

**For discussion
on 25 April 2022**

Legislative Council Panel on Public Service

Update on Targeted Measures for Protection of Government Employees under the Epidemic and Implementation of “Vaccine Pass” in Government Premises

Purpose

This paper provides Members with an update on the targeted measures implemented by the Government for protecting the health and safety of government employees under the epidemic and the implementation of “vaccine pass” in government premises.

Background

2. The COVID-19 epidemic first broke out in Hong Kong in early 2020, and the fifth wave of the epidemic took a turn for the worse in January this year. It has been the Government’s overriding mission to fight against the epidemic. At the same time, the Government also strives to maintain the orderly functioning of society and the economy. Being the team that serves the people of Hong Kong, the civil service has been remaining steadfast on duty and continues to play an important role in anti-epidemic work so as to align with the Government’s anti-epidemic goals at different stages and to meet the service needs of the public. In the light of the development of the epidemic, the Government introduced a number of enhanced targeted measures in the aspects of vaccination, infection control, testing arrangements, etc. to meet the changing circumstances, with a view to protecting the health and safety of government employees and our service recipients.

(I) Strengthening the Protective Barrier through Vaccination

3. Since the launch of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme (CVP) on 26 February 2021, the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) has spared no effort in promoting COVID-19 vaccination while using vaccination as the key measure to protect government employees, especially those at the forefront in the fight against the epidemic. To encourage and facilitate colleagues to receive COVID-19 vaccines, the CSB has, since the early stages of the CVP, invited bureaux and departments (B/Ds) to make appropriate arrangements to release government employees to get vaccinated during duty hours without the need to apply for leave. The CSB has also provided outreach service for vaccination, operated COVID-19 Mobile Vaccination Stations and set up temporary vaccination centres to administer vaccination for government employees working in government buildings or offices in the vicinity. Moreover, individual B/Ds can also arrange for their staff to receive vaccination at Community Vaccination Centres across the territory through group bookings.

4. As the backbone of the HKSAR Government, civil servants have a paramount role to play in the anti-epidemic effort. It is their obligation, no matter in meeting the expectation of the community or safeguarding the health of fellow colleagues or the people being served, to get vaccinated. In the process of promoting vaccination, the civil service also sets an example and takes the lead in promoting and implementing various measures, with a view to encouraging public bodies as well as different quarters in the community to implement similar arrangements. With the concerted effort of the entire team, the vaccination rate of government employees had already exceeded 70% as early as mid-2021 and has stayed on an exemplary upward trend. As at 8 April 2022, over 99% and 98% of government employees have received at least one and two doses of COVID-19 vaccine respectively. Among the staff who are not able to receive two doses of vaccine, about half of them could not do so due to health conditions, while the remaining half are recovered persons who do not need to receive vaccination for the time being.

5. The Government has implemented a number of measures to encourage government employees to get vaccinated as early as possible so as to build a strong protective barrier for the entire civil service workforce. These measures are set out below.

Vaccination Leave

6. As the largest employer in Hong Kong, the Government has been playing a leading and facilitating role by being among the first to launch the vaccination leave arrangement on 31 May 2021, which was followed favourably by different sectors of the community. Government employees are entitled to one day of vaccination leave for each dose of vaccine received to recuperate. For those who were vaccinated before the launch of the arrangement, in recognition and appreciation of their support for the CVP, they were also allowed to apply for one day of vaccination leave which might be taken by 31 March 2022 for each dose already received. In November 2021, the CSB announced that for all those government employees who have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine on or before 30 September 2021, they will also be entitled to a day of vaccination leave after receiving the third dose of vaccine. After the Government's introduction of vaccination leave, we are glad to see that many other employers also implemented similar measures.

Vaccination in lieu of Regular Testing

7. On 31 May 2021, the CSB first implemented the Vaccination in lieu of Regular Testing (VRT) arrangement for officers who are regularly involved in enforcement, inspection and investigation duties having frequent and close contact with members of the public, as well as frontline government employees involved in high risk duties. Frontline government employees who have not received the first dose of a vaccine are required to undergo polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid tests (PCR tests) using combined nasal and throat swabs at Community Testing Centres (CTCs) on a bi-weekly basis. The relevant testing fees would be fully reimbursed by the Government. Those who have received the first dose of vaccine and provided their vaccination record

could be exempted from regular testing. The VRT arrangement was expanded on 19 July 2021 to cover all frontline government employees, such as those who perform indoor frontline duties in the office or outdoor duties not involving enforcement, inspection and investigation and having frequent and close contact with members of the public, as well as those who are responsible for maintaining essential public services and/or whose work involves higher risk of exposure to COVID-19.

