

Social Welfare Department
9/F, Wu Chung Hse,
Wan Chai.
Hong Kong

Attn. Director of Social Welfare

By email

27 February 2017

Dear Ms. Carol Yip,

***Urgent demand for increase of welfare assistance for refugees
and banning of ISS-HK policy on provision of rent guarantors***

We are the Refugee Union, the only refugee-led society in Hong Kong comprising a community of ethnically and religiously diverse refugees. Our main objective is to safeguard the rights and interests of people who claim asylum in the city, and therefore have the right to be protected and duly assisted while their claims are being assessed and determined by Hong Kong Government.

We are appalled and greatly disturbed by unreasonable demands from International Social Service (ISS-HK) forcing refugees to obtain a “rent guarantor” in order to be afforded rental assistance. The Refugee Union has collected numerous complaints from the refugee community evidencing that the demand for rent guarantors is causing families and individuals to lose their homes at the renewal of tenancy agreements.

As of consequence, many refugees are becoming homeless. We further respectfully inform you that the current levels of assistance are grossly inadequate. In essence, they do not meet our basic human needs. We demand that the welfare assistance provided to refugees be urgently increased in line with the prevailing cost of living.

We understand from the [media](#) that ISS sympathizes with the “*difficulty refugees may have in obtaining a local guarantor, and that guarantors overseas such as friends or family back home, and guarantees from organizations are also accepted. The policy has always been in place, and the purpose is to give assurance to landlords.*”

However, we previously asked ISS-HK to urgently reply to the following, though to-date no response has been received. We respectfully repeat our questions below:

- If this policy has “always been in place,” why wasn’t it implemented before?
- It is doubtful that landlords, with whom we previously rented, suddenly ask for a document to guarantee rent. Did current landlords ask for such guarantees?
- If the purpose of this policy is to ease the concerns of landlords who might not rent properties to refugees in view of our insufficient rental assistance, how will guarantee letters produced in developing countries ease such concerns?
- What mechanism is in place for landlords to collect such rental balances?
- Will they travel to Africa and South Asia to retrieve outstanding funds?
- If local guarantees are accepted from NGOs and churches, pledging hundreds of thousands of dollars, what steps will ISS-HK take to ensure these organizations are able to pay year after year?
- If overseas guarantees are accepted, why do refugees complain that they are still required by ISS-HK to provide local guarantors with HKID cards? Are caseworkers misinterpreting or misapplying this policy?
- Who was involved in formulating this policy?
- Does the SWD support this policy?

Finally, if ISS-HK genuinely sympathize with the difficulties we face and are aware that by denying rental assistance to those who cannot provide guarantor letters they are effectively causing some to become homeless – or commit crimes to pay rent – why do ISS-HK insist on this policy?

We respectfully demand that SWD intervene to put an end to requiring guarantor letters. This “policy” is tantamount to protecting Hong Kong Government’s coffers while blaming refugees for our poverty, which is augmented, if not caused by the long waits we face in Hong Kong concomitant with a ban on raising income.

Refugee Union.