

Panel on Welfare Services
Support for Carers and Provision of Residential Care Services for
Persons with Disabilities

Submission from the Equal Opportunities Commission

Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic is posing challenges to our society as a whole, its impact is disproportionate on disadvantaged groups. This paper, therefore, aims to give views and recommendations on enhancing the support measures for carers and the provision of residential care services for the elderly and persons with disabilities (PWDs), especially during the tough times of the pandemic.

Support for caregivers during COVID-19

2. A number of tragic incidents happened in the past few years concerning carers killing the persons they took care of and then attempting to commit suicide themselves. The latest victim of such tragedies came from a family living in Kwai Chung Estate, where a 46-year-old mother allegedly strangled her 21-year-old son with intellectual disability, highlighted the lack of community support for carers and the immense pressure they faced in Hong Kong.¹

3. According to a survey conducted by the University of Hong Kong in 2018, a quarter (25%) of the surveyed carers for the elderly, are at a “high risk” of having physical and mental issues, as they reported experiencing a heavy burden for caregiving, having symptoms of depression, and weak family relationships.² The situation could only

¹ South China Morning Post (2020). *Hong Kong Police Arrest Mother after Son Dies in Suspected Murder-suicide Bid*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-and-crime/article/3100356/hong-kong-police-arrest-mother-after-son-dies>

² HKCSS (2018). *Research on the Profile and Service Needs of Elderly Carers*. Retrieved from <https://www.hkcss.org.hk/research-on-the-profile-and-service-needs-of-elderly-carers/?lang=en>

worsen under the COVID-19 pandemic, as many of the social welfare services and support measures, such as day care centres, sheltered workshops, integrated vocational rehabilitation services centres are closed.

4. Carers are a large stakeholder group and yet their needs are often underestimated. According to the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD), among the 506,600 PWDs residing in households, 203,700 persons (40.2%) cited that they had a person to take care of their day-to-day living as a result of their disabilities. For the 1,303,000 persons with chronic diseases residing in households, 175,600 persons (13.5%) reported the same.³ In reality, those figures are underestimated as carers of persons with intellectual disability are not included by the C&SD due to data limitation. These primary carers, mostly unpaid, are invisible from the welfare or health policies and strategies of the Government since these policies and strategies are mostly user-oriented.

5. While noting that the Labour and Welfare Bureau has commenced a policy study on strengthening carer support, the EOC believes it is high time for the Government to develop and implement a holistic plan to identify all the support needed by various caregivers as early as possible.

Financial support for carers

6. As a start, the Government should consider regularising and raising the amount of carer allowance schemes (currently HK\$2,400 per month per scheme)—namely the “Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Low-income Carers of Persons with Disabilities” and “Pilot Scheme on Living Allowance for Carers of Elderly Persons from Low-income Families” under the Community Care Fund—in order to help the carers in need weather the tough times of the pandemic.

³ Census and Statistics Department (2015). *Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics: Persons with disabilities and chronic diseases in Hong Kong*. Retrieved from <https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B71501FB2015XXXXB0100.pdf>

7. Second, many carers of elderly persons or PWDs are senior citizens and/or PWDs themselves. The Government should consider easing the current restriction of disallowing recipients of Old Age Living Allowance to receive the carer allowance of both abovementioned Pilot Schemes. The additional carer allowance will allow the elderly carers to get some outside assistance or service for easing their burden of taking care of elderly persons or PWDs in their family.

8. Also, both the abovementioned carer allowance schemes assume that PWDs who are recipients of Disability Allowance are not “deemed to be a fit and capable carer”.⁴ The EOC believes such assumption should be reviewed and revised. Whether the PWDs concerned are fit to be a carer should not be assessed by his physical impairment, but by the functions and responsibilities they can perform. Otherwise, the current approach of the carer allowance schemes deviates from the spirit of “equal recognition before the law” as stipulated in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by disregarding the individual capacity of all PWDs.

Respite care services

9. More importantly, a revamp of the over-subscribed respite care services is also urgently needed. It has been found that allowing caregivers to take time out are highly beneficial to their management of stress, as well as the quality of care they provided. It is, therefore, recommended that the Government should take reference from a number of overseas jurisdictions where at-home carers are entitled by law to a prescribed period of respite care services per year (e.g. Japan: 84 days; Australia: 63 days; Canada: 60 days; Taiwan: 21 days; etc.),⁵ during which they can take some rest while the elderly will be taken care of by professional caregivers at home or in short-term residential care facilities.

