

Foreword

2019 was an eventful year with many challenges. It is my pleasure to present to you the Annual Report 2019 of the Legal Aid Department which summarizes the efforts made by my colleagues in delivering and enhancing quality public service, as well as their commitments to tackle new challenges ahead. I hope you will enjoy reading this Report.



Thomas Edward Kwong
Director of Legal Aid

Serving the Community

We continued to make good use of various platforms and channels to actively promote legal aid services to different sectors of the community. Arrangements were made for over 110 secondary students (comprising both Chinese and non-Chinese speaking background) to visit the Department during 2019. Through an introduction on the Department's services, the daily work of our Legal Aid Counsel and Law Clerks, as well as attendance of a court hearing at the High Court for each school visit, the students were given a better understanding of our work as well as up-to-date information on pursuing a career in the area of legal aid service.

Apart from reaching out to secondary students and youngsters, our professional officers also hosted talks for members of trade unions during February and September 2019 to introduce legal aid services relating to claims for employees' compensation and personal injuries. We also hosted talks for social workers and frontline staff from the Social Welfare Department, Hospital Authority and non-governmental organisations throughout the year covering our work and services relating to matrimonial proceedings and guardianship of minors. We are grateful that these promotional activities were well received by members of the public and shall continue to do our best to connect with the various sectors of the community.

Exchanging views with parties outside Hong Kong

We have strived to introduce and exchange views on our legal aid services with visitors and officials visiting Hong Kong. For instance, I met with the Judge of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals of the United Nations in January 2019 and received a delegation led by the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Justice in March 2019. My senior directorate team received a delegation of 23 Mainland Senior Chinese Judges and gave them a briefing on the legal aid system of Hong Kong in May 2019. We

also met with the Director of Legal Affairs and External Relations Bureau of the International Civil Aviation Organization to exchange views on legal aid services in Hong Kong in November 2019. We treasure very much the opportunities for fruitful exchange of views with our visiting guests, which would surely enable them to have a better understanding of our vision to deliver quality legal aid service to the public and the various areas of our work.

Quality Service to the Public

The Department is committed to providing quality customer-oriented legal aid services. Over the years, we have strived to ensure accessibility to legal aid for members of the public which is conducive to upholding the principle of equality before the law.

To qualify for legal aid, a person must satisfy both the means test and merits test as provided by the Legal Aid Ordinance (Cap. 91). As announced in the Chief Executive's 2019 Policy Address Supplement, it was proposed to increase the financial eligibility limit (FEL) of the Ordinary Legal Aid Scheme ("OLAS") which covered committal proceedings in the Magistrates' Courts, civil and criminal proceedings in the District Courts or courts at levels above by about 30% to \$400,000. It was also proposed to increase the FEL of the Supplementary Legal Aid Scheme ("SLAS") which provided additional legal aid support to the "sandwich class" (who might not meet the means test criterion of OLAS) by about 30% to \$2,000,000. Subject to the passage of the bill on FELs adjustment by the Legislative Council, it is expected that the proposed increase in FELs will take effect in 2020 which will further enhance the public's accessibility to legal aid.

Enhancement of e-Service

We have always attached great importance to the use of information technology and developed new online service to enhance our mode of delivery of legal aid services. In our pamphlet entitled "How Your Financial Resources & Contribution are Calculated" published in January 2019, we added in the pamphlet relevant QR codes, through which members of the public would be re-directed to the most recent calculation examples of Means Tests for applications under OLAS or SLAS on the Department's website. With the effective use of QR Codes, looking for information on the latest calculation examples has become so much easier than ever.

Starting from 22 February 2019, intended legal aid applicants may make appointments online for obtaining Pre-application Information Forms through the Legal Aid Electronic Services Portal via mobile devices or desktop computers. With this enhanced e-service, submission of Pre-application Information Forms electronically has never been so convenient.

Visit by the Secretary for the Civil Service

The Secretary for the Civil Service ("SCS") paid a visit to the Department in December 2019 to meet with the senior management team and staff members to understand more about our services, including handling enquiries relating to application for legal aid, processing legal aid applications, providing litigation and legal support services, as well as the operation of the Remote Official Visit System in the Crime Section. SCS also met with staff representatives of various grades to exchange views on matters of concern and challenges ahead.

Awards on our Professional Service

2019 was another rewarding year to our colleagues who continued to serve the community with professionalism and delivered quality service from the bottom their hearts despite heavy and increasing workload. Two of our colleagues were awarded The Ombudsman's Awards 2019 for Officers of Public Organisations for their professionalism, positiveness and excellence in handling complaints. The distinguished awards fully recognised their efforts made in achieving impartiality, effectiveness and efficiency in enhancing the quality of public administration.

Apart from The Ombudsman's Awards, the Department participated in the Civil Service Outstanding Service Award Scheme 2019 ("Award Scheme") organized by the Civil Service Bureau. Despite the fact that the competition among government departments was very keen, the Department was awarded a Special Citation Award for its excellent services and was awarded the Bronze Prize in the category of Departmental Service Enhancement Award (Small Department Category) of the Award Scheme for our "Enhancement of Legal Aid Services through Innovative Use of Information Technology".

These achievements are testaments to our long-term commitment to maintain the highest standards of professional excellence and ethics. I am very pleased that my colleagues have clearly demonstrated, once again, our values of professionalism, teamwork, caring and responsiveness and that their hard work has stood out and earned the respect and recognition of others.

Looking Ahead

It is important to recognise that legal aid is a cornerstone of the rule of law in Hong Kong. The role of the Department is to ensure access to justice to all so that everyone is equal before the law. To deliver this message to members of the public, we are now producing a Television Announcement in the Public Interest (TV API) and radio APIs on legal aid services. We have targeted to launch the APIs for broadcast at local television and radio channels early next year and will also upload the same to the websites of our Department and the Information Services Department. Stay tuned for our TV API.

2020 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Department. To commemorate this important milestone in the development of our legal aid system, a series of events, including opening ceremony, roving exhibition, production of TV documentary and commemorative publication will be launched next year. A Working Group led by the senior management of the Department has been formed to oversee the launching of related activities and production. I am longing to witness these celebration activities to be launched next year and sincerely hope that our stakeholders, colleagues and members of the public would continue to support our work in delivering quality legal aid services.

Finally, I wish to express my utmost gratitude to the Legal Aid Services Council, the legal profession, our stakeholders and the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office for their invaluable advice and unfaltering support and especially to my colleagues in the Department who have worked tirelessly with professionalism throughout the year, without which we would not have been able to achieve so much.

Thomas Edward Kwong
Director of Legal Aid

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