

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 2018
ON SATURDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER 2018 AT WISMA GEYLANG SERAI

Chairman Mayor Ms Low Yen Ling,

Host Mayor Dr Mohamed Maliki,

My fellow colleagues, as well, Ms Denise Phua and Mr Desmond Choo as mayors, and of course,

Mr Dennis Chee, PBM, representing Mayor Teo Ho Pin.

Mr Vijayendran, thank you for the very much for the wonderful speech, I think it is a timely reminder of the roles that lawyers play and how much impact we can have on society.

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our students,

A very good afternoon to all of you.

1. Thank you very much for having me here today. It is a wonderful privilege, especially in my new appointment, to be here today because of the significance and impact that this event will have on our society.

2. The 5 CDCs and the Law Society Pro Bono Services have worked closely over the years and the programme has developed from one that lasts just an afternoon on a weekend, to one that travels across the island and lasts a good six weeks.

3. This is the way to bring our community closer to justice. The partnership that has been cultivated and developed over the years, seeks precisely to enhance access to justice, particularly to the less privileged members of our community.

4. I believe, as I think all of us as volunteers here believe, that one of the measures of how inclusive we are as a society is how accessible our justice system is.

5. Our principle, as a society, must be not to let someone suffer a wrong, or suffer a consequence, only because he or she is not able to afford legal services. And I think that is why we are all here today.

6. So I thank you very much for keeping the ethos alive and for driving this purpose in our community. The CDCs and Law Society provide these services at a widespread number of places, not only at the CDCs, but also the CCs and the RCs. And of course, once a year, at a standout event such as today's and over the next six weeks.

7. Since 2014, I'm told that more than 5,000 residents have benefitted from the law awareness talks across the island. More than 10,600 residents have received legal advice at the 5 CDC legal clinics. At these legal clinics, pro bono lawyers provide free legal advice to our residents, which lasts about 20 minutes on average.

8. From the Law Society's Pro Bono Services satisfactory surveys conducted between March and May this year, I am happy to say that 86%

of these were first time applicants. This means that, incrementally, over the years, many more people are touched by the services that the Law Society Pro Bono services and the CDCs offer.

9. The survey continues to tell us that 77% of those applicants said that they would adopt the course of action suggested to them by our pro bono service lawyers. Again, that is a measure of the value of the services and the value of the advice that has been given to these residents.

10. Other than legal services, the pro bono lawyers and student volunteers at the legal clinics also refer residents who need societal assistance to the CDCs. That is precisely the role that Gregory had envisioned earlier – lawyers as healers, playing a big part in ensuring that societal issues and differences, which may have a consequence in the law, but often, emanates from more fundamental and deep-seated problems, such as family conflicts, and societal issues.

11. And so, it is in that context, that lawyers play a significant role, in bridging the divide between what might start as a family difference, to one that has a legal consequence. And so, to take the example a bit further, if the lawyer is not there, to guide, not only in the law, but in what society

needs, then sometimes, a family conflict can very quickly escalate to a serious legal conflict. And lawyers are here to prevent precisely that.

Law Awareness Weeks (LAWs)

12. Over the years, LAWs @ CDC has been extended from one to six weeks, so that many more residents can benefit from this programme, from the different talks that have been held.

13. We have gone through some of the talks earlier this afternoon, and I can say that the level of participation is strong. The knowledge and know-how of the lawyers speaking, have been very good as well.

14. So I thank very much those volunteers who step forward, and spend their weekends and their afternoons delivering these services across to our residents.

15. This year, for the first time, the talks have also been done in three different languages - in English, Mandarin and Malay.

16. And if you've paid attention to the skit earlier, you can see that sometimes, oftentimes, it is not in English that brings the message across

so well, lawyers are more used to speaking in English, that's our usual language of conversation, but in bringing this down to the ground, down to our society, you do need to be conversant, in our less traditional languages as well, including as the skit showed us, a variety of dialects.

17. The focus for this year's LAWs @ CDC has been precisely on Family and Syariah law.

18. By educating the public on legal information and familiarizing them with some basic legal concepts, we hope that members of the public can learn the avenues which they can get legal advice, how they can seek legal advice and identify the legal issues early before the problem escalates and, particularly in the context of family proceedings, understand the impact of family proceedings on children and to protect the interests of the children as far as possible.

19. So for instance, the talk on family law will cover Personal Protection Orders and Domestic Exclusion Orders which occur in the context of family violence. There are also talks which give information on children, what and how children's interests can best be looked after when there is a family dispute.

Support of Pro Bono Lawyers and Student Volunteers

20. The partnership between the CDCs and Law Society Pro Bono Services, working hand in hand, with the numerous pro bono lawyers and student volunteers, reaffirms our culture, our hopefully deep-seated and entrenched culture, of giving back to the community and promoting a caring and inclusive society

21. Over the years, some 2,100 lawyers from 159 law firms have provided legal services to the CDCs. I thank all of you, past and present, for this contribution. It is really wonderful to see so many lawyers stepping forward.

22. In the course of this afternoon, I also see many young faces. As Gregory mentioned, we start them early, when they are in law school, to inculcate in them, that being a lawyer is not about what you can do for yourself in the firm, but also what you can do for your society as an individual.

23. So with that, I want to share a quote with you. This is someone who said this many years ago. And he is David Kutik, who was at that time the

president of the Cleveland Bar Association where he was talking about giving back and pro bono services. And he said this and I quote:

David Kutik, Cleveland Bar Association

(Jones Day, specializing in complex commercial litigation)

“Doing pro bono connects us to people. We make the law and the justice system work for people who have nothing to give us but their gratitude. We empower them. We give them hope; we help them when they have nowhere else to turn. It makes us feel like a lawyer. It makes us feel that our training, our experiences, and our judgment can do some good. It makes us feel that we are better people. And indeed we are.”

24. So, this is to all of you, who have volunteered your services, young and old, past and present, students, practitioners, academics alike, all of you have played in any role, a part in our society in giving back on this Law Awareness Weeks, thank you very much.

I would like to thank:

- a. The Mayors,
- b. Their CDCs, and

c. Law Society Pro Bono Services,

for coming together to put together these excellent programmes for our community.

25. Thank you very much.