

# Foreword

It is my pleasure to present to you this Annual Report which summarises the major tasks performed and events organised by my colleagues in 2022. I hope you would enjoy reading this Report.

This was another challenging year for everyone when the COVID-19 pandemic took a turn for the worst in Hong Kong as the fifth wave of infections struck with deadly force in the first few months of 2022. The record-high daily infection rate shot into tens of thousands and COVID-19 related deaths mounted unceasingly in early 2022. This bleak condition had adversely affected the livelihood of various sectors, and the Department was no exception. During this time, some of our offices were temporarily closed for thorough disinfection. In view of the severity of the pandemic, the Government implemented new special work arrangements since late January with a view to reducing the number of staff in the office at the same time, while generally maintaining certain extent of public services. Despite the unprecedented impact of the pandemic, we continued to provide essential and urgent legal aid service to members of the public. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our clients for their patience and understanding of our special measures adopted to combat the pandemic and to extend my gratitude to all of my diligent colleagues for their dedication and perseverance.



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Director of Legal Aid

## Serving the Community

The fifth wave of the epidemic is more severe than the past few waves. Regardless of their departments and grades, civil servants, be they civilian or disciplined services staff, were mobilised to take up various roles in the anti-epidemic work at full stretch under the leadership of Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Departments. As with other government departments, some of our colleagues were assigned to carry out essential anti-epidemic duties on various fronts from February to April 2022 and to provide general support to the Government in the fight against the pandemic.

Amidst all this turmoil, we continued to reach out to the community via various publicity channels. With the gradual easing of the social distancing measures starting from the second half of 2022, our professional officers (including our senior directorate officers) resumed hosting face-to-face seminars/ talks for social workers and frontline staff of the Social Welfare Department, Hospital Authority and other non-governmental organisations, etc. These promotional events covered different topics ranging from the work and services of the Department to various family issues such as divorce, maintenance, child custody and guardianship of minor, family mediation, etc. In November 2022, our professional colleagues participated in the “Free Legal Advice Programme” under the “Law Week 2022” organised by the Law Society of Hong Kong. They manned a booth in Wan Chai to answer public enquiries on legal aid services. Besides, one of our professional officers also took part in the production of a short video on legal tips for the “Law Week 2022” to introduce the means and merits tests conducted when we process legal aid applications.

To maintain good relationship with our stakeholders and to promote the various services of the Department, two directorate officers hosted a workshop on civil legal aid schemes and measures to prevent abuse of legal aid for members of a trade union in July 2022. Another directorate officer conducted a webinar on “Update on Legal Aid Schemes” organised by the Hong Kong Academy of Law for legal practitioners in October 2022. All these events were well received by the participants and were no doubt conducive to promoting our services.

Apart from our stakeholders and working partners, our publicity programmes also placed importance on engaging youth groups and students. This year, we have re-activated our collaboration with a non-governmental organisation in a Job Shadow Day for students of two secondary schools in July 2022. Apart from being briefed of our services, the participating students were also given the opportunity to work with our Legal Aid Counsel (“LAC”) to acquire hands-on understanding of our work. In addition, we also participated in a mentorship scheme for a group of 12 students from another secondary school under the “Life Buddies” Mentoring Scheme in the same month. The students visited our offices and attended hearings at the High Court. The visits were followed by debriefing and discussion sessions with our LAC who served as mentors of the students. Law school students are also our major target group. This year, one of our professional officers delivered a career talk on legal aid services to introduce the work of LAC to a group of law students at the University of Hong Kong in September 2022.

