

LCQ11: Agency for Volunteer Service

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Kwok-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, in the Legislative Council today (July 11):

Question:

Quite a number of staff members of charitable bodies have relayed to me that the Agency for Volunteer Service (AVS) is publicly funded, and since May this year, whenever charitable bodies request volunteer assistance from the Volunteer Photographers' Team (VPT) located at Sai Yuen Lane of Sai Ying Pun, and other Specialized Volunteer Talent Teams (SVTTs) under AVS, the staff member who has newly taken over the charge of VPT and the person in charge of SVTTs have adopted a "political censorship" approach of asking the charitable bodies whether participation or cooperation of District Council (DC) members or Legislative Council Members is involved in the events concerned, or venues are hired by them for such events. According to the aforesaid staff members of charitable bodies, there was a previous case in which staff members of VPT and SVTTs, having learnt about the involvement and cooperation of some DC members and Legislative Council Members of the pro-democracy camp in a certain event, immediately indicated that they had to seek the approval of their superiors before they could start recruiting volunteers for the charitable bodies. There were also other cases of AVS for the same reason deliberately reducing the number of volunteers provided to some charitable bodies, or even refused to provide volunteers to them. Such charitable bodies pointed out that AVS had deliberately subjected their events to staffing difficulties, creating a situation akin to "political suppression". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (a) of the total government funding applied for by AVS in the past five years;
- (b) whether any government official regularly monitors AVS's services, so as to ensure proper use of public money; if so, of the responsible government department and the positions of the civil servants in charge; if not, why the Government does not monitor the quality of publicly-funded services;
- (c) whether it knows if AVS requires job applicants or its incumbent staff to declare their political affiliation or political stance; if AVS does so, of the respective numbers

of staff members from the pro-democracy and pro-establishment camps in AVS at present; if not, the justifications for AVS to require various charitable bodies seeking assistance to make declarations of political affiliation;

(d) whether it knows if AVS's requirement for charitable bodies to make declarations of political affiliation was endorsed by its Board of Directors and approved by its Chief Executive Officer; if so, when such requirement was endorsed and approved, and whether all the responsibilities are to be borne by its Board of Directors and Chief Executive Officer; if not, whether the persons in charge of VPT and SVTTs are to be held responsible;

(e) whether it knows the legal basis on which AVS requires charitable bodies to make declarations of political affiliation;

(f) whether it will immediately ask AVS staff to immediately stop requiring charitable bodies seeking assistance to make declarations of political affiliation or subjecting them to political censorship; if it will, when it will do so; if not, of the reasons for that; and

(g) whether it will immediately appoint civil servants to AVS's Board of Directors in order to monitor whether AVS puts the funding provided by the Government to good use; if it will, of the government department to which the civil servants to be so appointed belong and their positions; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Agency for Volunteer Service (AVS) is an independent non-governmental organisation. The Agency's volunteer referral service falls within its daily operation and the Home Affairs Bureau (HAB) respects its independence. My reply to various parts of the question is as follows:

(a) Government subvention to the AVS is about \$31 million in the five financial years from 2007 to 2012.

(b) The AVS submits its annual reports, annual financial reports, audit reports and reports of other purpose-specific grants to the subventing bureau and department

(HAB and Social Welfare Department respectively) every year for the purpose of monitoring the use of subvention.

(c) to (f) The recruitment of the Agency's personnel is an internal matter. According to the AVS, it takes forward its work and services in line with its vision, mission and values. The Agency does not require declarations of political stance by non-profit making or charitable bodies seeking its volunteer service, its incumbent staff or job applicants. The Volunteer Referral Program of AVS is operated according to its set principles. The key principles would include the activities concerned should be one not of commercial or profit-making nature, not for political and religious objective; the content and environment of the activity should not be foreseeably dangerous; the activity should not be unfair to the volunteers, etc.

(g) Given that the AVS is an independent non-governmental organisation, its organisation structure is determined by the Agency on its own accord. The HAB has no intention to interfere with its routine operation or its decision-making tier.

Ends/Wednesday, July 11, 2012