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Promoting Family Well-being - Future Direction on Family and Child Welfare Services

P CHU

Social Welfare Department, Hong Kong

Introduction

I am most privileged to have this opportunity to share with you the trends and challenges faced by families in Hong Kong, our guiding principles and policy objectives of family and child welfare services, the current provision and service delivery system, and the future directions and strategies adopted by the Hong Kong Government in promoting family well-being.

The White Paper on "Social Welfare Into the 1990s and Beyond" (1991) recognizes the family as "vital component of our society". It is the basic unit which provides physical care, mutual support and emotional security. It provides the most natural and nurturing environment for the growth and development of its members, particularly, children. There have been numerous discussions over what constitutes a "Family". I do not think we should waste our time over rhetorics. Our emphasis should be on the functions of the family rather than the form in which it exists. Parental love, guidance and supervision as well as positive relationship with siblings and other family members are important elements in promoting physical, emotional and intellectual development of children. In promoting the best interests of the child, it is important to preserve the strengths of the family and enhance its functioning. Children today are the parents of tomorrow. What we are doing for our children today is an investment for social stability and development, which will definitely extend beyond us, and will have far reaching effects in ensuring the well-being of our future generations.

Trends and Challenges Faced by Families in Hong Kong

Decades ago, families in Chinese communities were primarily extended families which performed the functions of caring of the young and the old, educating children, disciplining deviant behaviour of their members, cultivating relationship, and organizing productive activities. Families were generally self-contained and external influence was minimal. With rapid socio-economic changes, and advances in technology, the structure and functions of the family have undergone significant changes. The characteristics of families in Hong Kong¹ today are:

- household size is getting smaller: decreasing from 3.7 in 1986 to 3.4 in 1991 and 3.3 in 1996;
- continuous increase in number of nuclear family households from 59.2% in 1986 to 61.6% in 1991 and 63.6% in 1996;
- more families are living in new towns in the New Territories: increasing from 35% in 1986 to 42% in 1996;
- more families with both parents working

Like other societies in the world, socio-economic changes have also brought along stresses and challenges to families in Hong Kong. The population of HK is ageing. In 1998, the crude birth rate was at 7.9 per 1000 and expectation of life at birth was 77.2 for male and 82.6 for female in 1998. As a result of economic restructuring and growth of service industry, there is an increasing number of women in the labour force, with more than 1.3 million representing a labour force participation rate of 48.5% among female, and a 39% among the economically active persons in 1998. With economic independence, the status of women is raised and the role of men and women in the family is undergoing changes.

In the past few years, there is migration of population from Mainland China to Hong Kong (about 55,000 per year), as well as movement of families, especially young families, from older parts of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula to the new towns in the New Territories. The relocation of families brought about split families, adjustment and integration into a new living environment and lack of support from families of origin.

Incidents of domestic violence such as child abuse and spouse battering are emerging. The number of single parent families is increasing with rising divorce rate (with 5098 divorce cases in 1988 to 13230 in 1998). There are more reports on family tragedies arising from inability of individual families in handling crisis and more youth problems such as runaway youth, juvenile delinquency and youth suicide. The stresses and strains in urban life is undermining the mental well being of individuals, weakening inter-personal relationships and affecting the quality of life.

While some families have the strength and resilience to cope with the challenges, others which are vulnerable and less capable to face these stresses and strains have to seek help from outside the family.

Guiding Principles and Policy Objectives

In meeting these challenges, the Government is adopting a few guiding principles. These include the recognition for the role of the family, the strive for self

reliance and mutual support. It also believes that prevention is better than cure, and the need for early identification of problems and timely intervention. The Government is wary about intruding and intervening in private life and intimate emotion of the family and always conscious that the Government is not there to substitute the family.

The major objectives of family and child welfare services, as stipulated in the White Paper "Social Welfare into the 1990s and Beyond", are:

- to preserve and strengthen the family as a unit so that they may provide a suitable environment for the physical, emotional and social development of their children;
- to promote family well-being and resilience through developing caring interpersonal relationships;
- to provide for needs which cannot be met from within the family and give assistance to families at risk;
- to enhance family functioning through supportive services so that it can cope with difficulties in family life; and
- to restore families in trouble.

Current Provision and Delivery of Services

Over the years, the Social Welfare Department has developed a comprehensive network of welfare services to cater for the various needs of the family. The total recurrent expenditure on social welfare in 1999/00 is \$28.9B, representing 16.1% of the total Government expenditure. When compared to that in 1995/96, which was \$12B, representing 9.7% of total Government expenditure, there is a 141% of increase over a period of five years. In 1999/2000, the Department is spending \$1.6B on family and child welfare services, constituting 6% of the total welfare expenditure including social security, or 20% of expenditure on direct services. A breakdown of expenditure in the various services under the family and child welfare programme is shown in the slide.

In providing family and child welfare services, a three prong approach is adopted:

- promoting family well-being and resilience and preventing family problems;
- supporting families to enhance family functioning; and
- restoring families in trouble.

