

**Embargoed till 4 September 2019, 7.30pm. Please check against delivery.**

**SPEECH FOR GUEST-OF-HONOUR MR EDWIN TONG  
SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE,  
MINISTRY OF LAW AND MINISTRY OF HEALTH  
FOR LAUNCH OF LAW AWARENESS WEEKS @ CDC 2019  
ON WEDNESDAY, 04 SEPTEMBER 2019  
AT KEAT HONG COMMUNITY CLUB**

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Chairman Mayor and Host Ms Low Yen Ling,

Mayors Ms Denise Phua, Mr Desmond Choo, and Dr Teo Ho Pin

Grassroots Advisor to Fengshan GROs, Ms Cheryl Chan

Board Member of Law Society Pro Bono Services, Mr N Sreenivasan SC

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening.

**Opening**

1. It is my great pleasure to be invited to the launch of the Law Awareness Weeks (LAWs) @ CDC for the second time this year.
2. This launch kick-starts a series of legal talks to raise awareness on the importance of equipping oneself with basic knowledge, so that we can make informed decisions on issues which may happen to us or people around us.
3. I recall participating in a short quiz last year together with the Mayors and the Chairman of the Law Society Pro Bono Services (LSPBS) during our tour of legal talks.

4. The new initiatives introduced last year, such as having talks in three languages – English, Mandarin, and Malay – were well-received.

### **Access to Justice – Existing Efforts**

5. I believe that all of us are here today because we understand the important of access to justice. No one should suffer injustice because he or she cannot afford to hire a lawyer.

6. Over the years, the Government has strengthened our systems over the years to enhance access to justice for Singapore citizens and permanent residents. This includes working with the judiciary to enhance and improve court processes to save time and costs; and enhancing frameworks to enable Singaporeans to resolve their disputes quickly in a cost effective manner, such as through the use of mediation.

7. First, let me share our efforts to review the civil and family justice systems to ensure that they remain efficient, affordable and accessible to all.

8. The Civil Justice Commission and Civil Justice Review Committee were set up by the Supreme Court and MinLaw respectively in 2015 and 2016.

9. Various reforms to the civil justice system were recommended.

10. For example, the Commission proposed simplifying court forms to make them more informative and user-friendly; and simplifying and consolidating

procedural rules. The Committee also suggested introducing forms for pleading for common types of claims that benefit litigants-in-person.

11. In the area of family justice, we streamlined family proceedings in 2014, thereby reducing delays and costs for litigants. The changes have been well-received. To further strengthen our family justice system, the Committee to Review and Enhance the Reforms to the Family Justice System (“RERF Committee”) was set up in 2017. This committee has considered, amongst other issues, the costs, complexity and timeliness of family proceedings, and will be announcing its recommendations soon.

12. Even with various Government-driven initiatives to reduce the costs of dispute resolution, we recognise that some in our society may still be unable to afford their own lawyers for basic legal services.

13. Since its establishment, the Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) has received about 400,000 applications for civil legal aid. In 2018 alone, the Bureau received more than 9,500 applications, of which around 90% passed the preliminary means test.

14. MinLaw will be updating and simplifying the means criteria, to shorten the application process for legal aid. The amendments allow greater flexibility for aid to be granted to those who may fail the means test, but have extenuating circumstances.

15. The LAB has also enhanced their systems and processes to better serve applicants. They have gone paperless with a new case management system which allow lawyers to easily access the online portal anytime and anywhere, thus giving them greater flexibility and efficiency in their work.

16. The LAB also launched a screening tool designed to track applicants who are suffering from social problems. This allows the LAB to refer the applicants to social services, with their consent, so that their non-legal issues can be addressed as well.

17. Next, I will touch on criminal legal aid provision. The Law Society started the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS) in 1985 as a ground-up initiative by the Law Society and its volunteer lawyers.

18. In 2015, the Government started providing direct funding under the Enhanced CLAS, and worked closely with the Law Society Pro Bono Services (LSPBS), the Criminal Bar and the Courts to enhance the scheme.

19. The number of accused persons receiving full representation in 2018 was more than 1,500 – almost four times the number of cases assisted before Enhanced CLAS was launched.

20. Both the LAB and the Criminal Legal Aid Schemes would not have been successful without the volunteer lawyers who have devoted their time and effort in taking on the cases.

21. Besides legal aid provided directly or funded by the Government, the LSPBS, CDCs, PA, and the legal fraternity have made very significant contributions as well. One such example is the Community Legal Clinics programme run by LSPBS.

22. The CLC programme has expanded greatly over the years. We started off with just two CLCs, and this has grown to a total of 19 CLCs.

23. The CLCs have helped many people by providing free basic legal guidance on issues such as neighbour and family disputes, and family violence:

- a. Over 11,300 residents received legal advice at the CLCs since 2014, and
- b. Over 80% of them have said that the advice was useful and they would consider taking the advice of the volunteer lawyers.

24. Apart from legal advice, the volunteer lawyers and student volunteers at the CLCs also refer residents who need social assistance to the CDCs. This ensures that holistic assistance is provided for the people.