8. On 1 September 2021, the CSB further expanded the VRT arrangement to all those government employees who have not yet received vaccination for various reasons to undergo PCR tests on a bi-weekly basis. Relevant B/Ds will allow government employees, who are unfit to receive COVID-19 vaccination because of medical conditions supported by a valid medical certificate, to undergo PCR tests at CTCs where practicable, provided that departmental operation will not be affected and will fully reimburse their testing fees. Whereas other government employees who have not yet received the first dose of vaccination will have to undergo self-paid tests outside working hours. Given the emergence of highly transmissible mutant strains, the Government tightened the VRT arrangement to once-a-week testing on 22 November 2021, and further to once every three days starting from 28 December 2021.

9. Following the implementation of the “vaccine pass” arrangement for government employees with effect from 16 February this year (please see paragraphs 10 - 11), the CSB updated the VRT arrangement by relaxing the frequency of PCR test to a 7-day cycle for all unvaccinated government employees who are medically unfit for vaccination due to medical conditions as supported by medical certificate. Relevant B/Ds may also provide these members of staff with rapid antigen test (RAT) kits such that they can conduct RAT between testing dates for surveillance purpose. Such staff who have recovered from COVID-19 are not required to undergo regular tests under the prevailing VRT arrangement within three months after they are fit to resume duty at the workplace. However, regular testing has to be resumed upon the end of the period.

“Vaccine Pass” Arrangement for Government Employees

10. To implement the “vaccine pass” policy as a measure to promote vaccination for all, the Government took the lead in implementing the “vaccine pass” arrangement at government buildings and office premises on February 16 for compliance by all government employees to set an example. Under the arrangement, all government employees, save for those who are medically unfit for vaccination as supported by a valid medical certificate, are required to present proof of vaccination before entering government buildings or offices for work-related purposes. Government employees who are certified for being medically unfit for vaccination will be issued a special pass by their serving departments for their entry into government buildings and offices. Government employees who fail to comply with the “vaccine pass” requirements will not be allowed entry into the said government premises, and their absence from work may be deemed as unauthorised where appropriate under the prevailing disciplinary mechanism, even subject to dismissal in the most serious cases. Such requirements will be stipulated in the contracts to be entered or renewed between the Government and its service contractors which provide services in government buildings and offices to

ensure that the employees of these service contractors will also meet the “vaccine pass” requirements. Bureaux have also urged all statutory bodies and subvented organisations under their purviews to introduce similar “vaccine pass” arrangement in their premises.

11. On 21 March 2022, the CSB updated the “vaccine pass” arrangements for government employees that, save for those who are unfit for vaccination due to medical conditions supported by a valid COVID-19 Vaccination Medical Exemption Certificate and those who have recovered from COVID-19, all government employees are required to have received the second dose of vaccine before 1 April 2022 and the third dose before 16 May 2022 or within five months after the day the employee received the second dose, prior to their entry into government premises for work-related purposes. For employees who were unvaccinated before infection, they must receive their first dose of vaccine within five months from the day when he or she is fit for resuming duty at the workplace, and from 1 April 2022 onwards, they should receive their second dose of vaccine within five months from the day of first dose. For employees who had received their first dose before infection, starting from 1 April 2022, they must receive the second dose within five months from the day he or she is fit for resuming duty at the workplace for entering the relevant government premises. Those who have received at least two doses before infection are not required to receive extra doses for the time being.

(II) Infection Control and Prevention Measures

12. In the past two years, the Government has been taking a series of measures to safeguard the health of government employees, such as enhancing the cleansing of communal facilities, installing suitable partitions in the workplace and providing adequate protection equipment to government employees. The CSB has also issued and updated guidelines on testing and relevant work arrangements for B/Ds from time to time. B/Ds also maintain a number of targeted social distancing and infection control measures, including staggering of work and lunch hours, cancellation of mass events, arranging video conference instead of physical meeting, etc., to minimise social contacts. These targeted measures have significantly enhanced the Government’s capabilities in protecting the health and safety of government employees under the epidemic, allowing the provision of public services to members of public in a more flexible manner during the epidemic. Details of the recently launched and enhanced measures are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

Enhancing the Use of “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile application