Over the years, our colleagues are passionate about serving the community not only through their work, but also through voluntary service. Being members of the community, they care about the well-being of the public, especially individuals and families in need. The Government has all along been encouraging colleagues to volunteer for community service and I am glad to see that our colleagues have been participating in various community services in their spare time. In addition to manifesting concern for those in need, volunteerism will no doubt enhance solidarity and bolster staff morale. With the establishment of the Legal Aid Department Volunteer Team in November 2022, like-minded colleagues with strong passion for volunteering to serve the community as a team were bonded to achieve synergy and



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impact. In December 2022, I, together with my colleagues and volunteers from other bureaux/ departments and the Law Society of Hong Kong took part in the Carol Singing Festival organised by the Child Development Matching Fund at Lee Tung Avenue, Wan Chai to raise funds for the next generation in the festive season. We will continue to serve our community through volunteering in the years ahead and encourage you to join hands in building a team culture of caring for the community, endeavouring to promote and participate in volunteer programmes in loving care for those in need.

## Quality Service to the Public

The Department strives to deliver efficient and quality legal aid service to members of the public. In May 2022, we revised Chapters 6 to 9 of the Manual for Legal Aid Practitioners to provide up-to-date guidance notes to counsel and solicitors handling civil cases and criminal cases. In September 2022, our Application and Processing Division launched the SMS messaging service by which legal aid applicants would receive notification that their pre-application forms sent by post had been received. The new messaging service would also allow us to request applicants to contact the Department by phone as well as to inform them of the application results. We will continue to explore other means to enhance the efficiency of our services in the years to come.

## Enhancement of Information Systems

The Department has attached great importance on the use of information technology with a view to digitalising our services and providing e-service options to members of the public. With the kicking-off of the revamp of the Case Management and Case Accounting System and the Knowledge Support System in September 2022, staff from various sections of the Department were deployed to form a Project Team to maintain an effective high-level project management structure and to facilitate timely decision-making and implementation of the project. The project team is also responsible for internal communication between the management and users of various working levels and across sections during development

of the project. I am glad to share with you that Phase I of the project has been successfully launched in Q4 2022. The development and implementation of the project is expected to last for about 3 years and to be completed by the third quarter of 2025. With the revamped systems, we could enhance efficiency in the provision of legal aid services to the public on various fronts including 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.

Apart from revamping our business systems, the launching of e-submission of Legal Aid Panel Entry Forms through the “iAM Smart +” mobile app, a one-stop personalised digital services platform, is also in the pipeline. Panel lawyers could make use of this mobile application to submit e-reports and e-forms to the Department when this e-application is launched in early 2023.

The Department would explore more possibilities to further streamline our workflow with the help of information technology in order to raise our operational efficiency.

## **Awards on our Professional Service**

Despite various challenges in 2022, our colleagues have spared no effort in delivering high quality services to the public and pursuing excellence. Their hard work was duly recognised. This year, two meritorious colleagues were awarded The Ombudsman’s Awards for Officers of Public Organisations (“Ombudsman Award”) in recognition of their exemplary performance in customer service and complaints handling. Another experienced officer with consistently impressive performance was also awarded the Secretary for the Civil Service’s Commendation Award 2022 (“SCS’ Commendation”) for his commitment and dedication in the provision of quality legal aid services to the public in the past years. These award schemes are highly selective. The fact that our colleagues have been awarded the Ombudsman Award and SCS’ Commendation since 2017 and 2021 respectively best demonstrates the excellent and professional service they rendered to the members of the public over the past years. I believe my colleagues will continue, as they have been doing, to deliver their best in the provision of services to the public.

## Looking Ahead

Despite the unprecedented threats and challenges arising from the fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2022, it has been the Government's overriding mission to fight the virus on the one hand and to maintain the orderly functioning of society on the other. Being the team that serves the people of Hong Kong, my colleagues have been remaining steadfast on duty and continuing to play an important role in anti-epidemic work so as to align with the Government's anti-epidemic goals at different stages and to meet the service needs of the public. After months of hard work, Hong Kong gradually resumed to normal in the latter part of the year. As far as our Department is concerned, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all my colleagues who have provided professional and quality legal aid services to the public this year as we did in the past 50 years. As always, we will continue to be a cornerstone in upholding the rule of law in Hong Kong in the years to come.

On behalf of the Department, I would like to take this opportunity 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 unfailing support for the work of the Department.

**Chris Y.T. Chong**  
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