

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR CULTURE, COMMUNITY & YOUTH, AND
SECOND MINISTER FOR LAW EDWIN TONG SC
AT LAUNCH OF LAW AWARENESS WEEKS (LAW)@CDC 2021
SATURDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER 2021, 11.15AM VIA ZOOM**

Chairman Mayor Ms Low Yen Ling;
Host Mayor Mr Desmond Choo;
Mayors Ms Denise Phua, Mr Alex Yam, and Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman;
Chairman of Law Society Pro Bono Services, Mr Gregory Vijayendran SC;
Distinguished guests,
Students, volunteers,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning to all of you.

Introduction

1. Thank you very much for inviting me to launch the Law Awareness Weeks (LAW)@CDC. This is my fourth year launching LAW and my second time doing it virtually – almost getting used to it now.

Access to Justice – Existing and Upcoming Initiatives

2. I believe that all of us are here today because we believe fundamentally in ensuring and advancing access to justice.
 - a. It is a fundamental pillar of our justice system, and also a measure of how far we have come as a society.
 - b. It is also about ensuring that the ordinary man in the street can access our justice system. I have said more than once that that is one of the key hallmarks and indicia of the success of our legal system.
3. My Ministry firmly believes in this very important mission.
 - a. We have been working very hard – and will continue to do so – to enhance access to justice.
 - b. Let me sketch out some recent moves we have made to improve and enhance access.

Civil Legal Aid

4. First, on civil legal aid.
5. The Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) has launched several initiatives in the last couple of years.

- a. Such as the iLAB legal chatbot that provides customised legal information at one's convenience.
- b. LAB has been pushing ahead to add more topics to iLAB to improve the accessibility of customised legal information. New topics include things that we might come across more commonly – monetary claims, deeds of separation, and deputyship.
- c. LAB is also expanding its partnerships and referral systems to include more community touchpoints, such as with community centres and social service agencies, to try and bring these services closer to homes – closer to where our applicants might find convenience, so that we can meet their needs more holistically.
- d. This is important as legal issues are sometimes – in fact, oftentimes – a symptom of deeper social and financial difficulties. This kind of holistic help will help individuals to not just address the legal problem, but also, as far as we can, the deeper root causes of these issues.

Family and Civil Justice

6. Second, family and civil justice.
7. The dedicated Protection from Harassment Courts (PHC) began its operations in June, and was designed with the end-users in mind. We started by thinking how the end-users would need to and would want to use these services. Some of the key measures to make proceedings more accessible for litigants-in-person (LIPs) include:
 - a. Making it easier for them to commence harassment claims by enabling online filing of claims. Not having to be present in person often simplifies and lowers the threshold in terms of hurdles.
 - b. Also introducing simplified processes: making the forms more user-friendly, designing them with the end-user in mind.
 - c. Also making the fees a lot more affordable.
 - d. At the same time, also providing guidance, counselling and mediation services for LIPs.
 - i. There are court officers and assessors to explain the processes, to guide the applicant.
 - ii. The Community Justice Centre will provide legal advice and assistance.
 - iii. The Court will also refer parties to counselling and mediation in appropriate cases.

- iv. All with the intent of not just solving the legal issue at hand, but fundamentally trying to create an environment that is best able to tackle the breakdown of the relationship – dealing with not just the symptom, but also more fundamentally the cause.
 - e. In some cases we will also allow third party representation, for example, when the victim is unable to present his or her own case because they are victims of abuse, are of old age, or illiterate, unable to comprehend the proceedings. This ensures that the most vulnerable amongst us will be able to obtain the necessary support and representation in court proceedings.
- 8. Last week, in Parliament, we passed the Courts Reform Bill, which supports the digital transformation of the litigation process, something that's very much needed, and also implements the recommendations of the Civil Justice Commission and the Civil Justice Review Committee.
 - a. One objective, as I articulated in Parliament, is to simplify rules and eliminate unnecessary processes, which have been there as a matter of practice for a while – always ensuring fairness to litigants as a guiding post.
 - b. The Bill also modernises expressions used in court proceedings across 150 pieces of legislation. I'm afraid, for lawyers, no more legal jargon which only we lawyers can understand! It's now, as far as we can, modernised and put in simple, plain, layman English.
- 9. These are part of our broader efforts to enhance access to justice, by making the whole process a lot less intimidating, and making it easier for the public who are not legally trained to very easily understand our laws and court processes.

