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[For Immediate Release]

“City Companion” Community Alliance on Promoting Mental Health launched to strengthen mental health support in Kowloon City District

Echoing the Government’s initiative to strengthen community support for mental health, as stated in the 2023 Policy Address, Hong Kong Metropolitan University (HKMU), together with the Auxiliary Medical Service, Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service, Hong Kong Lutheran Social Service, SideBySide, and The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong, established the “City Companion” Community Alliance on Promoting Mental Health (the Alliance). Using Kowloon City District as the first pilot, the Alliance aims to provide a range of mental health support services to enhance understanding and awareness among residents in the district of mental health issues.

With Kowloon City district as its first pilot, the Alliance will focus particularly on vulnerable groups, such as older people, low-income families, persons undergoing mental recovery and students. Through collaboration among Alliance members, it will organise diverse community promotions and school-based education events to raise public awareness of mental health first aid and to identify and help individuals in need of mental health support at an early stage. Leveraging technology to promote mental health, the Alliance will also enhance counselling services for vulnerable groups, providing all-round support for mental health to residents in Kowloon City District. The Alliance will organise an expo this autumn to further promote public awareness of mental health.

HKMU has been promoting the awareness of community mental health among teachers and students. Earmarking of over HK\$10 million in a three-year university-wide scheme to enhance student mental health, the initiative helps students understand the symptoms of mental illness and provides primary assistance to those who are in need of support, fostering a culture of helping others and self-help. The convenor of the Alliance, HKMU Council Chairman Ir Dr Conrad Wong Tin-cheung, said he hoped that through increased public awareness and the cultivation of student mental health ambassadors, the stigma surrounding mental illness in society would be reduced and that they could achieve synergy to have a positive impact on society. “We hope this community-based alliance will serve as a pioneer example, inspiring different parts of the community to promote mental health.”

Auxiliary Medical Service Chief Staff Officer Mr Wong Ying-keung said that adult and volunteer team members will be trained as "Mental Health First Aid Instructors" to train others to help organise mental health promotions to raise awareness of mental health among secondary school students and the rest of the public. They will also train cadet members as "Let Me Know (LMK) Buddies", allowing them to proactively listen to and accompany emotionally distressed individuals and to accompany them to seek assistance. The programme is expected to be launched in July with approximately 20 to 30 cadet members in the first batch of "LMK Buddies".

Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service Assistant Chief Executive Officer Ms. Scarlet Poon Fung Oi said that the programme has been collaborating with Li Ka Shing School of Professional and Continuing Education (LiPACE). They will conduct a survey this September of 2,600 full-time LiPACE students to learn about their mental health condition and identify students who are emotionally distressed for referral and professional intervention. They will also train about 400 higher diploma students to become mental health ambassadors in the first academic year. Each ambassador is expected to support an average of five students, resulting in about 2,000 beneficiaries.

Hong Kong Lutheran Social Service Chief Executive Ms. Lau Sze-fan said 20 of its service units and community resources in Kowloon City District will be deployed to provide mental health support to residents of different ages to achieve whole-person development. They will invite HKMU students who have completed mental health first aid training to serve in the units and promote mental health among people in the district.

SideBySide Chief Executive Ms. Anthea Lee Suk-wai said that through its comprehensive mental health community centre, Vitality Place, residents in Kowloon City District will be offered convenient, one-stop, district-based support for community mental health, from early prevention to crisis management. The facility serves 36 secondary schools in Kowloon City District and promotes mental health via in-school and group activities, such as "Live Library". Volunteer training will be arranged for HKMU students and members of the Auxiliary Medical Service to work with persons undergoing mental recovery to promote mental health in the community leveraging their strengths.

The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong Assistant Director (Service) Mr. Stephen Wong Man-shun said that mental health first aid training and related instructor training will be provided to increase public awareness of mental health issues. Mental health support will also be provided to secondary schools in the district to promote mental health care on their campuses. They will also invite HKMU students to participate in volunteer activities organised by their rehabilitation service units.

Through the establishment of the Alliance, members hope to raise awareness and acceptance of mental health issues among the residents of Kowloon City, thereby reducing discrimination against individuals with mental health problems in the community, as well as encouraging people in need to seek immediate support through early identification. The members hope that the first pilot in Kowloon City will serve as a role model for other organisations and encourage them to offer similar support in other districts across Hong Kong in the future, thus promoting the implementation of all-round mental health support throughout Hong Kong in the long run.

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Photo caption: (from left) Auxiliary Medical Service Chief Staff Officer Wong Ying-keung, Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service Assistant Chief Executive Officer Scarlet Poon Fung-oi, Hong Kong Lutheran Social Service Chief Executive Lau Sze-fan, HKMU Council Chairman Ir Dr Conrad Wong Tin-cheung, HKMU President Prof. Paul Lam Kwan-sing, SideBySide Chief Executive Anthea Lee Suk-wai and The Mental Health Association of Hong Kong Assistant Director (Service) Stephen Wong Man-shun pictured at the ceremony to symbolize the official launch of the Alliance on Promoting Mental Health.

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