⁴ See Note 4 of https://www.swd.gov.hk/en/index/site_pubsvc/page_supportser/sub_PWD/

⁵ Legislative Council (2020). *Policy Support to Carers in Selected Places*. Retrieved from <https://www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/1920rt07-policy-support-to-carers-in-selected-places-20200309-e.pdf>

10. In Hong Kong, the respite care services for elderly persons and PWDs in both residential care homes and day care centres are deeply inadequate. For example, as at 10 September 2020, the Day Respite Service for Elderly Persons only offers 189 places and the latest number of vacancies is only 34.⁶ Similarly, the Day Respite Service for PWDs as of September 2020 offers only 160 places.⁷ Hence, it is recommended that the Government should drastically improve the capacity of respite care services to satisfactorily accommodate citizens' needs in this regard.⁸

11. The scarcity of land in the territory and the intense competing demands of various welfare service needs make it difficult to find venues to provide more respite care services within a short time to meet the demand. Moreover, there is always a shortage of staff in healthcare institutions like residential care homes and day care centres. Having said that, more and more care workers and health workers leave their full-time job and work as freelance in the private market on their own or through the network of private healthcare companies.

12. In this connection, the EOC believes the Government may explore more innovative ideas to cope with the challenge of improving the respite care services. For instance, the Government may consider borrowing the concept of the current Neighbourhood Support Child Care Project, recruiting part-time care/health workers or training people in the neighbourhood to do this job, with a view to providing day care respite services for elderly and PWDs by individual elderly/PWD sitters at their own residence in the neighbourhood or in the service users' residence.

⁶ See the website of the Social Welfare Department (SWD):
https://www.swd.gov.hk/storage/asset/section/1573/tc/Vacancy_position_of_day_respite_as_at_10_9_20.pdf

⁷ See the website of the SWD:
https://www.swd.gov.hk/storage/asset/section/2808/en/Day_Respites_Service_bilingual_082020.pdf

⁸ It is noted that there are a few hundred places of residential respite services for the elderly persons provided by subvented/contract homes or private homes in the Enhanced Bought Place Scheme, but the number is still far from enough as compared to the statutory rights offered in other jurisdictions.

Improving service quality of residential care homes for the elderly and for PWDs

13. Abuse cases of residents of private residential care homes for the elderly and for PWDs by care homes' personnel are reported from time to time in recent years. In 2017 Policy Address, the Chief Executive stated that the Government will improve the supervision and the quality of residential care homes service, as well as increase the service quota. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 in residential care homes showed that improvement of service quality in residential care homes is long overdue.

14. There are outbreaks of COVID-19 in residential care homes during the third wave of infections. As of 13 September 2020, 105 senior citizens contracted COVID-19 from residential care homes in Hong Kong, which made up 13% of the confirmed cases within the elderly age group (age 65 or above) in Hong Kong. The COVID-19 mortality rate of elderly persons living in residential care homes is 28%, which is much higher than the 2% COVID-19 mortality rate of the general population in Hong Kong. These figures highlighted the long-standing concerns of poor environment and bad management in some residential care homes, which could aggravate the plight of the vulnerable groups under the pandemic. Those problems include, for example, overcrowded environment, poor indoor ventilation, a lack of formal training for care home staff on hygiene and infectious disease control, and deployment of temporary care workers to work in different residential care homes which can increase the risk of cross infection of COVID-19.

15. Therefore, the EOC recommends that the Government should specify a timetable for the improvement of residential care homes and strengthen the inspections and supervision of residential care homes. The Government should also make the existing Centre for Health Protection's

guidelines for the prevention of COVID-19 in residential care homes mandatory,⁹ as recommended by medical experts.¹⁰

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⁹ Centre for Health Protection (2020). *Guidelines for Residential Care Homes for the Elderly or Persons with Disabilities for the Prevention of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)*. Retrieved from https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/advice_to_rche_rchd_on_prevention_of_nid_eng.pdf

¹⁰ South China Morning Post (2020). *Coronavirus: guidelines to keep Hong Kong elderly care homes free of disease must be made mandatory, experts say*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3092571/coronavirus-guidelines-keep-hong-kong-elderly>