Accessibility of Legal Information and Assistance

- 10. Third, let me speak a bit about accessibility of legal information and assistance. Much as we want to simplify the process when you end up in court, we also want to go upstream and ensure that information and assistance is easily available.
 - a. MinLaw is working with the Law Society Pro Bono Services (LSPBS) to develop a one-stop portal for legal information and assistance, in our first attempt to try and consolidate the disparate multitude of sources of legal information in Singapore into one single, trusted website.
 - b. When it is launched, I hope that Singaporeans will find the portal useful in helping them to understand, to navigate and also improve their own legal understanding, to meet their legal needs.

- c. MinLaw is also working with LSPBS to develop an IT solution to enable better coordination of legal clinics, to increase accessibility to those in need.

Resolving Disputes Between Neighbours

11. Next, let me touch on something that we might have read about, or might have even come across ourselves, which is disputes between neighbours – often a common pain point.
12. What you might already know is that an inter-agency committee involving several ministries and agencies – MinLaw, MCCY, MND, and MHA – have begun reviewing the Community Dispute Management Framework last year.
 - a. To study how some of these more common neighbourly disputes can be better managed, not just at the point where it breaks out, but also resolved upfront, upstream, as far as we can.
 - b. To do that, we want to see how we can promote positive norms of mutuality, appreciation, and gracious living – we call these “pro-social norms”.
 - c. And increasingly, to encourage the take-up of community mediation, creating greater awareness of its benefits, trying to put it out there – besides having just one centre in the heart of town, whether we can decentralise these services across the island.
13. These are all areas where I feel residents can benefit from greater awareness of the basics of the law.
14. Neighbourly disputes often do not involve complicated legal concepts. But they can be highly contentious and evoke strong emotions between neighbours. And we all know they can sometimes be a real pain, especially when we’re living with neighbours, and there is a constant problem, constant acrimony that goes on between two neighbours. The positions and animosity between them can be easily entrenched, if there is no solution that addresses the heart of the problem. Very often, it is getting to the table, understanding the emotions behind the problem.
15. Navigating the legal system is sometimes not easy.
 - a. For that reason, many residents do turn to the authorities – the police, Members of Parliament or other institutions of authority – more quickly than might otherwise be necessary.

- b. And when they are directed to mediation or the CDRT, the anxiety and uncertainty of participating in proceedings can sometimes add to the frustration and tension of the parties involved.
 - c. They might worry about whether they have a case, whether they can prove their case, whether they have sufficient evidence, and whether when they see the judge, whether they will be able to articulate their position.
 - d. Very often, for good reason, this is because legal representation is not allowed in CDRT proceedings.
16. These apprehensions and anxieties can be better addressed if we have access to information and advice on various things like:
- a. What mediation and CDRT proceedings entail. People don't often have a clear understanding of what it entails.
 - b. What does one need to do, to get relief?
 - c. How should evidence and arguments be marshalled and presented to the mediator and to the CDRT judge?
 - d. All these have been questions that we've had to grapple with.
17. We have decided to work with LSPBS to develop the CDC community legal clinics, so that residents can now seek free legal advice on precisely these matters - how to navigate mediation and how the CDRT works generally.
- a. The overall objective is not to promote more litigation, but to drive conciliation and as far as we can, an amicable resolution as much as possible.
18. I believe that a better understanding of the law amongst our residents will ultimately help to expand common ground.

