

Foreword

It is my pleasure to present to you this year's Annual Report which provides an overview of the major tasks accomplished and events organized by the Legal Aid Department in 2021. This will be my final Annual Report and I hope you will enjoy reading it.

Hong Kong continued to face the severe impact of the unprecedented pandemic of COVID-19 which began in early 2020. By December 2020, Hong Kong was hit by the fourth wave of the pandemic which persisted until mid-February 2021. The livelihood of various sectors has been adversely affected and the legal sector is no exception. Notwithstanding the uncertainties and challenges during these difficult times, we have flexibly adjusted our services to align with the Government's social distancing measures but at the same time maintained adequate services to the public.



Thomas Edward Kwong
Director of Legal Aid

Serving the Community

As soon as the pandemic started to ease, we began to reach out to various sectors of the community through different publicity channels and programmes. Our professional officers hosted a number of talks / seminars for social workers and frontline staff of the Social Welfare Department, Hospital Authority and other non-governmental organisations as well as members of various trade unions, covering different legal topics including the work and services of the Department, family issues relating to divorce, maintenance and custody, guardianship of minors, family mediation, as well as issues relating to employees' compensation and personal injuries claims. In view of the severity of COVID-19 and the need to comply with social distancing measures, some of these talks / seminars had to be conducted online so as to facilitate the participation of more target audience.

To maintain rapport with our stakeholders and with a view to promoting a better understanding of our services, one of our directorate officers took part in delivering a talk on the recent development on law and practice relating to mentally incapacitated persons organised by the Mental Health Law Committee of the Law Society of Hong Kong in July. A webinar organised by the Hong Kong Academy of Law in September on the topic of "Update on Legal Aid Schemes" was also hosted by another directorate officer for legal practitioners. Likewise, in maintaining a strong tie with the education sector, we nominated another directorate officer to deliver a talk on legal aid to a group of law students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in November. And I am very pleased to note that these talks and webinars were found to be well received by the participants and were very conducive in promoting the various legal aid services provided by the Department.

This year marked the 30th Anniversary of Law Week organised by The Law

Society of Hong Kong. Over the years, the Legal Aid Department has always been very supportive of this meaningful event and I was delighted to take part in person officiating the Opening Ceremony of the Law Week 30th Anniversary in November. The Department's participation in the various activities during Law Week has demonstrated our full support for the Law Society in the promotion of legal knowledge to the community. Incidentally, during the event, apart from the provision of advice to members of the public on legal aid services, one of our professional officers also took part in the production of a short legal tips video introducing the concept of the Director of Legal Aid's First Charge.

In late October 2021, I accepted an invitation from the Radio Television Hong Kong to attend a current affairs programme which provided an opportune time for me to explain to the public the rationale and basis behind the upcoming legal aid review. This radio programme had also served as a platform enabling me to share with the public the latest developments of the Department and the services we provided.

Quality Service to the Public

We highlighted in last year's Annual Report that the financial eligibility limits ("FELs") for legal aid applicants under the Ordinary Legal Aid Scheme and Supplementary Legal Aid Scheme had been increased to \$420,400 and \$2,102,000 respectively since 26 June 2020. As highlighted in the "Chief Executive's 2021 Policy Address Supplement", the FELs for legal aid applicants for these two schemes had increased by 45% since 2017. The relaxation in FELs has enhanced access to justice by enabling more people with greater economic means falling within the financial eligibility for legal aid.

In order to enhance the operation and implementation of the legal aid scheme,

the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office and the Legal Aid Department had completed a review of the legal aid system and proposed an array of enhancement measures to prevent potential abuse of our services and strengthen management of legal aid cases. All the enhancement measures were fully implemented in December 2021. With these measures in place, transparency of our services would be further enhanced which in turn would raise public confidence in the legal aid system in Hong Kong.

Enhancement of Information Systems

Technology makes our life easier. I firmly believe technological advancement plays a key role in driving productivity for our business and enhancing our operational efficiency. As highlighted in last year's Annual Report, the Department had proposed to revamp our core IT systems, namely the Case Management and Case Accounting System ("CM&CAS") and the Knowledge Support System ("KSS"), in order to cope with future challenges. I am pleased to report that we successfully sought the support from the Panel on Administration of Justice and Legal Services in March and subsequently obtained funding approval from the Finance Committee a month later for the sum of \$79 million. I believe that the revamped information systems would bring benefits not only to our internal users, but also legal aid applicants / aided persons and various stakeholders alike. The revamped systems would facilitate application processing and greatly reduce our processing time and would also enable us to manage case assignments more efficiently through a brand-new e-assignment process. It would also enhance our operational efficiency and performance in monitoring assigned-out cases, as well as achieving greater efficacy for costs assessments. Moreover, advanced security features would be introduced in the revamped systems to enhance system and data security.

Awards on our Professional Service

Despite the various challenges during the pandemic, our colleagues had shown perseverance throughout in continuing to provide quality and professional services to members of the public. They maintained the highest standards of professional excellence to meet the ever-changing needs of the society. And their efforts were fully recognized in a number of excellence award schemes. This year, two meritorious colleagues were presented with The Ombudsman's Awards 2021 for Officers of Public Organisations for their exemplary performance, professionalism and patience in handling legal aid applications and the provision of excellent customer service. Another experienced and exceptionally meritorious officer was awarded the Secretary for the Civil Service's Commendation Award 2021 for his consistently impressive performance and dedication to the delivery of quality legal aid services to the public over the years. They are clearly excellent examples of our Department's strive for positive work attitude and strong commitment to our work.



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50th Anniversary

The launching ceremony of the "Legal Aid Department 50th Anniversary Roving Exhibition" was successfully held in June 2021 in the City Hall. We were very honoured to have the Chief Executive of the HKSAR, the Chief Justice of the Court of Final Appeal, the Chief Secretary for Administration and the Chairman of the Legal Aid Services Council as our officiating guests for this significant and milestone event in witness of our achievements over the past 50 years. The launching ceremony was followed by a number of roving exhibitions held in different districts of the territory in June and August 2021 respectively. Members of the public who read our exhibition panels and participated in the games booths at the various venues would certainly find the information fruitful and rewarding. The events had no doubt enhanced public understanding and knowledge of the history and services of the Department.

As part of the celebration programmes, we also produced a commemorative publication and aired a documentary TV series co-produced by RTHK to showcase our contributions to the community through the provision of legal aid services in Hong Kong since 1970.

Looking Ahead

2021 has been a challenging and yet a productive year. On behalf of the Department, I would like to take this opportunity to offer my heartfelt gratitude 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 unfailing support for the work of the Department. Last but not least, I wish to express my utmost appreciation to all my colleagues who have worked tirelessly

with dedication and professionalism throughout the year in delivering quality legal aid services to the public.

Hong Kong has one of the best and most efficient legal aid system in the world. We must treasure what we have and appreciate the importance of our role in facilitating access to justice. As we move forward, we will continue to strive for the provision of quality legal aid services to the public in the years to come and to maintain our role as a Cornerstone of the Rule of Law in Hong Kong.

Thomas Edward Kwong
Director of Legal Aid