

Foreword

2023 was an amazing and exciting year for the Legal Aid Department. Hong Kong has returned to a state of normality after three years of COVID-19 attack and the Government aims to restore the city's pre-pandemic status both as an economic and international hub. As with other public services, the Legal Aid Department has fully resumed provision of legal aid services to the public in this year. In the face of evolving challenges and ever-changing legal landscapes, we have consistently demonstrated unwavering commitment and made tireless effort in ensuring access to justice for those in need. Through our vision, passion and determination, we continue to make meaningful strides towards a more equitable society. As we reflect on another year of steadfast dedication to strive for access to justice, it is my privilege to introduce the 2023 Annual Report of the Legal Aid Department. This report stands as a testament to the invaluable contributions and the profound impact we have made to the community of Hong Kong. I believe you will find it enjoyable to read.



Chris Y.T. Chong
Director of Legal Aid

Serving the Community

We attach great importance to promoting our legal aid services to various sectors of the community. During the year, our professional officers had hosted various talks for social workers and frontline staff of the Social Welfare Department, the Hospital Authority and other non-governmental organisations as well as members of the trade unions. These talks covered a wide range of legal aid related topics, including the work and services of the Department, employees' compensation and personal injuries at work, family issues such as divorce, maintenance, child

custody and application for restraint order, mediation issues in matrimonial cases, as well as procedures and eligibility criteria for legal aid application.

We treasure the valuable working relationship with our various stakeholders and grasp every opportunity to promote our work. For instance, I, together with three directorate officers, paid a visit to the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims in May 2023 and had a fruitful exchange of views with its chief executive and colleagues on legal aid services relating to employees' compensation and personal injuries claims. To maintain a strong tie with the legal sector and enhance understanding of our legal aid services by the legal practitioners, one of our directorate officers conducted a training session on "Legal Aid: the Right to Legal Aid, Means, Merits and Appeals" for pupils and junior counsel organised by the Hong Kong Bar Association in October 2023. In the same month, two other directorate officers introduced our services to legal practitioners by taking part in a webinar on "Update on Legal Aid Schemes" organised by the Hong Kong Academy of Law.

In the 2022 Policy Address, the Chief Executive encouraged various departments to organise activities to enrich young people's understanding of government departments and professions, and to guide them in their career pursuits. To this end, we have been reaching out to secondary students and youngsters with a view to providing them with an early exposure to and understanding of our legal aid services, as well as enabling them to experience the work culture and inspiring them to plan for their career pathways in the legal sector. During the year, around 80 senior secondary school students had visited the Department and attended court hearings at the High Court through our school visit programme. The students were briefed by our professional officers on the legal aid services and the daily work of our Legal Aid Counsel and Law Clerks. In February and April 2023, the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims and the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre organised two stage performances based on real-life work-related injury cases for secondary school students to raise their awareness of the importance of occupational safety. One of our Deputy Directors together with another directorate officer had attended these performances to show support to the events and seized

the opportunities to share the work of the Department with the students. Further, in July 2023, our professional officers delivered a talk on legal aid services to non-Chinese speaking secondary students at the Career Expo 2023 organised by the Caritas Youth and Community Service. To further enhance our effort in engaging the younger generation, we continued to launch our Post-Secondary Internship Programmes in the summer and winter of 2023 by recruiting a total of 20 interns to work in the Department so as to let them have exposure to and gain experience in real-life working environment.



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Director of Legal Aid

Exchanging Views with Mainland Senior Judges

In September 2023, we received a delegation of 26 senior judges from the Mainland and introduced to them the work and services of the Department. We had a fruitful exchange with the senior judges. Despite a fundamental difference in the legal systems, the senior judges found our briefing highly informative. The visit had no doubt enhanced our mutual understanding and provided a valuable opportunity for the delegates to have a good grasp of the work of and services provided by the Department. Now with the pandemic over and behind us, I look forward to receiving more and more delegates both from the Mainland and overseas in the years to come.

Participating in Volunteering Service

Our colleagues are not only passionate about serving the community through discharging diligently their daily job duties, but also enthusiastic in providing volunteering service in their spare time. The Department has been encouraging and supporting our staff to step out of their

comfort zone to volunteer for various kinds of community services with a view to serving people in need. In February, together with members of the Legal Aid Department Volunteer Team, I took part as a volunteer in the “25th Hong Kong Marathon” at Victoria Park by distributing runner’s packs to participants. In April, our Volunteer Team participated in the “Book for Love” charity book sale held at Taikoo Place. They assisted in crowd control, delivering books and providing other venue support. In the early morning of 19 November, members of the Volunteer Team made their way to the AsiaWorld-Expo on Lantau Island to provide assistance at the runners’ registration counters for the “Hong Kong – Zhuhai – Macao Bridge (HK Section) Half Marathon”. In November, I, together with my senior directorate officers and members of the Volunteer Team distributed promotional leaflets and souvenirs for the “2023 District Council Election” to members of the public at Sai Lau Kok Garden in Tsuen Wan after office hours to appeal to the public to cast their votes in the election.