Introducing the Theme

19. In this vein, this year's theme of 'Relationships and Healing' complements our efforts in this aspect. I believe it is an apt theme in the wake of the pandemic.
- a. The last 1½ years or so have been tough.
 - b. Spending more time working from home, greater friction with family members and neighbours – it's no surprise that the number of neighbourly disputes that went to mediation saw an increase in 2020, compared to 2019.
 - c. It might be because of greater awareness of mediation, but it might also be because people have just been living very much in close quarters.

20. Now is a time, more than ever, that this community – the legal profession, our volunteers, our partners, our students, working with the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association (SCCA), working with the Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) – all need to come together, to help to empower individuals, people who live in our estates, the ordinary man in the street, with the legal knowledge and basic awareness, to create that safe space.

Mediation as a Safe Space to Heal Relationships

21. Let me say a little bit about mediation, which I believe is one key essential to that safe space. It is an avenue for parties to air their grievances and reach a mutually acceptable solution with the help of an expert trained neutral party.
- a. After all, part of healing relationships is really about being able to keep an open mind and to resolve disagreements openly, and moving forward together in the spirit of mutual understanding. And that's often something that we have to do as neighbours.
22. So, I am pleased to announce that this year, **in the spirit of the theme on 'Relationship and Healing', the Community Mediation Centre (CMC) is joining as a new partner to the LAW@CDC**, alongside LSPBS, the three Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) – NUS, SMU, SUSS – and the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association (SCCA).
- a. It's really symbiotic of more helping hands on deck. All of this will bode well for mediation in the longer term.
23. It's come a long way – the CMC was first set up in 1998, to promote a more harmonious, civil, and gracious society. And CMC has done a good job.
- a. The settlement rate at the CMC is at a healthy 80%. That means that if you have a dispute and end up at the CMC, there is an 8 in 10 chance of that dispute being resolved in an amicable fashion. That's a lot more effective and time-efficient than an adversarial process like going to court, going to litigation, making a claim, even in the CDRT.
 - b. The success is really due in no small part to the volunteers, many of whom are lawyers. They have given back generously to society by serving as volunteer mediators at the CMC over the years.
 - c. Let me just quickly segue into a real-life story on how these contributions have made a real-life impact for people in the community.
24. To cite one case, Mr F had a long-term dispute with his neighbour Mr G for a few years. This regards the topic that's commonly brought up on secondhand smoke.

- a. Mr F was unhappy that Mr G would keep spraying air freshener into his unit whenever he smokes, as he felt that he had the right to smoke in his own home, as most people will say.
 - b. He then requested for a mediation at CMC and thankfully, Mr G agreed to this mediation.
 - c. During the mediation, Mr G shared that there was a real health concern – the prolonged exposure to secondhand smoke had resulted in tangible problems with his own chest infections.
 - d. When Mr F became aware of that, he was very reflective. He was unaware that this had such a direct repercussion. He said at the mediation session that had he known this, had Mr G approached him respectfully and perhaps in a more conciliatory way rather than to just spray air freshener into his unit, he would have proactively taken some action on his part to avoid the situation.
 - e. The bottom line is that both parties came before the mediator, spoke their minds, were quite candid, and realised that actually, it was not the smoking that caused the problem. It was non-communication that had caused much disagreement over the years, and they were able, through the mediator, to bridge that divide, and ultimately reach a consensus and understanding on both sides.
25. This is one story, but it's really one of many successful cases at the CMC. Neighbourly disputes can often be really difficult to solve but through the help of our many dedicated volunteer mediators, we have been able to do so.

Raising Legal Awareness Through Community Legal Awareness Webinars

26. Today, we also **launch a series of legal talks to raise awareness on the importance of equipping oneself with basic legal knowledge.**
- a. I talked about this a little bit earlier – this year's webinar sessions will cover topics under three categories: family, community, and employment – three very topical issues today.
 - b. Community mediation will be woven into some of the talks, and CMC's volunteer mediators will also be on hand to speak about them.
27. Last year, I announced the launch of the Youth Community & Legal Clinic, served by young lawyers, for young people to seek legal information and services if they encounter legal problems.
- a. I was very happy to learn that the clinic has helped more than 200 young people over the last eight months – that's an excellent number.

