

Agencies blamed for lack of workshop placements

By AGNES CHEN

The Social Welfare Department has blamed voluntary agencies for the severe shortage of sheltered workshop and activity centre places for the mentally retarded.

A senior social worker, Mrs Katherine Shin, said that the reluctance of voluntary groups to run such centres had contributed to the shortfall.

She was speaking after the parents of mentally retarded children petitioned Umelco for more places. They claimed that hundreds of mentally handicapped people were forced to wait for years for places in sheltered workshops and work activity centres — despite the fact that more than 100 places remained unfilled.

She said there were 900 mentally retarded people

waiting for places in sheltered workshops and 250 in work activity centres. But only six voluntary agencies were running such services, catering for the mentally retarded aged 16 or above.

These were the Po Leung Kuk, Society of Homes for the Handicapped, Kowloon Union Church, Mental Health, Caritas and the St James Settlement.

Mrs Shin said that because of the complications involved in these services, some voluntary agencies felt they were too difficult to handle.

She said the Social Welfare Department was still providing the biggest portion of these services, and the Government was giving priority to upgrading the service.

Eight of the 16 work activity centres, providing a total of 730 places, are run by the department, which also runs 10 of the 25 sheltered workshops, which provide a total of 2,520 places.

On a more optimistic note, Mrs Shin noted that more agencies had shown interest recently in helping to run services.

"At least five more agencies have agreed to take up new projects in the future," she said.

Another problem with this service was a lack of staff, partly a result of the Government's zero growth policy in the civil service.

This had meant that the 50-place Cheungshawan Work Activity Centre,

opened last year, still had 20 places unfilled, she said.

At the same time, the sheltered workshop at Kwai Hing had 40 unfilled places and one at Butterfly Estate had 30. Each of these workshops, opened in 1985, can cater for more than 100 people.

"We have to deploy our own staff to run these centres," she said.

But Mrs Shin was confident a recruitment exercise started this year would produce more staff.

The Shek Wai Kok sheltered workshop, originally due to open in 1984 but delayed by an underground water seepage problem, would be opened in about September.

The workshop had places for 140 mentally handicapped people, but only 80 would be initially admitted, she said.

"The trainees would have adjustment problems if we take them in one lot."

Mrs Shin said she expected the situation to improve greatly over the next five years, with 22 sheltered workshops, providing an extra 2,960 places, and 21 work activity centres, providing 1,360 more places, scheduled to open.

This year, three new sheltered workshops will be opened in Sun Tsui estate, Shatin, Kwong Fuk estate in Taiipo and On Ting estate in Tuen Mun. They will eventually provide a total of 320 places.