Through volunteerism, we can bolster the solidarity of the civil service and deepen colleagues’ understanding of the public needs. With such better understanding, they can provide public service in their respective posts that will be more targeted at and will better meet the needs of the people. In future, we will continue to support volunteer teams in organising volunteer activities and providing more diversified volunteer services by joining hands with other sectors of the community. By co-operating with and gaining support from them we should be able to achieve greater synergy in these activities.

“Government-wide Mobilisation” Level

On 2 September 2023, the “Government-wide Mobilisation” Level was first activated to mobilise civil servants to perform various relief work following the passage of Super Typhoon Saola. We were one of the government departments participating in this emergency operation. Despite the inclement weather conditions and extremely limited public transport service that day, we still managed to mobilise 44 colleagues to reach the Sha Tau Kok frontier closed area to assist the elderly members who had stayed in a temporary sheltering facility there to return to their

elderly homes. I am so proud of my colleagues who had taken part in this meaningful event. I also need to extend my gratitude to those who had assisted in liaising with other government departments. Together we had achieved a success for this emergency operation. Once again my colleagues manifested their commitment to deliver the best to the community.

Quality Service to the Public

The Department has been committed to providing quality and professional legal aid services to those who qualify for legal aid. To further enhance the public's access to legal aid, the financial eligibility limits for the Ordinary Legal Aid Scheme and the Supplementary Legal Aid Scheme were adjusted upwards to \$433,010 and \$2,165,060 respectively with effect from 17 March 2023.

In order to enhance the efficiency of our services, we have been digitalising our legal aid services over the years. In this year, the Department introduced the e-notification service to enable legal practitioners who had submitted Legal Aid Panel Entry Forms ("Entry Forms") to receive result by email. Besides, the Department had enhanced its Legal Aid Electronic Services Portal ("LAESP") by facilitating electronic submission of Entry Forms by legal practitioners through their "iAM Smart+" account. Panel lawyers who had joined the Legal Aid Panel could submit prescribed e-reports and e-forms through LAESP by using User ID and password or "iAM Smart". With our enhanced e-service, joining the Legal Aid Panel has become much easier for our legal practitioners. In future, we will strive to explore more convenient and speedy means to further enhance the efficiency of our services.

Enhancement of Information Systems

Technological advancement plays a pivotal role in enhancing our operational efficiency and we have attached great importance to enhancing our information systems and digitalisation of our services. As outlined in last year's Annual Report, we had internally deployed staff from various

sections to form a Project Team to oversee the implementation of the revamp of the Case Management and Case Accounting System and the Knowledge Support System since September 2022. Phase I of the project had started in May 2023 and the relevant user acceptance test would commence in the second quarter of 2024. The Project Team will continue to monitor the progress of the revamp project with the aim of launching the new systems by the third quarter of 2025. When the new systems have been rolled out, we expect that we can enhance much more the efficiency and effectiveness of our operation in various areas such as processing of applications, monitoring of cases, assignment of cases to panel lawyers, sharing of information with other parties, costs assessment, data retrieval as well as system security, etc.

To provide a more convenient and reliable payment option to the public, we planned to introduce the “Faster Payment System” (“FPS”) in addition to traditional cash and cheque payments. We target to launch this new service at our shroff counters in our headquarters office in Admiralty as well as in the Kowloon Branch Office by the first quarter in 2024.

We would continue to explore various e-options to further streamline our workflow and enhance our operational efficiency through the use of more advanced information technology.

Awards on our Professional Service

This year, two colleagues have been awarded The Ombudsman’s Awards for Officers of Public Organisations (“Ombudsman Award”) in recognition of their exemplary performance in customer service and complaints handling. Besides, another experienced officer with consistently impressive performance had been selected for commendation under the Secretary for the Civil Service’s Commendation Award Scheme (“SCS’ Commendation”) in 2023 for her commitment and dedication to the Department as well as outstanding services provided to customers in the past years. Since 2017 and 2021 respectively, our colleagues have been continuously awarded the highly selective Ombudsman Award and SCS’ Commendation respectively. This demonstrates a solid recognition for their consistently brilliant and professional service rendered to the public

over the years. I am confident that my colleagues will continue to deliver high quality services to the public in the years ahead.

Looking Ahead

It has been a great honour for me to serve as the Director of Legal Aid and also act as the Official Solicitor since 2022. I am so proud of all my colleagues who have continued to serve the community with dedication, professionalism, objectivity and impartiality despite various challenges. As we look to the future, I am filled with optimism and confidence and have no doubt that Legal Aid will continue to be a force for positive change, transforming lives and communities for generations to come.

In closing, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to all the colleagues for their unwavering dedication in the pursuit of justice. It is through their vision, their passion, and their tireless commitment that we are able to fulfill our mission and make a meaningful difference in the community. I am honoured to work alongside them and inspired by the impact they continue to have on the lives of so many. Last not but least, I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the Legal Aid Services Council, the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office, the two legal professional bodies and our stakeholders for their invaluable advice and indispensable support for the work of the Department in the past years.

Chris Y.T. Chong
Director of Legal Aid

Matrimonial
Cases

Traffic Accident
Claims

LAW
Breach of
Contract

Employees'
Compensation

Landlord and Tenant
Disputes

Claims in respect of
Industrial Accidents