

**Delivered Speech by Mr Edwin Tong SC,  
Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and  
Second Minister for Law  
at the Launch of Law Awareness Weeks (LAW) @ CDC 2023  
21 October 2023, 3.00pm to 5.30pm, at Max Atria (Singapore Expo)**

---

Good afternoon,

Chairman Mayor Ms Low Yen Ling;

Host Mayor Mr Fahmi Aliman;

My parliamentary colleagues and other Mayors,

Ms Denise Phua, Mr Desmond Choo, and Mr Alex Yam;

Chairman of Pro Bono SG, Mr Gregory Vijayendran SC; thank you very much for a wonderfully illuminating speech as always,

Distinguished guests,

Student volunteers,

Ladies and gentlemen

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. It is a great pleasure to be back here again.
  - a. I know Greg said that previously that we had to do this event in an online and hybrid format.
  - b. But that fact of the matter is, we did it.

- c. And that stands for something, that we continue to affirm the value of Law Awareness Weeks, the partnership, as well as also acknowledge our volunteers.
2. As I prepared for this speech, and I look back at the past nine years that we've spent with this collaboration – the pro bono spirit, the initiatives we have, serving the community, lawyers, students, grassroots leaders all coming together, playing a role in pro bono work,
  - a. I asked myself, why we are doing this? For what purpose?
  - b. I did a bit of research and I came across several quotes from Ruth Bader Ginsburg.
  - c. Those of you who know her, will know that she is a woman of small stature, tiny woman.
  - d. She was a first-class lawyer, nonetheless, first class legal mind;
  - e. monumental in stature, became a leading outstanding legal jurist, activist, was also on the Supreme Court bench.
  - f. Sadly, she passed away a couple of years ago.
  - g. She was a champion of the underdog, whether it is the role of women in society, equality, equality of pay, inclusion in society, and so on.



- d. And that tells us something about what we all here collectively have.
  - e. We all have the great power, and it comes at a cost;
  - f. and that cost is a great responsibility to give back to society.
5. It is actually also articulated in a different way, in the Bible.
- a. It says from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.
  - b. Its different ways of reflecting the same ethos:
  - c. that, if you've been privileged, you've been blessed, you've been honoured, I think it's time that we collectively give back.
  - d. And I think that is the answer that I was searching for to why we have over the years been developing this.
  - e. Why we see every year, an incremental number of volunteers stepping forward, coming forward, serving more, developing these networks.
  - f. And why in Singapore, as a matter of policy, we constantly strive to make justice accessible.
6. We continually look at how accessible our justice system is.

- a. We want to make sure that those of us who have to get into court, to answer charges, to have to deal with claims, whatever is the outcome,
  - b. they must have adequate legal representation; they must have access to the system.
7. The government has been delivering civil legal aid to deserving cases since 1958.
  - a. That has been one of the bedrock anchors of our legal system.
8. In 2015, we made an incrementally significant move.
  - a. We funded the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme, the CLAS.
  - b. The CLAS used to be an initiative set up by lawyers, staffed by lawyers to serve the public.
  - c. In 2015, the government decided that we would fund it and that was a big milestone.
9. Last year we moved the needle even more, by setting up the Public Defender's Office (PDO).
  - a. This initiative is funded again entirely by the government.

- b. But beyond that, what this Office does, which is an office in the Ministry of Law, is that we get the best defence lawyers that we can muster.
  - c. Set it up, house them under a chief public defender, give them good training, give them the best resources, and their task is to defend every charge for a person who's unable to do it for themselves, to the best of their ability.
  - d. To challenge every charge, challenge every legal argument that the government through the Attorney General's chambers, musters against this accused person.
  - e. I would dare say there are not many legal systems in the world that will have this – institutionalise public defender's office to ensure that no one is left to fend for himself or herself in court.
  - f. This exists alongside CLAS, because we believe that there's merit in lawyers running a system giving back through the CLAS system, for the benefit of the public.
10. And these are just some of the initiatives introduced by both the public and the private sector to support the legal needs of ordinary citizens. Current legal aid, legal advise representation.
11. We also speak about legal education.
- a. Earlier on Greg mentioned demystifying language – that is also enhancing access to legal justice.

- b. If you use all these Latin terms in legal jargon, which many of us can't understand, let alone man in the street.
  - c. Sometimes you might need for precision in language, but otherwise, if we can afford to, let's put it in plain English;
  - d. so that the man on the street does not face an additional burden of having to figure out what language this is.
  - e. All of this feeds into lowering the barrier and ensuring greater access to justice.
12. And we do this not because access to justice is a mantra, it sounds nice or it's a tagline or catchphrase.
- a. But we do this because we believe, fundamentally, that access to justice is the bedrock of a fair and equitable society.
13. In Singapore, we take great pride in establishing our legal system.
- a. Our legal industry is first-class, our judiciary is first class.
  - b. We have the best legal jurisprudence coming out of any country in the world.
  - c. We have a first-class legal education system with so many universities, all pushing the boundary of legal jurisprudence.
  - d. But none of this will work well if the man in the street can't access our legal system.

