‘Testing workers not the issue’

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PETALING JAYA: Employers have no issues with obeying the mandatory ruling for all foreign workers to get tested for Covid-19 from tomorrow but want the government to clarify how often workers should be tested.

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said while some employers might be shocked by the sudden rule, he believed many had already taken their own initiatives to get their workers tested.

“But we have yet to be informed whether workers only need to be tested once or periodically. Just because they tested negative once doesn't mean there is no risk of them getting infected later, ” he said.

While it was wise to get tested regularly, the cost might burden employers who already had to deal with a slowdown in business due to the pandemic, he said.

He added that although the Social Security Organisation’s (Socso) Program Saringan Prihatin Perkeso offered employers a one-time RM60 screening subsidy for each employee, it was only temporary relief.

“We hope Socso will consider increasing the subsidy as many employers are also struggling and relying on subsidies to keep going,” he said.

Shamsuddin also hoped the government could standardise the cost for Covid-19 RTK-Antigen test as it ranged from RM80 to RM180.

Master Builders Association Malaysia president Foo Chek Lee shared Shamsudin’s views, saying that periodic tests could burden small-time contractors.

“They also have to deal with labour recalibration programme costs of about RM5,000, and improve workers’ accommodation. It’s going to be a costly affair,” he said.

He also hoped the government would consider allowing contractors to renovate existing workers’ quarters while they work to submit new plans for safer living quarters to allow employees to better
practise physical distancing.

Malaysia Singapore Coffee Shop Proprietors’ General Association president Datuk Ho Su Mong said business owners were worried about the costs to get foreign workers tested regularly and suggested testing employees again only if they showed symptoms of Covid-19.

“If we have to do it frequently, I’m afraid most coffee shop and restaurant owners might give up because they won’t be able to cope with the cost,” he said.

Malaysian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association president Datuk Jawahar Ali Taib Khan is also concerned with the cost of screening, especially when workers live in yellow or red zones.

“Periodic tests in yellow and red zone areas will be good, so I hope Socso and the government will consider amending the subsidy rules to accommodate employers,” he said.

Malaysian Medical Association president Prof Datuk Dr Subramaniam Muniandy said the screening was important “but it will make little sense to test them if they are to go back to their cramped living conditions”.

The government should take a systematic approach to check on the living conditions in dormitories, shoplots, flats and terrace houses, he said.

“It has become common knowledge that many of these houses are shared by between 10 and 30 workers,” he added.

Starting tomorrow, all foreign workers are required to undergo mandatory Covid-19 screenings following a spike in infections at workplaces, particularly in factories and construction sites.

Senior Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob said on Friday that the rule would be imposed in phases, with the first phase in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Labuan and Negri Sembilan.

The test is compulsory for foreign workers in all sectors and the cost will be borne by their employers.

Ismail Sabri also suggested that employers fix appointments with private healthcare facilities to conduct the Covid-19 RTK-Antigen test.

Previously, the Human Resources Ministry announced that Socso would subsidise up to RM60 for each test and only once for each worker.