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A cry from orphans' centres

by
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THE quality of service for orphans in residential care centres could be seriously affected, if current recruitment problems are not solved.

Recruiting of staff, made difficult by low pay and long hours, has already affected services.

Voluntary agencies claim that inadequate staffing is leading to further complications, including medical care.

The agencies say that present services are stagnant, "and will continue to be so until government listens to our grievances".

High on the list of priorities is medical support which says Michael Lai, chairman of the residential child care committee of the Council of Social Service, is "unsatisfactory".

to supply a 24-hour medical service to the children," he said.

Mr Lai added that the Social Welfare Department last year agreed in principle to give an additional two nurses — "but as yet nothing has been done."

At present voluntary agencies have to "dip into their pockets" to treat the orphans, while the Social Welfare Department "ponders whether to subsidise medical treatment or not".

To visit clinics or hospitals, not only is one staff member required to take the child (thus leaving fewer to mind the children) but the agency must obtain an exemption form first from branch offices of the SWD.

"All this means another delay for the child, who is ill," he said.

Although there is a visiting doctor scheme, whereby a doctor visits the only look after the sick

children, they also look at ways of prevention... therefore their workload is doubled," she said.

This extra workload and the general standard of present medical services, lead staff to seek employment at day care centres where their working day is only eight to nine hours.

"They don't have the burden that residential staff have. After eight hours the children go home. If they are ill they don't come to the centre. There are not many workers who prefer to work for us, when they can earn just about the same working only eight hours a day with less responsibilities," Miss Chau said.

Another factor that leads to problems is in the area of relief workers — i.e. replacements called in when regular workers take leave or get ill.

Michael Lai said that

"At present the SWD puts aside around \$87,000 a year for the Relief Workers Scheme. Three additional workers, hired at the current rate of payment would only cost between \$70,000 to \$80,000."

Another point is the pay structure of supervisors and social work assistants in relation to enrolled nurses working at the centres.

According to Cynthia Chau, the starting point of a social work assistant is a few points lower than that of an enrolled nurse.

"How can it be that there is not much difference in the salary scales for two totally different jobs. If the agencies don't subsidise or make up the extra in the supervisors' salary, they too could earn less than the nurses supposedly working under them," she said.

"Although we have made considerable progress in major areas over the past 10 years we must nonetheless iron out these things, which could invariably lead to a drop in the standard of service provided by the centres."

"As there are only three agencies offering these services I think the government can afford to be more flexible."

Agreeing with this, Mr Lai said that staffing ratios and pay scales must be resolved so that staff and supervisors can function to their best for the sake of the children.

both day care centre and residential care centre relief workers receive \$70 a day.

"How many people do you know would work harder and longer for the same amount they could get working an eight-hour day?" he said.

He added that relief workers are thus "unavailable" to residential care centres, which are then forced to "break the rules" and ask regular staff to come back and work through their holidays.

"We give them the same that we would a relief worker, but that is beside the point. If there is a relief workers scheme it must be seen to be working in both day care and the residential care setting... at present it's not working in the latter case," he added.

Mr Lai suggested that the Social Welfare Department subvent an additional three workers to join residential care centres on a permanent basis.

"If we have three more helpers we could survive if one is ill or goes on leave. It would also be cheaper for the SWD," he added.