- e. So, it's one thing to have a first-class legal system, but it's another to have access to justice.
14. Justice should not be a privilege reserved for just a few, but it should really be a basic inherent right.
- a. And it is really through the pro bono efforts of everything that we have seen and we've heard about, through Mayor Fahmi and through Greg earlier today, that makes this system work and makes this system accessible.
15. Over the years in strengthening this access to justice, the CDCs have worked with PBSG, nine years now and counting.
- a. And I think the key here really is to develop, like Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg says, how do we help to heal the tears in our communities.
  - b. The way to do it is to develop networks in our communities.
  - c. And that's what LAW@CDC has been doing.
  - d. A network comprising different stakeholders from different communities, pro bono lawyers, students, law professionals, legal counsellors, and so on including grassroots leaders,
  - e. And importantly doing it in a day-to-day setting, in an everyday setting,



- f. so that the additional barriers are also not created by having to walk into an imposing office in the middle of the CBD.
  - g. Something that most people either shy away from, or feel a degree of trepidation just by doing.
  - h. So, we take many, many steps in different ways to lower the barriers of entry into access to justice.
16. Over the years, I'm very happy to see, when I did my research on this, that the partnerships have deepened.
- a. They're not just in name, but there's true substance behind these partnerships.
  - b. Whether it is with the Community Legal Clinics @ CDC, or the Youth Community and Legal Clinics, all that have sprouted.
  - c. I think Greg mentioned, 23,000 people have been served.
  - d. That number, if you ask me is probably on the lower end of an estimation because looking at this, looking at the spread and the networking, a lot has been done.
  - e. And I'm very glad that the CDC-PBSG partnership has also broadened to encompass the generous resources from other partner institutions like NUS, SMU, SUSS and SCCA (Singapore Corporate Council Association),

- f. In my view in the next space, we have to build on the successes and expand.
- 17. Early on, Mayor Fahmi and Greg spoke about the partnership that you will soon have with the Singapore Association of Social Workers coming into this network of communities.
  - a. This gives us a very good access to those who are most vulnerable in our society.
  - b. There will also be an MOU to be signed.
- 18. And there was a brief mention of what I thought was a truly innovative initiative by PBSG to have the Community Law Centre at the Tian De Temple in Hougang.
  - a. The Community Law Centre houses full-time community lawyers who serve by:
    - i. Providing legal advice and assistance,
    - ii. Referring cases to other legal and non-legal schemes of assistance, and
    - iii. Supporting community professionals such as social workers who may have clients facing legal issues because we all know that sometimes legal problems are not just a problem. They are sometimes a symptom of a deeper, more underlying social problem.

- b. So that community connection between the Legal Services at the CLC and the wider and broader social service network, I think has been invaluable.
  - c. I went to see for myself the set-up at the premises of a temple and I think this again illustrates what's unique about Singapore.
  - d. How often would you see that around the world - the pro bono centre, serving all in the community, housed in the temple.
19. So as I conclude, I want to just give a real shout out to the people who make all of this happen.
- a. All the volunteers are the true lifeblood, the cornerstone of everything that we talked about as our way of ensuring that we are a first class legal system in all senses.
  - b. And so I want to thank all the volunteers.
  - c. For those who are students, it's not easy to juggle today's curriculum;
  - d. Those of you who are working young lawyers about to embark on a professional career; I know how tough it is and how difficult it will be.
  - e. The law professors, the senior partners, the firms have generously given their time, the many grassroots leaders who

serve on top of the programme that keep them very busy with at People's Association, they continue to put extra hours into looking after this aspect of the community.

- f. All this coming together, I think gives us a great landscape, a great beacon, a shining example of what it means to really care for the people around us.

20. And to go back to Justice Ginsburg's point to heal the tears in our community, because fundamentally, this is what we do.

- a. It's not just legal work.
- b. It's not just social work,
- c. but it's building a society bit by bit, little community by little community;
- d. looking after our social cohesion, which, as you all know, in today's context around the world, is so treasured.

21. I leave you now with another quote which actually when I was a young law student, I came across doing work on an assignment.

- a. But she also said this, and I thought it was particularly appropriate for many of our pro bono volunteers, particularly lawyers amongst us.

- b. She said, “If you're going to be a lawyer, and just practice your profession, well, you have a skill. But if you want to be a true professional, you will do something outside of yourself. Something that makes life better for people less fortunate.”
  - c. And this truly captures the ethos of why we are here, and to answer my initial question – why pro bono, why we have all come together, with so many different partners and different parts of the society to make this work.
22. So, I thank all of you very much. I thank you for being here. Thank you for being a partner.
- a. And I look forward to this being nine years plus nine plus nine, all the way through.
  - b. Thank you.