

Foreword

2024 was another challenging yet fruitful year. It is my pleasure to present to you the Annual Report 2024 of the Legal Aid Department which summarises the major work done and events organised in the year through the hard work and unwavering commitment of our colleagues to delivering quality public service. I hope you will enjoy reading this Report.



Chris Y.T. Chong, SBS, JP
Director of Legal Aid

Serving the Community

For the furtherance of our mission to ensure that no one who qualifies for legal aid is denied access to justice because of lack of means, we endeavour to actively promote our legal aid services to various sectors of the community via different platforms and channels. Throughout the year, our professional officers delivered a number of talks to social workers and frontline staff of the Social Welfare Department, Hospital Authority, non-governmental organisations and trade unions who had frequent and direct contacts with people that may be in need of legal aid services. We are delighted that these well-received talks, covering various topics such as employees' compensation, personal injuries at

work, common issues encountered in matrimonial cases, as well as procedures and eligibility criteria for legal aid application, could enhance the understanding of those frontline staff of the work and services of the Department.

We have also continued to make use of different opportunities to reach out to members of the general public directly. For instance, we hosted a talk at a community hall in August 2024, sharing with over 120 attendees how our services could facilitate access to justice for people in need. Another talk for newly arrived ethnic minorities was held in October 2024 to enhance their understanding of the legal aid services in Hong Kong. We also warmly received several groups of secondary school students from different backgrounds under the school visit programme during the year. Through the briefing given by our colleagues, not only could the students learn more about the availability of legal aid services provided by the Department, but they could also have a glimpse of the career opportunities in the area of legal aid service. Between February and May 2024, we actively participated in three rounds of "Free Legal Advice Programme" of the "Law Week" organised by the Law Society of Hong Kong, with enquiry booth set up in different districts to reach out to the locals.

Furthermore, we have continued to maintain a close relationship with our various stakeholders and strive to promote our work, while also exchanging with them views on matters of common interest from time to time. For instance, our two directorate officers served as speakers in a seminar on legal aid schemes organised by the Hong Kong Academy of Law in September 2024 to enhance the understanding of our legal aid services by legal practitioners and the general

public. Apart from the legal sector, we had further our continuous contacts with the Hong Kong Federation of Insurers to combat fraudulent claims and explore ways that could facilitate us in conducting thorough investigation into accidents when processing applications for legal aid. For protection of first charge payable to the Director of Legal Aid, the Federation has also assisted in drawing its members' attention to the need to pay damages and costs to our Department direct.

Exchanging Views with Parties outside Hong Kong

We treasure every opportunity to introduce and exchange views on our legal aid services with officials and visitors from places outside Hong Kong despite the differences in our legal systems. In September 2024, we received a delegation of 14 officials from the Chinese Mainland (hereafter referred to as "Mainland") under the Cooperation Agreements with the Mainland Justice Bureaux/Departments organised by the Department of Justice and introduced to them the work and services of the Department. We gave a briefing to another group of Mainland officials from the Department of Justice of Zhejiang Province during their visit to our Department in November 2024. During the year, training opportunities were also provided to a total of eight Mainland officials placed to the Department on a short-term attachment programme organised by the Department of Justice, familiarising them with the provision of legal aid in a different legal system. Our two directorate officers also met with some officials from Japan Central Authority under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction in March 2024 to exchange views on legal aid services in Hong Kong.

Quality Service to the Public

The Department is committed to providing professional and quality 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 \$449,620 and \$2,248,110 respectively with effect from 13 December 2024.



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We also strive to deliver our services in an efficient, effective and customer-oriented manner. Recognising the urgent needs of applicants involving in domestic violence cases, a Task Force led by our senior directorate officers was formed to review the processing of such kind of legal aid applications. Following the review, new guidelines with various improvement measures were introduced in July 2024, including the unified handling of domestic violence cases by dedicated officers and the discretionary exemption given to applicants from providing medical reports and police statements. With the implementation of these new measures, the average processing time for such kind of applications has been substantially reduced from about 20 days to 8 days. In addition, the Faster Payment System (FPS) was introduced to the Shroff Offices of the Department as a new payment means in March 2024. With FPS,

payers could now use any supporting mobile banking application or e-wallet to scan the FPS QR code to make payments at the Shroff Offices conveniently.

Enhancement of Information Systems

Acknowledging the benefits and impacts that information technology could bring to our operational efficiency and services provided to the public, we embrace a transformative mindset in exploring different digitalisation options where practicable. In the year, we continued to press ahead the revamp of the Case Management and Case Accounting System, which is the major information system critical to our core businesses, aiming to have it been rolled out by the third quarter of 2025. In addition, we kick started the development of a Legal Aid Virtual Assistant Chatbot named "Aidie" with the plan to launch it by the first quarter of 2025. Built with Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing technology, the Chatbot could handle legal aid pre-application general enquiries in traditional Chinese, simplified Chinese and English. The Department also compiled a three-year action plan for digitalising our legal aid services, including a proposal to develop an online platform for easier completion of the customer service questionnaires by members of the public. We believe that the implementation of such e-service could encourage legal aid applicants and aided persons to provide their valuable feedback to us, thereby facilitating our further review to enhance operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Awards on our Professional Service

We attach great importance to delivering high standard and professional legal aid services. I am proud to share that we had two colleagues being awarded The Ombudsman's Awards for Officers of Public Organisations in 2024 for their efforts in handling enquiries and complaints in an expeditious, professional and impartial manner. Besides, another experienced officer with persistent exemplary performance was selected for commendation under the Secretary for the Civil Service's Commendation Award Scheme in recognition of her dedication to duty and passion for serving the public over the past years. These colleagues set outstanding examples for other colleagues of the Department as well as the civil service.

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 would like to extend my utmost gratitude to all my colleagues for their staunch support to the Department as well as unwavering commitment to serving the public. Through their untiring efforts and determination in delivering quality legal aid services, we have continued to fulfill our vision of being a cornerstone of the rule of law in Hong Kong. I trust that with our unfaltering dedication to ensuring access to justice for those in need, we will continue to be able to surf through ever-changing challenges in the years to come. Finally, on behalf of the Department, 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 unfailing support for the work of the Department in the past years.

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