

LCQ8: Comprehensive Social Security Assistance

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Che-cheung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (January 13):

Question:

In vetting and approving applications for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) at present, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) considers in aggregate the income and assets of the applicants and their family members. If those elderly people who live with family members wish to apply for CSSA on their own, their family members are required to make a declaration that they do not provide any financial support to the applicants. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) Among the applications from elderly people applying for CSSA on their own in each of the past four years (set out in a table), of (i) the number of them approved after the applicants provided the aforesaid declaration, and (ii) the respective numbers of them (a) approved and (b) rejected under the situation that the applicants were unable to provide the aforesaid declaration;

(2) Of the justifications based on which SWD approved the applications mentioned in (1)(ii)(a), and the average time taken to complete the vetting and approval of such applications;

(3) As some applicants have indicated that they did not receive any reply from SWD about the application results until the fifth month after they had submitted their applications, whether SWD will make a performance pledge in respect of the time taken for vetting and approval of CSSA applications;

(4) Given that in order to cope with the epidemic, the Government made arrangements on several occasions last year for government personnel not providing emergency and essential public services to work from home, whether the time taken for vetting and approval of CSSA applications has been affected; if so, of the details; and

(5) Given that starting from February 2017, when elderly people who do not live with family members apply for CSSA on their own, their family members are no longer required to make the aforesaid declaration, whether the Government will consider extending this arrangement to those elderly people who live with family members applying for CSSA on their own; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the Member's question is set out below:

(1), (2) and (5) The Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme provides a safety net to help persons and families who cannot support themselves financially to meet their basic needs. The CSSA Scheme is non-contributory, but applicants have to pass a means test to ensure public resources are used on those who are genuinely in need.

Since families constitute the core units of our community, CSSA applicants (including elderly applicants) living with their family members are required to make their applications on a household basis. This requirement is based on the principle that family members living in the same household should render assistance and support to each other. When income-earners are able to support their family members who have no financial means, CSSA recipients should first utilise the economic resources of their family members to meet their basic needs. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) takes into account the resources and needs of all household members in determining the household's eligibility for CSSA. In other words, the SWD will assess the assets, income and required expenses of all household members.

Generally, the SWD's staff have to verify the financial ties between the persons who are applying for CSSA on an individual basis and the family members living with them, as well as the actual situation (including but not solely based on the declarations made by the applicants' family members living with them on whether they provide the applicants with financial support). In fact, the SWD will refer special cases (for instance, where an elderly applicant has poor relationship with family members living with him/her) to appropriate social work service units for assistance. The SWD will also cautiously consider such special circumstances on a case-by-case basis and may, at its discretion, allow an elderly person in need to apply for CSSA on an individual basis. As the existing arrangements are working well, the Government does not intend to conduct an overhaul of the CSSA system. Meanwhile, the SWD does not maintain information on the number of applications approved or rejected on grounds that the applicants' family members have or have not made such declarations, or information on the time taken for approving the applications.

As regards singleton elderly persons not living with their family members, they can all along apply for CSSA on an individual basis. Since February 1, 2017, the SWD has abolished the arrangement for elderly persons living on their own to submit the relevant declarations. In other words, the family members of the elderly persons living on their own do not have to make declarations on whether they provide the elderly persons with financial support. Only the elderly applicants will be required to submit information.

(3) and (4) Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the community, the Government has implemented a series of disease control measures in light of the pandemic situation, such as special work arrangement for civil servants and various arrangements to minimise social contact. To reduce the risk of community infection, the Social Security Field Units (SSFUs) of the SWD adjusted the arrangement for public services for a certain period in 2020. Nevertheless, special measures have been put in place to ensure that applications for CSSA

and Social Security Allowance (SSA) (including Old Age Allowance, Old Age Living Allowance and Disability Allowance) are processed and allowances are disbursed to eligible applicants and existing recipients in a timely manner. These special measures include allowing applicants to submit applications via the drop boxes outside the SSFUs, or by post, fax or email. The SSFUs have also continued to arrange interviews with individual applicants as necessary in order to process their applications effectively. During this period, the SWD has made special arrangements and announced in mid-February 2020 that, in view of the latest situation of COVID-19, the Director of Social Welfare will consider disregarding absences from Hong Kong of applicants/recipients of the CSSA Scheme and SSA Scheme who could not satisfy the residence requirement or had exceeded the permissible limit of absence from Hong Kong under the respective schemes owing to the pandemic. These arrangements were made to protect the safety of the applicants/recipients so that they do not need to rush back to Hong Kong.

It is worth noting that while the Chief Executive announced on December 8, 2020 a new round of special work arrangements for civil servants which required them to work from home as far as possible, the Government has maintained emergency services and essential public services. This notwithstanding, the SSFUs have remained fully open to the public throughout this period of time.

Generally, if CSSA applicants or their guardians/appointees have provided all the necessary information, the application procedures can be completed in four weeks. Even during the period when opening hours of the SSFUs were shortened in 2020, the SWD has continued to process CSSA applications in a timely manner with the aforementioned special measures.