on infectious disease control, clinical skills for handling patients with infectious diseases and the capability to use special personal protection equipment and anti-epidemic tools.

The permanent establishment of the OCRT includes one Senior Ambulance Officer, one Ambulance Officer, two Senior Ambulancemen and four Ambulancemen, involving a yearly expenditure of about \$4 million. If necessary, the FSD will deploy its manpower flexibly by drawing qualified ambulance personnel from other teams to join the OCRT to cope with the workload.