13. In the past four waves of the epidemic, the Government managed to cut virus transmission chains through rapid and accurate virus tracing. To actively promote the use of the “LeaveHomeSafe” mobile app (the app), starting from 1 March 2021, the Government took the lead to require all government employees and members of the public to use the app or register their names, contact numbers, and the date and time of their visits before entering government buildings and offices. To better assist the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) in conducting contact tracing when confirmed cases

are found and to reduce the chance of incomplete or even false personal particulars in filling out the record form, starting from 1 November 2021, the Government requires all government employees and members of the public (except for exempted persons¹) to use the app to scan the venue QR code before they are allowed to enter government buildings or offices. Registration by filling out the record form as an alternative will no longer be accepted. The Government's implementation and enhanced use of the app sets a good example and encourages different private enterprises to implement the requirement of using the app in a more extensive and stringent manner. In fact, the public have been accustomed to using the app since its introduction and the measure for using the app has continued to remain in force after the implementation of "vaccine pass" in government buildings and offices.

Implementation of Special Work Arrangement for Government Employees

14. COVID-19 can be transmitted through either respiratory droplets or contact. According to the guidelines of the CHP, going out less, reducing social activities and maintaining appropriate social distance with other people as far as possible are effective ways to contain the spread of the virus. Against this background, the Government implemented special work arrangement for government employees, including allowing staff with health concerns (such as those who are pregnant or suffering from serious chronic diseases) to work from home on a case-by-case basis, for the first time on 29 January 2020 in the light of deteriorating epidemic situation to reduce the number of people going out and the chance of spreading the virus at the workplace. The Government also appealed to private enterprises to adopt such arrangement. With the experience gained in the past four waves of the epidemic, departments have procured additional computers, other mobile devices/equipment and computer software, and enhanced the capacities of their communications, networks and databases according to their operational and staff needs, thus enabling more staff members to work remotely at the same time.

15. Given the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic and the high transmissibility of the Omicron mutant strain, while striking a balance between the needs for the functioning of society, the economy and the anti-epidemic effort, the CSB issued internal guidelines in January 2022 that on the premise of maintaining public services and having regard to their actual operational needs and the post and job nature of the staff, B/Ds may allow their staff members to split into teams and take turns to work from home whilst ensuring that the staff concerned can perform their duties effectively from home so as to reduce people flow in offices as far as possible and also to minimise the number of infected staff in case of any transmission chain at the workplace. Departments also restrict the number of visitors at any one time as far as possible by making use of scheduled appointments, drop boxes and quota system with a view to reducing the risk of infection.

¹ Persons who are aged below 12 or aged 65 or above, and those with disabilities that render use of the app difficult, are exempted from the requirement of using the app when they enter government buildings and offices, but they are required to complete a record form to register their personal particulars.

16. However, in view of the rapidly deteriorating and extremely severe epidemic situation, the Government has only provided emergency services and essential public services from 4 February 2022 onwards, with a view to significantly reducing people flow and social contacts in the community to curb the spread of the virus, as well as releasing manpower and resources for anti-epidemic work. As in the past, the Government has appealed to members of the public to receive the services they need by post, via drop-in box or through online channels. During the period, quite a number of departments still continued to maintain essential counter and hotline services, or provided limited services through other channels. Take the Transport Department as an example, although its Licensing Offices had suspended walk-in counter services since 4 February, they continue to provide counter services for applications submitted by applicants with online appointments and process applications submitted via drop-in box, by post or through online means. Take for another example, the service units of Social Welfare Department, which offer direct public services, continue to maintain their provision of emergency services and essential services. Departmental hotline services are in operation as normal while Integrated Family Service Centres and Social Security Service Units remain open.

17. Following the Chief Executive's announcement on 21 March this year that, if the epidemic situation does not rebound and remains on a downward trend, most of the social distancing measures will be relaxed in three phrases within a period of three months starting from 21 April, the Government announced on 25 March that government departments would resume public services gradually from 1 April with a view to largely resuming normal public services from 21 April. To put the epidemic situation under a strict control, B/Ds will continue to adopt targeted social distancing and infection control measures. They will also exercise discretion in continuing the suspension of delivery of services in a face-to-face manner, and switch to provide the services through online channels, by post, via drop-in boxes or other suitable means. As a good employer, the Government will continue to allow pregnant employees to work from home without having to return to their offices, and remind departments to deploy employees with chronic illnesses to posts without public interface.

