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About 60 vulnerable Hong Kong children remain in hospital as they lack a safe home to return to

Child welfare groups call on government to increase number of places in shelters for vulnerable children and provide better support for troubled families



Around 60 children, who were considered fit to be discharged, have been stranded in public hospitals – with one staying for as long as six months – as they do not have a safe home to go back to.

Child welfare concern groups warned that this could affect their emotional and physical health and education, and called on the government to increase the “catastrophically insufficient” number of places in shelters for vulnerable children and provide better support for their troubled families to facilitate reunion.

The thorny issue will be discussed in the Legislative Council on Thursday.

[Neglect of the neglected: Hong Kong boy’s death exposes a child protection system riddled with holes](#)

The Social Welfare Department provides residential services, such as children's homes, residential child care centres and foster care, for those under the age of 21 who cannot be adequately cared for by their families because of issues such as domestic violence, having parents with drug problems and crises arising from illness and death. There were around 3,700 places available in June, according to official figures.

But concern groups said these facilities were always full, resulting in some youngsters being stranded in hospitals even though they were fit to be discharged.

The Hospital Authority estimates around 60 such children remain in hospitals.

Lawmaker Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, citing figures provided by the authority, said these children had been staying for an average of 42 days, with the longest around six months.

Social workers noted that they had no choice but to leave these children in hospitals as there were no places available in shelters and sending them home was too risky.

Three years ago, [a mentally disabled child died after ingesting methamphetamine](#) used by his mother. A month before his death, experts recommended that the child with Down's syndrome be removed from his home. He was not. Reasons heard in court included not being able to find a place for him.

Wanda Hau Yuet-king, assistant director of Against Child Abuse, said the current situation was not ideal as there were a lot of germs in hospitals and schooling was affected as no one was available to take the children to school.

"While there are schools in hospitals, the learning of these children would be affected as they are lacking socialisation with their usual teachers and classmates," she said.

Cross Leung Li Chi-mei, general manager of the Hong Kong Christian Service, said these children were already unhappy after going through difficulties such as abuse, and staying in hospitals without family and friends could further affect their emotions.

"[We] should not deprive these children of a good, healthy development because of their family problems," said Susan So Suk-yin, director of the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children.

According to official statistics, the average waiting time for residential child care services, excluding emergency services, is currently about three months.

Child welfare groups urged the government to increase the number of places in homes and raise awareness among those who are able to help foster needy children.

The groups also called for more support for troubled families to help them overcome difficulties preventing them from reuniting with their children.

Billy Wong Wai-yuk, executive secretary of the Hong Kong Committee on Children's Rights, suggested taking a leaf out of the US book by implementing a mandatory detoxification programme for parents with drug abuse problems, so they could overcome their addiction and become fit to take care of their children.

A spokeswoman for the Social Welfare Department said it would continue to review residential child care services and fight for resources for additional places.

She noted around 130 additional places would be available in the coming two years.

*This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as:
children forced to remain in hospitals*

Reference:

[http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education-community/article/2056397/about-60-vulnerabl
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