

Coronavirus: Hong Kong street cleaners struggle to work amid face mask shortage

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As the number of deadly coronavirus cases in Hong Kong climbs, maintaining public hygiene remains a vital step in curbing the spread of the SARS-like strain in the community. **But tens of thousands of local street cleaners have been confronted with an imminent shortage of face masks** - an essential item in their daily work. And many have been told to "figure it out" on their own.

- Kwan, who works for a government contractor and only gave her last name for fear of reprisals, told HKFP that her employer has not provided any face masks for work this month amid a citywide shortage. Prior to the outbreak of the virus, which has infected 48 people in Hong Kong as of Tuesday, Kwan said she and a colleague would be given a box of 50 masks to share each month, but now has to find her own supply.

"My employer said everyone in Hong Kong is trying to buy face masks and they couldn't buy any [for us]. Even if we don't have any masks, we still need to work. They told us to figure it out on our own," she said.

Kwan pointed to the mask she was wearing and said it was given to her by relatives. She had tried to stock up on face masks but was discouraged by the time it took to queue outside pharmacies, which often clashed with her working hours. There are around 20 single-use masks left at her home; with such limited supply, she said she will have to start reusing them soon.

"When I'm running short on face masks, I will just put them under the sun for a while and reuse them. What else can I do?" Kwan asked.

- Another street cleaner, Chan, who is employed by a different government contractor and did not want to reveal her full name, told HKFP that she was facing the same supply problem. Her contractor has only given her one mask to use since February 1. A group of social workers gave her five more during a visit last Friday. She has been told not to skip work even if she does not have a mask to wear, so she plans to cover her face with a towel instead.

"Our work schedule was set a long time ago, there is no way we can just skip work. Luckily, I don't have to handle domestic waste. I think that is worse than cleaning the streets," she said.

Environmental Services Contractors Alliance

Last Thursday, the environmental hygiene sector warned that their protective supplies could only

last about two weeks, according to a survey released by the Environmental Services Contractors Alliance (Hong Kong), which polled more than 30 cleaning firms.

Alliance convener Catherine Yan urged the government to supply at least five million masks to the 250,000 front line cleaners, who need to use at least two masks a day. Otherwise, the city could become “filthy”, as workers might be forced to stop working, the sector warned.

Carrie Lam

In response, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced on Saturday that 700,000 face masks produced by the Correctional Services Department (CSD) were to be distributed freely to street cleaners employed by government contractors. However, she did not reveal any details on when the masks were to be distributed or how.

“Generally speaking, the needs of cleaners, including their equipment and face masks, should be provided by the contractors. Unfortunately, they are facing immense difficulty in purchasing,” she said.

Lam’s plan was welcomed by Yan, whose alliance represents around 80 per cent of the industry’s sanitation companies. She praised the plan as a *“great morale booster,”* as it would help the sector tackle its most pressing concerns. But she estimated the 30,000 government-contracted cleaners would use up the supply in less than a month because they have to use at least one mask per day. *“We don’t want to see cleaners walking off their job, and this threat has been greatly reduced by the government’s plan, but the supply is still not enough,”* she said.

Yan sent a follow-up letter to the Chief Executive on Monday asking about face mask distribution arrangements. Among the enquiries included how the government plans to give out masks to cleaners and when the first batch will be available.

Kwan and Chan both said they appreciated the government’s action but had little clue as to how the masks will end up in their hands. They added using one mask per day is not ideal as it could be easily soiled by sweat or sewage during work.

Of course [the government’s response] is a good thing, but no one knows when and where we will get the masks, not even our team leader,” Kwan said.

Cleaning Workers Union

Leung Tsz-yan, a committee member of the Cleaning Workers Union advocating for cleaners’ rights, told HKFP that they have been working with volunteers to distribute face masks to street cleaners. Leung said she believed the government’s plan could ease the shortage problem slightly but its effectiveness would depend upon its distribution.

“It’s not ideal for street cleaners to use just one face mask a day, but it’s better than nothing,” Leung said. *“We don’t know how the government plans to give out the masks yet. Some of us are worried that the masks will go to the contractors directly and it will be hard for us to monitor how they distribute them to cleaners.”*

Government spokesperson

In an email reply to HKFP, a government spokesperson said the first batch of about **50,000 masks**

produced by the CSD is expected to be delivered to cleansing workers for major departments this week.

Workers prioritised in the first batch are those contracted by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, who clean **public toilets, markets, refuse collection points and streets.**

Sanitation workers who **clean public housing estates** for the Housing Department will be prioritised as well.

Going forward, around 170 000 masks will be delivered from the CSD to the two departments, as well as the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, every week for distribution to the frontline cleansing workers, the spokesperson added.

P.S.

<https://www.hongkongfp.com/2020/02/16/coronavirus-hong-kong-street-cleaners-struggle-work-amid-face-mask-shortage/>