We can see the continuum of service, from preventive services at one end, to supportive services and remedial services at the other.

Promoting Family Well-being and Resilience

Family resilience is the strength of the families in overcoming stresses and crisis. The healthier and stronger the members, the more resilient the family. Parental competence, harmonious relationship among family members and good support network for the family are positive indicators of family resilience. In order to promote family resilience for the well-being of its members, we shall continue to provide family life education to equip family members with self understanding, cultivate positive family values, promote harmonious family relationship and enable the acquisition of knowledge and skills in performing their respective roles and functions in the family.

Programmes on sex education, preparation for marriage and parent education and public education through publicity campaigns, the mass media are organised both at territory wide and district level to heighten public awareness and enhance family functioning.

Community support is another important aspect contributing to family resilience. Nowadays, most families are pre-occupied with earning their living and spending less time, not to mention quality time with their families. It is not uncommon that family members do not interact, they may not know their neighbours and live alienated life. Social networking and mutual help in the community provides support to families in the locality and are more readily available in meeting urgent needs of the families. Single parent groups and mutual child care groups, are examples of social networks and should be encouraged to provide opportunities for sharing and mutual support.

Supporting Families to Enhance Family Functioning

With increasing number of female in the labour force, families with children, elderly or disabled members very often have to turn to outside for support in discharging their responsibilities in taking care of these members.

In helping families with child care need, for example, a range of child care services is available. This includes day creches and day nurseries for children aged below six, occasional child care service providing short-term and ad-hoc care to children aged under six years, and after-school care programmes for children aged six to 12. Fee assistance is also available to low income families with a social need to place their children in full day care.

There are other community support services to assist the families in performing their functions. For instance, the home help service provides domestic help for those who are infirm or weak, and for whom help from family members or friends is not readily available. For needy individuals and families who require training in self-care, household management and care for family

members, they can make use of the family aide service to acquire and develop their skills through systematic training programmes. Carer support centres, parent resource centres and Family Care Demonstration and Resource Centre provide resource material, training in a "home-like" learning environment for individuals to enhance their skills to care for themselves and their family members.

Restoring Families in Trouble

The third approach is restoring families in trouble. For families failing to respond positively to the changes and unable to cope with family life, timely intervention to resolve the family crisis and prevent family tragedy, provision of tangible assistance (such as financial and housing assistance) and restoration of family relationship and functioning are required. Family service centres located all over the territory provide counselling service, using casework and group work methods to suit the specific needs of the service recipients.

The Hotline of the Social Welfare Department, apart from the various hotlines operated by NGOs, will be further enhanced into a Family Crisis Helpline to provide immediate telephone counselling to family in crisis and to follow-up as appropriate.

For those individuals who are suffering from psychological problems, the clinical psychological service will provide assessment and treatment. Psychosocial group therapy for the victims and their families will also be provided to enhance the treatment process. The social workers of the Child Protective Services Units and family service centres will deal with cases involving domestic violence with input and co-operation from other professionals. Residential child care services are provided to cater for those children who are in need of temporary care away from homes.

Future Directions and Strategies

With the emphasis on child-centred, family focused and community based services, the government is adopting the following strategies in the future development of family and child welfare services:

- integration of services;
- multi-disciplinary approaches;
- family participation and customer feedback;
- community involvement;
- quality assurance and continuous improvement;
- from input control to output control and outcome measures;
- research, evaluation and information systems; and
- need for constant review to meet changing needs.

Integration of Services

An integrated approach of service delivery will help address the difficulties caused by the compartmentalization of clients needs and fragmentation of service provision. A holistic approach is adopted in dealing with the individuals in the family, geared towards meeting the various needs of the individual through different method of intervention. This is essential to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure maximum and flexible deployment of resources to achieve cost-effectiveness. The provision of one-step service will make it convenient for the service recipients. Integration also means better coordination and collaboration.

Multi-disciplinary Approach

Multi-disciplinary approach is particularly essential in handling complex problems, such as child abuse, the causes of which are multi-faceted. In combating the problem of child abuse, the Government has adopted a multi-disciplinary approach both at the policy level and service delivery level with input from different professionals. The Committee on Child Abuse is a multi-disciplinary and inter-agency body to advise Government on measures to combat the problem and monitor implementation of measures with a shared vision, mission and values in protecting the best interest of children. This co-ordinating mechanism has developed multi-disciplinary protocol to facilitate understanding and co-operation in handling the problem of child abuse. Joint training programmes are organised for professionals concerned to strengthen the working relationship among professionals for the betterment of the abused children and their families.

Family Participation

Involvement of the family is essential in the enabling process to assist the families to cope with crises. Families could best be motivated to work together on problems which they have jointly identified and shared the ownership of the problem and the task. In the helping process, contracts between the professionals and the family members will facilitate the setting of goals. For example, in child abuse cases, families are invited to attend the case conference to work out an agreed action plan. Families are also involved in the treatment process and case review meeting, when they give feedback to assess customer satisfaction and readiness to engage in the rehabilitation process.