- b. Indeed, it reflects that this is an excellent initiative, as it enables them to receive social-emotional, and financial help through referrals to the CDCs.
 - c. The clinic is off to a great start, and I am glad that we are expanding our efforts to serve the needs of our young people.
28. This year, I am happy to **announce that LAW@CDC will be doing a targeted youth outreach on community mediation.**
- a. Through raising awareness of the Youth Community & Legal Clinic run by LSPBS and our three IHLs.
 - b. A webinar will also be conducted for young lawyers and law students interested in community mediation, with a lawyer who is also a CMC mediator.
 - c. As part of today's programme, we will have a panel of two legally trained volunteer mediators to speak about their perspectives on community mediation, facilitated by one of our very own law students.
29. I hope everyone can take some time, help spread the word, explain mediation to your friends, family and neighbours, people in the community. I think there's tremendous value.

Acknowledging the Volunteers

30. Next, before I round up, let me say a real warm word of thanks to the law firms and volunteers who have been serving at the community legal clinics (CLCs) across Singapore, and the CDCs, for so many years. It is really through your effort that we have been able to sustain this.
- a. The CDCs and Law Society signed an MOU in 2014 to create a Community Legal Pro Bono Services network, which was renewed twice, first in 2017, then most recently in 2020.
 - b. As of July 2021, there were around 2,000 persons who registered for the CLCs since the MOU was last renewed at the previous LAW launch. That's a tremendous indication of progress that has been made.
31. Let me acknowledge those who have volunteered your time and effort to make this happen.
- a. The three IHLs – NUS, SMU, and SUSS – and the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association (SCCA), thank you very much for all your roles in this – you provided volunteers to help not just with mediation, but also with the publicity and outreach, filming, and video editing.
 - b. Let me also express my thanks to the three law school deans, and the support that we get from all of you, your staff, the volunteer students, as

well as SCCA's rich talent, which has been completely fundamental and instrumental in making this programme work.

32. The success of LAW over the years has shown that we do have, not just talented, but passionate and selfless individuals in our community. Together, you all make an excellent network and system in place to help the indigent, and to help those who need it the most in our community.
33. As I mentioned before, there are few events which gather legal talent representing the different stakeholders in different facets of the legal industry, quite in the same way as we do today at LAW.
34. It warms my heart to see so many of you who have stepped forward and continued your services, even though it risks taking your time away from practice, from what you do on a day-to-day basis, especially in these times, so thank you very much.

Conclusion

35. I want to encourage all of you to continue with this spirit of looking out for those around us, using the skills that we have been blessed with, and the unique position that I strongly believe that we as lawyers have to help to bridge the divide. We are not as lawyers here to just advocate the case at all costs, take a strict adversarial position, but we can do much to help heal and enhance relationships within the community.
36. This will strengthen family relationships and community bonds. Overall, building a better Singapore for all of us to live in.
37. Let me leave you with a quote from Robert F. Kennedy, former American lawyer, politician, and also previously the Attorney General:
 - a. "It's not more bigness that should be our goal. We must attempt, rather, to bring people back to the warmth of community, to the worth of individual effort and responsibility, and of individuals working together as a community, to better their lives and their children's future."
38. I believe the efforts of all of you here today – LSBPS, CDCs, lawyers, SCCA, IHLs, students, volunteers.
 - a. All of you enhance not only access to justice,

but in many ways, also the warmth of the community.
39. Thank you very much for all your work, all your efforts. I wish you a pleasant day ahead, a wonderful weekend.
40. Thank you very much once again for making this all come together for the community. Thank you.