

Press Releases

LCQ16: Language support to PRH applicants from the ethnic minorities

Following is a question by the Hon Alan Leong Kah-kit and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Professor Anthony Cheung Bing-leung, in the Legislative Council today (November 21):

Question:

According to the 2011 Population Census, the number of people from ethnic minorities living in Hong Kong was 451 183, accounting for more than 5% of Hong Kong's population. On the other hand, as revealed by the surveys conducted by a number of concern groups, most of the South Asians residing in Hong Kong have all along been living in poverty. Recently, I have also received requests for assistance from the ethnic minorities, who said that they faced great language barriers when applying for public rental housing (PRH). In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (a) whether it has compiled statistics on the current number and percentage of applicants on the Waiting List for PRH from the ethnic minorities, together with a breakdown by nationality;
- (b) whether it has compiled statistics on the number of PRH applications in the past five years which had been affected (eg disqualification owing to delay in replying to the Housing Department (HD)) because the applicants did not know Chinese nor English or because of other language barriers;
- (c) whether the documents published by HD on PRH applications and the letters sent by HD to PRH applicants are available in languages other than Chinese and English; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (d) whether HD (including the headquarters and estate offices) has currently employed any people from the ethnic minorities; if it has, of the details;
- (e) whether HD has issued specific guidelines to frontline staff on the handling of enquiries or complaints from PRH applicants or PRH residents who do not know Chinese nor English; and
- (f) of the details of the translation support provided by HD for PRH applicants who do not know Chinese nor English; whether it has considered making reference to the practice of certain government departments and public organisations and formulating policies to provide language support to PRH applicants from the ethnic minorities; if it has, of the details, including the relevant expenditure; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Section 3(1) of the Official Languages Ordinance (Cap. 5) provides that both the English and Chinese languages are the official languages of Hong Kong for the purposes of communication between the Government or any public officer and members of the public and for court proceedings. Therefore, correspondences between the Housing Department (HD) and public rental housing (PRH) applicants are generally in Chinese or English.

The Race Discrimination Ordinance (Cap. 602) does not make any

express provision that translated copies of government documents have to be provided in different languages. However, to facilitate the ethnic minorities (EM) to better integrate into the community, HD has implemented the following measures to enhance their access to public housing services.

(i) selected essential information on PRH application and policy are available in six EM languages (ie Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, Nepali, Tagalog, Thai and Urdu) on the Hong Kong Housing Authority (HA)/HD Website.

(ii) At present, the Home Affairs Department (HAD) commissions non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to operate four support service centres for ethnic minorities. Amongst these support service centres, the Centre for Harmony and Enhancement of Ethnic Minority Residents (CHEER) provides free telephone interpretation service. HD has prepared an information brief in the aforementioned six EM languages about these support service centres for the reference of EM PRH applicants. Information leaflets provided by the HAD and the NGOs are also distributed at the HA Customer Service Centre to EM applicants who visit the centre.

(iii) a video promoting harmonious community relations among different racial groups and the provision of various PRH service and assistance channels available for the EM is broadcasted in the Waiting Hall of Applications Sub-section at the HA Customer Service Centre.

My replies to the questions raised by the Hon Alan Leong Kah-kit are as follows:

(a) According to prevailing policy, persons of any ethnic origin or nationality, provided that they are residing in Hong Kong and have the right to land in Hong Kong without being subject to any condition of stay and fulfill other eligibility criteria, may apply for PRH. Applicants are not required to provide details of their ethnic origin or nationality on the application form for PRH. As such, we have no statistics on EM applying for PRH.

(b) As mentioned above, HD has implemented a range of measures to enhance access of individual non-Chinese/English speaking EM to information on application for public housing. We have not received any report of PRH applications of EM being affected because they cannot understand Chinese or English.

(c) Notification letters and related documents for PRH application generally adopt the official languages of Chinese and English. However, if HD staff processing applications for PRH become aware that an individual EM PRH applicant may not understand Chinese and English, we will attach the information brief in the aforementioned six EM languages in the notification letter. This is to facilitate their seeking translation/interpretation services through the support service centres.

(d) Two Pakistani Hall Attendants have been employed to offer reception and simple interpretation service at the HA Customer Service Centre to some of the EM PRH applicants.

(e) HD had set up administrative guidelines for the promotion of equality for EMs. Training has also been provided to staff to enhance their understanding of the Race Discrimination Ordinance and related guidelines, and to promote their sensitivity on racial equality so as to facilitate provision of services to the EM. Moreover, HD has also distributed information about the four support service centres operated by NGOs mentioned above to our staff so that they may seek their assistance when necessary.

(f) HD has a longstanding practice to provide language support service to non-Chinese/English speaking PRH EM applicants. Apart

from the above-mentioned simple interpretation service provided by the two Pakistani Hall Attendants, HD will also deploy the telephone translation/interpretation service of CHEER and utilise the video conference equipment installed in the HA Customer Service Centre to facilitate communications among HD staff, EM applicants and the interpreters from CHEER. For complicated cases, HD will make advance arrangement with CHEER for on-site interpretation service. Support service to EMs' applications for PRH is an integral part of the support services to all PRH applicants. We therefore have no separate information on the cost involved in this aspect.

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