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\$35m boost to halve welfare service gap

By TAD STONER

THE Social Welfare Department, with a \$35-million budget increase for its next financial year, hopes to halve its shortfall in services by the end of 1992.

Figures released yesterday by the Assistant Director of Social Welfare, Mr Kwok Ka-chi, show a demand this year for roughly 20,000 places in the 15 service areas that the department provides.

However, only 10,000 slots were available, leaving an equal number of people on the department's waiting list, which Mr Kwok hopes to reduce by half through the establishment of a central referral system, increased recruitment, an expanded program of care and the increase in the budget.

"Last year, we had \$162 million and this year we will get \$197 million; we haven't yet decided on next year," he said.

"But we are increasing our programs and for example, the number of sheltered workshops will go up to 450 this year, then up to 500 next year."

A sheltered workshop provides simple employment to physically and mentally handicapped, who otherwise would be unable to compete for jobs on the open market.

Currently 2,905 people take part in the workshop program.

Other new programs include home-based training, a scheme started in April through which the mentally handicapped, who are waiting for a place in a day-activity centre, can develop survival and personal-care skills.

The first training team began work eight months ago, a second and third will begin by the end of next month and the last is scheduled to start in the next financial year.

The department is also



Kwok Ka-chi

inaugurating or planning four other programs. They comprise:

- A pilot "respite service" where families could put a disabled member in a hostel for between two days and two weeks.

- A team of physio and occupational therapists and a separate team of psychologists, who would regularly tour department facilities in an effort to centralise information about the handicapped.

- A scheme similar to sheltered workshops that provide on-the-job counseling and support to those whose disabilities do not prevent employment on the open market.

- A housing service that would group people of similar handicaps in residential care tailored to their needs.

A department spokesman said the \$35 million budget increase would cover the immediate programs, but staff shortages and high turnover, while not severe enough to derail the plans, meant the department was continually struggling.

"We have about 500 trained university graduates who are assistant social work officers, but a chronic shortage of about 10 per cent," one official said.

"We lose a lot to immigration because Canada gives a high mark to social workers and they also go

where the pay is better," he said.

In July, the Director of Social Welfare, Miss Elizabeth Wong Chi-lien, said an extra 437 workers were needed for the planned expansion, leading to a request from the Health and Welfare Branch to the Civil Service Branch to allow expatriate social workers.

"We're actually a bit fortunate," Mr Kwok said yesterday.

"Because the acute shortage is in trained university graduates, we now employ a lot of Polytechnic graduates and we can cope with the shortage."

"We also employ some secondary school graduates."

He was unable to enumerate either Polytechnic or secondary-school graduates, nor could he say how many new staff would be required for the new programs.

However, Polytechnic graduates are generally employed as social work assistants rather than assistant social work officers and while Mr Kwok says he has "no problem" recruiting Polytechnic leavers, a shortage of officers still exists.

The central referral system is an attempt to obtain reliable estimates of Hongkong's handicapped and their needs, said a department spokesman.

"For all these years, the Government has been using rates from abroad to project the number of disabled in Hongkong."

"But this has not been very accurate and the central referral system will give us some reliable figures and we can decide what sort of premises we need and the sort of resources we have to allocate," she said.

"We are asking all doctors and nurses, for example, in screening centres for newborns that when they see any sign of disability, to tell us and then we can put them on our computer."