Protection Measures for Participation in Anti-epidemic Work

18. Civil servants play an important role and bear an undeniable responsibility in the fight against the epidemic. During the epidemic, government departments have mobilised manpower to take forward and support the anti-epidemic effort. It is understandable that colleagues may worry about contracting the virus while performing duties and in turn infecting their family members. To protect the safety and health of frontline anti-epidemic workers, all participating personnel are provided with adequate personal protection equipment (PPE), and the health authorities have uploaded the guidelines and videos about donning and doffing of PPE for reference. Those departments responsible for overseeing various operations have also held relevant briefings before operation and arranged staff members to undergo risk-based testing after operation.

(III) Testing Strategy and Arrangements for Staff Infected with COVID-19

19. As a good employer, the safety of government employees has always been our primary concern. The Government has reminded its staff to seek medical consultations as early as possible if feeling unwell, even with mild symptoms. If there is a confirmed case in an individual office, the department concerned should conduct thorough cleaning and disinfection at the workplace of the infected staff and relevant communal facilities as soon as possible. It should also keep in close contact with the CHP.

20. From the onset of the fifth wave to 11 April 2022, a cumulative total of 45 793 government employees were infected with COVID-19, accounting for about 24% of the overall actual number of government employees and involving 78 B/Ds. Among the infected government employees, more than 95% (43 963) have resumed duty. In view of the rapidly deteriorating epidemic situation under the fifth wave and the substantial increase of number of infected staff, affected B/Ds would make suitable redeployment of its manpower having regard to the actual service demand and operational needs to minimise impact on the provision of public services.

21. Under the fifth wave of the epidemic, the CSB has, with due regard to the latest testing strategy and guidelines promulgated by the health authorities, issued and updated guidelines to B/Ds and measures on testing and relevant work arrangements in a timely manner, which include –

- (a) staff members who are subject to compulsory testing must present to their departments the relevant proof of the compulsory testing and the test results for record purpose. B/Ds should allow the staff concerned to work from home since the day of testing until being tested negative;
- (b) in the event that there is a staff member who is tested positive or is a close contact of a positive case, B/Ds may draw up a list of staff subject to testing with the number of tests and frequency that the staff will be required to undergo, taking into account the factors including their operational needs, the actual work arrangements of the office concerned, and whether the infected staff member shares office equipment and facilities with others frequently, so as to cut off transmission chains as quickly as possible;
- (c) upon the recognition of positive RAT result by the health authorities, B/Ds have been requested to continue to ask their staff to conduct tests, depending on the risk exposures and operational needs, and to provide their staff with RAT kits or reimburse their staff for the expenses incurred upon production of receipts;
- (d) government employees, upon completion of RAT, are requested to report any positive cases to the health authorities and his/her supervisor. The staff concerned has to follow the instructions of the health authorities to undergo

isolation or receive medical treatment in hospital. For those staff who have to undergo isolation at home, a minimum of seven or 14 days of isolation will be imposed depending on the number of doses of COVID-19 vaccine they have received. They also have to undergo RAT during the specified period and return to their workplaces only after being tested negative; and

- (e) infected government employees or government employees who are regarded as a close contact of a positive case can resume duty at the workplace once he/she fulfils the isolation or quarantine requirements instructed by the health authorities. There is no need to wait for his/her infected household members to recover or complete isolation.

22. Generally speaking, infected staff members can apply for sick leave in accordance with the established practice. However, in view of the fact that many infected staff were put under isolation at home without having been hospitalised during the fifth wave of the epidemic, the CSB has issued guidelines to all B/Ds stipulating that sick leave should be granted by the approving authority in accordance with the established practice if an infected staff member has been issued with a medical certificate, whereas authorised absence, instead of sick leave, may be granted counting from the date of being tested positive until the day immediately before the staff's resumption of duty if the staff member has been provided with an Isolation Order (IO) / Record for Persons Infected with Coronavirus Disease 2019 issued by the DH or other documentary proof issued by the Hospital Authority upon discharge from isolation. For staff members who are close contacts of positive cases and are put under quarantine at a place other than their residence as ordered by the DH, authorised absence may be granted to them upon production of an IO or relevant documents issued by the DH.

Advice Sought

23. After months of efforts by the entire community, the epidemic situation has been stabilising. The Government will continue to put forward different measures in a flexible manner in the light of the development of the epidemic and actual needs, and will strive to fight against the epidemic while safeguarding the health and safety of government employees.

24. Members are invited to note this paper.

Civil Service Bureau
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