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Columnist : will Matthew Cheung show he listens to the people?

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This column provides a forum for intellectuals to contribute their ideas and knowledge on ageing issues. Articles are original work of the columnist and do not represent the views or opinions of APIAS.

Columnist : An APIAS honorary adviser, John Leung is an experienced public administrator. He has a deep understanding of the organization and operation of the government, having served in various bureaux and departments. Interested in social and public affairs, Leung has elderly welfare matters particularly at heart. He can be contacted at : john.johnleung@gmail.com



Will **Matthew Cheung** show he listens to the **people**?

No sooner than CY Leung's Government swore in on 1 July 2012, the Chief Executive (CE) and his principal officials launched a series of visits to districts to listen to people's views and aspirations. But the response of the community was lukewarm. The public regarded the visits as a show.

In two articles published in this Column in January and March 2012, I commented on subsidized places in elderly homes and put forward a suggestion for improvement. There was no response from Matthew Cheung, Secretary for Labour and Welfare. This attitude of non-response to reasoned submissions is the main reason for some groups in society to take radical actions to champion the people's rights.

Principal Officials' visits to districts were a show

I would sum up here the main points in the two articles and hope that the Secretary would follow the CE's

instructions to face the people and to listen to them. The Labour and Welfare Bureau should also strictly comply with its performance pledge on handling complaints.

The term of CH Tung as CE saw a phenomenal enhancement of subsidized residential care service for the elderly. The number of subsidized places in residential care homes for the elderly went up from 17 683 before the Handover to 26 177 in March 2003, an increase of nearly 8 500 places (48%) in six years.

In June 2005, Donald Tsang succeeded CH Tung as CE. During his tenure, the number of subsidized places dropped from a peak of 26 177 to 24 869 in September 2011. This is a 5% decrease in subsidized places, against an 18% rise in the number of persons aged 65 or over. The demand for subsidized places far outstrips supply. The fact is that the number of elders passing away each year while waiting for a subsidized place (some 5 000) is more than that newly admitted in the year.



Subsidized elderly home places cut by 5% in Tsang's Term as CE

Given the severe imbalance in supply and demand, many elders (some 25 200 as at January 2011) had to rely on CSSA payments averaging \$5,000 plus to pay fees in private homes¹. At that fee level, it is not unexpected that the service leaves much to be desired.

Many people can, and are willing to, make some financial contributions for the upkeep of their parents in elderly homes. But the Government does not allow CSSA elders to benefit from such contributions. Under the existing arrangement, children are "forced" to sign a paper (commonly known as "bad boy paper"), declaring that they would no longer support their aged parents. This requirement is against our core values and serves only to destroy harmony in society.

I have suggested invoking the existing "disregarded income arrangement"² under the CSSA scheme in processing applications by elders who live alone. Elders and their children could supplement the meager CSSA payment, up to the limit of the maximum disregarded income, to secure a place in a private home which provides better service. My suggestion would benefit elders and help build a harmonious society. It would not bring pressure on public funds because elders are currently already eligible for CSSA benefits if their children declare that they make no financial contributions to their upkeep. The Government would only increase very slightly its expenditure on pension³.

Adopt the disregarded income arrangement to improve quality of life for elders

Since the early 2000s, the Government has been aware of anomalies in the CSSA Scheme in meeting long-term care needs of the elderly. In an article dated 19 November 2002, Carrie Lam, then Director of Social Welfare, said that she found the situation of elders living in private homes on CSSA payments alone and the helplessness of their children heart-breaking.

In May 2003, the Government made a submission to the Legislative Council (based on Carrie Lam's suggestion), proposing for further consideration a "residential care service voucher scheme" to better meet care needs of the elderly. Having regard to their

affordability, elders and their children, together with the Government would share the cost of the service.

With Carrie Lam now at the helm as Chief Secretary, I very much hope that the voucher scheme first put forward 10 years ago could be implemented early for the benefit of elders.

John Leung

- 1 There are private homes in Hong Kong providing quality service. The crux of the matter is when the operating cost of a care and attention place in subvented homes run by NGOs is more than \$11,000 a month (comprising Government subvention of \$10,000 and home fee of more than \$1,000, not to mention the construction cost of the facilities and land premium), we could not expect the same quality service in a private home at about \$5,000 CSSA payment.
- 2 Disregarded income (DE) refers to the earnings from employment that are disregarded when assessing the amount of CSSA payable. Currently, the DE arrangement only applies to those who can work. The provision of DE allows CSSA recipients who work to be financially better off than those relying entirely on welfare, thus encouraging those who can work to find and remain in employment.
- 3 A small number of CSSA elders in private homes are retired civil servants who have opted to receive CSSA payment and forfeit their smaller pension payment. If the "disregarded income arrangement" is in place, there will be a slight increase in pension expenditure for the Government.

