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\$136m to be spent on aid for the needy

The Social Welfare Department is to spend \$136 million this year to provide aid for the needy, according to the Director of Social Welfare, Mr Thomas Lee.

This is an increase of more than 33 per cent over the \$103 million paid out in public assistance last year, he told members of the Rotary Club of Kowloon East at a recent luncheon meeting.

In addition to this, the department expects to pay out another \$80 million in disability and infirmity allowances from which over 55,000 people will benefit.

Mr Lee was speaking about the social security schemes which the department operates.

Touching on the public assistance scheme, he said it has brought considerable help to the poorest members of the community by bringing the income of an eligible single person or a family up to a level where essential needs such as food, clothing, fuel and power can be met without hardship.

"In general, I think I can fairly claim that the scheme has worked well and, without doubt, is currently providing essential help for a considerable number of poor, elderly, sick and disabled people, together with widows with young children, who would otherwise have to fend for themselves," Mr Lee said.

"However, it is true that what we are doing is not to everyone's satisfaction, and we are at the

receiving end of criticism which is not always as well-informed or, indeed, as fair as we might reasonably expect."

In recent months, he noted, there had been a fair amount of comment about what the scheme should do or not do in the present tight economic situation in which we find ourselves.

Much of the current criticism, he said, was centred round the scope of the scheme, and, in particular, it has been argued, that it should directly cater for the unemployed.

"There can be a great deal of sympathy for the view that they should not suffer serious hardship when they are unemployed, but it is quite another thing to suggest the solution must inevitably be to cover the unemployed directly by public assistance."

He said the problem arose because under the eligibility criteria, those able-bodied between the ages of 15 and 55 do not qualify for public assistance.

"It is important when discussing this to keep in mind the purpose for which public assistance is intended. The aim is to provide cash help at a decent level for those who, as a result of age, illness, disability, or through family commitments, are not available or who are unable to work and so cannot support themselves by their earnings."

Thus, he pointed out, was quite different from the situation faced by the unemployed who are

available and can work. The solution to their problem, he said, was one of work opportunity.

Mr Lee said that even though an unemployed person could not directly receive public assistance, the eligible members of his family could "share the help provided by public assistance just as in the same way as the family share his earnings when he is in work."

"At the same time, if a person experiences hardship because he is not eligible for public assistance under the existing eligibility criteria, we will do whatever we can to help him, such as granting him temporary relief.

"I do appreciate that all this is far from easy for the unemployed person, but the help given does afford some protection," he said.

Dealing with the question of time taken to make public assistance payments, which had brought criticism, the Director of Social Welfare said under normal circumstances, payments are made, on average, three weeks from the date of application, providing, of course, that the applicant supplies all the relevant documents needed to verify circumstances.

"I think I should make clear that because the scheme is means-tested, it inevitably takes time to check all the facts to enable the amount of money to be paid to be calculated.

"Indeed, if only superficial enquiries were made leading to on-the-spot payments as a

general rule, there would soon be complaints that needs were being overlooked."

Mr Lee said there had been a period towards the end of last year when people had to wait a rather longer period because a backlog had built up of cases awaiting the preparation of cash order books.

However, the situation was corrected through redeploying of staff from within the department, and the introduction of shift duty up to 10 pm.

On occasions where action cannot be completed and hardship would arise, field units have arrangements to make immediate cash payments on the spot.

Each field unit had a sum of money for this purpose, and together make about 350 such payments each month.

The department currently has a case load of about 46,000 cases, 60 per cent of whom are single people, mostly elderly. The others fall into different categories such as widows with dependant children, ill health, disability or families with low earnings.

Cases directly related to unemployment account for only about five per cent.

In addition to the public assistance scheme, Mr Lee said the department also operates a disability and infirmity allowances scheme which provides extra cash for the totally disabled, and the elderly aged 75 years or more.