Community Involvement

Community has resources which can be tapped on for the protection of the children and the families. Community participation can be achieved through promotion of the public awareness, through community education and publicity, whereby community groups are encouraged to involve themselves in combating child abuse. The setting

up of district committees and community based mutual support network among families are measures to involve the community. Promotion of volunteerism through community participation is an empowerment process which helps to develop strengths and potential of the individuals, and also help to promote a caring community.

Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

There is a recognition for quality assurance and with the joint efforts of the whole welfare sector, Hong Kong has drawn up 19 service quality standards and a service performance monitoring system for all the welfare services provided by the department and the NGO sector. Formal Funding and Service Agreements have been drawn up to set out the roles, responsibilities and expectation of the funder and service provider. A two-step performance assessment process comprising self assessment and external assessment is put in place in phases, starting April 1999. There is a will to strive for continuous improvement with training, bench-marking and sharing of good practice.

From Input Control to Out Control and Outcome Measures

The current subvention system is an input control system which is complex, inflexible, time-consuming, discourages innovation and flexibility. We are currently in the process of introducing a more flexible and accountable system whereby output control replaces input control, both in terms of quality and quantity. We are also aiming at developing outcome measures and performance indicators which are essential to assess whether policy objectives are achieved in a cost-effective manner. The introduction of service performance monitoring system and output control and outcome measures is a fundamental change in the way we deliver services and involves the change of mind set in the whole sector. Training is essential to facilitate the management of change.

Research, Evaluation and Information Systems

There is a growing recognition for research studies to be conducted to provide pointers for policy formulation and demand assessment. Evaluation on effectiveness of service in terms of service delivery model and methodology are essential for the sector to strive for continuous improvement and good practice. In order to facilitate systematic compilation and analysis of data, there is the need to set up information systems such as client information system, financial management system and management system. With comprehensive statistics, we will be in a better position to assess the demand for service, understand the profile of the service recipients, to manage cases more effectively and provide pointers for planning and formulation of policy decisions.

Need for Constant Review to Meet Changing Needs in Society

What we have planned in the past and are providing at present may no longer meet the needs of the society. With rapid social changes faced by the family, there is always the need for the sensitivity to objectively review our service provision and delivery system, and redirect our resources to the areas of priority. Recently, there has been calls for social/family impact analysis so that our social policies are meeting the needs of the families at present and in the future. We can make better use of the 5-Year Plan Review mechanism and with the active input from the Social Welfare Advisory Committee and various working groups and committees, for example, the Committee on Child abuse, Committee on Services for Youth-at-Risk and Working Group on Battered Spouse, we will be in a better position to map out the blue-print for the future direction for welfare services in Hong Kong. In the past weeks, I have been meeting academics and service providers to initiate discussions on the review of our family services to meet the changing needs of our society, for example, the influx of new arrivals from Mainland China, increase in single parent families and growing incidence of domestic violence. The deliberation of this Conference will definitely stimulate our thinking and provide much food for thought in our coming exercise to review our family services to achieve the objective of promoting family well-being in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to reaffirm our commitment to develop and provide a child-centred, family focused, and community based Family and Child Welfare Programme to promote well-being of families in a most cost-effective manner to meet the challenges that I have described. It is only with an open mind, sensitivity and readiness to manage change, strong sense of commitment and accountability that we can demonstrate to our community that we are really investing now and working for the well-being of families in Hong Kong, and we are sure to reap the fruits of our efforts in the years to come.

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Awareness of Psychological Abuse and Promoting Mental Health in Families¹

D GLASER

Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS, United Kingdom

Defining the Task of Parenting

Fulfillment of the needs of *dependent, developing/ changing* children:

- **Basic needs provision:** food, stable shelter, healthcare
- **Protection** including from abuse
- Response to **attachment needs**
- Ensuring **family tasks and functioning**

Family Tasks and Functioning

Consistent and Age-appropriate:

- Caring, nurturing, and stimulating
- Setting of boundaries
- Clear communication and affective expression
- Hierarchies and inter-generational boundaries
- Intra-generational alliances
- Balance between family cohesiveness and connectedness with outside world
- Models of non-violent conflict resolution

What is Child Abuse and Neglect

- *(Wo)man-made* and potentially avoidable harm to children
- Different forms may exist discreetly or co-exist
- All forms of CAN involve psychological harm
- Omission & commission forms of CAN:
 - neglect
 - physical abuse/non-accidental injury
 - sexual abuse
 - emotional abuse and neglect
 - factitious illness

Emotional Abuse and Neglect Refers to:

- Parent-child RELATIONSHIP (not event or single interaction)
- Characterises the relationship
- Heterogeneous collection of different forms of interaction
- Both omission **and** commission
- Physical contact not required
- Actually **or** potentially harmful to the child

Abuse threshold reached when the viability of the relationship is questionable without some intervention.