25. The CLCs have been able to assist more residents because more pro bono lawyers and student volunteers have come forward to serve.

- a. 380 lawyers and 275 first-time student volunteers volunteered in FY2018/2019. This is a 6% and 10% increase respectively compared to FY2017/2018.

26. It is wonderful to see so many law students, lawyers, and law firms coming forward to help the community.

27. The Law Society also partnered with the CDCs to organise the Law Awareness Weeks since 2015.

28. LAWs @CDCs provides legal information to the community through various free talks and sessions to the law and the legal system, thus empowering Singaporeans to know their legal rights.

29. This year, LAWs @CDC will cover a range of topics that affect the everyday lives of Singaporeans such as the Syariah Law, Community and Neighbour Disputes, Personal Debt, Family Law, amongst others.

30. The wide reach of LAWs @ CDC has spread legal awareness amongst many residents:

- a. Since LAWs @ CDC started, we have organised 197 talks and 6,954 residents have benefitted from the Law Awareness Weeks talks held across the island.
- b. This year, there will be a total of 70 talks in various heartland locations across Singapore.

### **New Initiative: Webinar Series**

31. As we are aware, digitalisation is one of the key pillars of the Government's public service transformation efforts.

32. This involves leveraging of technologies to extend the reach of public service content to the digital platform.

33. I am very pleased to announce that the CDCs and LSPBS are partnering IMDA and PIXEL to launch a series of webinars where legal talks will be held and uploaded online.

34. For a start, they will introduce three webinar topics:

- a. Debt management and gambling;
- b. Family issues, with a focus on divorce; and
- c. The Good Samaritan initiative, which Mayor Low spoke about.

35. These topics were chosen based on the real needs in the community.

36. For instance, there was a Taxi Driver, Seng Huat.

- a. He was addicted to gambling and ran into huge debts that turned his life upside down.
- b. His wife was about to leave him.
- c. However, Pastor Jolene managed to convince his wife to give him a second chance and not to divorce him.
- d. Since then, Seng Huat has recovered from his gambling addiction and turned over a new leaf.
- e. Both Seng Huat and his wife are now volunteers with Arise2Care and he is training to become a counsellor to help gambling addicts.

37. The CDCs will also be partnering with stakeholders such as LSPBS, National Addictions Management under the Institute of Mental Health, Arise2care and Blessed Grace Social Services, Jamiyah, and National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) to discuss how we can help these individuals.

38. With the webinars, Singaporeans can attend and participate in the live panel discussion sessions online. This is helpful because some people may shy away from seeking help face-to-face. It is also more convenient for people to participate in the series.

39. Besides individuals facing the legal issues, family members and friends of people who face such issues can also tune in to learn how they can help.

40. Indeed, the webinar series is aptly named “help you help others” (to be confirmed), because it is necessary for the community to help one another address legal and social problems.

### **Strong Partnership Amongst Various Stakeholders**

41. The network of support we provide to Singaporeans can only be achieved with the strong partnership of the Government, our key partners, and the legal fraternity who generously give their expertise and time. Not forgetting the law faculties of NUS, SMU, and SUSS, whose law students help out at the CLCs and Law Awareness Week events.



42. This is a good example of how Government working in strong partnership with Singaporeans can co-create and co-deliver programmes and services to serve the community better.

43. I would like to share how one of the volunteer lawyers at the CLCs experienced for herself the intangible rewards of serving the community:

- a. She started being a volunteer lawyer in 2015. One of the most memorable cases was helping an applicant who had suffered harassment from debt collectors after her husband had borrowed money and abandoned the family.
- b. The applicant broke down crying as she recounted her plight to the volunteer lawyer. She was clearly very traumatised.
- c. The lawyer was able to refer her case to the LAB so she could seek more comprehensive legal aid and assistance.
- d. At the end of the consultation session, the applicant held the volunteer's hands and thanked her for the guidance and comfort provided.
- e. The volunteer shared that the gratitude of the applicants is probably the most rewarding experience she ever got from doing pro bono work.
- f. And that her pro bono involvement brings her a peace of mind, both professionally and personally.

## **Conclusion and Call to Action**

44. I thank the Mayors, CDCs, LSPBS, and the legal fraternity for their hard work and their service to the community.

45. To end off my speech, allow me to quote from Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman on the US Supreme Court.

46. “Certainly life as a lawyer is a bit more complex today than it was a century ago. The ever-increasing pressures of the legal marketplace, the need to bill hours, to market to clients, and to attend to the bottom line, have made fulfilling the responsibilities of community service quite difficult. But public service marks the difference between a business and a profession. While a business can afford to focus solely on profits, a profession cannot. It must devote itself first to the community it is responsible to serve. I can imagine no greater duty than fulfilling this obligation. And I can imagine no greater pleasure.”

47. All of us here are in a unique position to collectively bring about a positive impact to our society in a way that no one else can.

48. Therefore, I urge all of you to continue to keep the pro bono spirit alive in the community and to further strengthen partnerships to serve the residents.

49. Through strong partnerships between Government and Singaporeans, we can ensure that everyone, especially the less privileged, have access to justice.

50. Thank you very much.