

**Delivered Speech by Mr Edwin Tong SC,  
Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and  
Second Minister for Law  
at the Launch of Law Awareness Weeks @ CDC  
21 September 2024, 1pm to 3pm, ITE College West**

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Chairman and Host Mayor Ms Low Yen Ling;  
Mayors,  
Ms Denise Phua, Mr Desmond Choo, Mr Alex Yam and Mr Fahmi Aliman;  
Mr Tanguy Lim, CEO of Pro Bono SG;  
Ladies and gentlemen

1. Good afternoon, everyone. Congratulations to all, we have reached 10 years of Law Awareness Weeks @ CDC (LAW@CDC) 2024.
2. This is an important milestone. And I will spend a few moments just to reflect on these 10 years.
3. I will share on where we started, how far we have come, and later, on what we think we can do to move the needle on inclusivity, to move the needle on making sure that we support legal ventures and access to justice.

**A Decade of Growth and Impact**

4. Before 2015, PBSG's Law Awareness events took place over just day at one location, at the Supreme Court.
5. When the CDCs and PBSG joined forces in 2015, the programme was upgraded and called Law Awareness Week (instead of 'Weeks'). It was a modest, one-week programme, but it showed us how important it was to reach out to those who are vulnerable, who felt that the law was mystifying, was intriguing, something that was completely beyond their reach. And I think Law Awareness Week broke that model and allowed people to come forward and feel that they are very much a part of the justice system.
6. Year on year, as the programme continued to gain good response from residents, LAW@CDC grew from strength to strength. from a one-week programme, it became six-weeks, and today close to a 2-month long programme.

7. So two months' worth of programmes, of events, webinars, and an ability to outreach, not just around the space where the law is, but going out there into the social space as well.
8. And indeed, beyond physical talks, LAW@CDC also started offering webinars since 2020. Partly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we moved online. We reached out to a different audience through the technology platforms and through social media.
9. Of course, the partnerships have also increased, also broadened. And this is not just about adding more partners, but these are meaningful partnerships, sustainable ones, reaching out to audiences and beneficiaries through these networks that can help to serve even more of the vulnerable. Over the years, the CDC-PBSG collaboration has evolved to also encompass NUS, SMU, SUSS, SCCA, and SASW.
10. The CDC-PBSG Community Legal Pro Bono Services Network has also grown from 1 clinic, to 4 and it now encompasses 28 Community Legal Clinics (CLC) established at CDCs and Community Centres/Residents' Committee Centres (CC/RC), delivering on the commitment to really be proactive and going out there into the heartlands and being where people need the law the most.
11. Sometimes this makes a big difference. If I was someone who needed help in the law, maybe even terrified of what the law might present or afraid of going to see a lawyer, going somewhere closer to home, downstairs, across the road, at the RC centre, or in the case of Tian De Temple, also in a place where the community exists; makes it a lot less something that's out there and unreachable.
12. Together, this has created a really strong community of legal support that's more robust than ever.
13. The growth of these endeavours speaks volumes about how much impact this it has made.
14. Since 2015, more than **15,000 residents** have benefitted from **about 340 legal talks** across **80 legal topics**.
15. More than **20,000 residents** have benefitted from our **CLCs@CDCs since 2015**.

16. And over **300 youths** were supported through the Youth Community & Legal Clinics over the past 3 years.
17. And more importantly, the people who made these numbers possible.
18. LAW@CDC has brought together over **300 passionate lawyers and volunteers** who have contributed their time, talents and treasure to giving back to the community.
19. Additionally, over **4,700 law students and 350 lawyers** who gave up their time and dedicated their legal expertise to serving those who need help at the CLCs.
20. I would like to stop for a moment and maybe you'll join me in thanking everyone who has made this possible. These are the people who made the numbers that we talk about possible. These are the people who are the unseen heroes and very often unsung as well.

### **Looking Forward: Evolving to Meet New Needs**

21. Singapore is moving into our sixth decade of next year SG60. We've come far. We've developed a strong country, vibrant economy, able to weather storms.
22. We're looking at what else we can do to move the needle on making Singapore a lot more inclusive, a lot more impactful in terms of our programmes. It's about ensuring that everyone, and I would say particularly the vulnerable, the lower income and those who are less privileged and others who have barriers in navigating the system, sometimes systemic barriers, have the opportunity to understand the basic legal needs and receive legal support.
23. And I would say those who benefit from the system is more than just getting legal advice. It's finding a platform, finding some amount of dignity and respect in how you overcome, deal with and overcome such legal problems.
24. Pro bono legal services helped us tremendously on that score, levelling the playing field, ensuring that our first-class legal system, is not just for the high-profile, high-value cases, but that it also serves the needs of everyone, each and every one of us. And that to me is the mark of a truly first-class system.

25. That our people, that those who are vulnerable, those who are not able to afford their lawyers, will see the legal system as something useful. And we have been striving to achieve that as much as we can so that we can call ourselves a first-class legal system.
26. The Ministry of Law has been working very hard at doing this. Some of you will know that some years ago, we started to support both financially as well as also in terms of structure, class, the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS).
27. It was a lawyer-driven initiative, and it was serving an important aspect of society. So, we moved some years ago to formally support CLAS. We've also set up the Public Defender's Office (PDO) in the last couple of years. Again, structurally funded by government to ensure that those who can't afford legal services, but who face serious charges, serious cases in court, they will be able to find a space for them at the PDO.
28. And finally, we looked at what the relevant means testing criteria would be for getting legal aid. We understand that you can't quite apply the usual social sector and financial assistance type barriers. When it comes to a legal problem, it is often dramatically high. The pain point is sharp, sudden, and it exceeds the usual thresholds that you might see for financial assistance schemes. So, we have reviewed means testing and we have brought it to a level which we feel is sustainable, that allows families who face a sudden, serious legal challenge. Sometimes you get brought to court on a civil claim and you feel that suddenly you have to put all your resources into it. So, we've looked at all these different areas to ensure that we constantly review the way in which we discharge and we dispense pro bono legal services.
29. Now, 10 years on, LAW@ CDC has a strong foundation, good platform, many programmes are running, thanks to the many volunteers and the systems that CDCs and PBSG have put in place.
30. Today's theme, looks at very the questions that we may not need answers to today necessarily, but will become urgent in the future. I think this is the right direction for the new focus for LAW@CDC. It's timely today for LAW@CDC to rise to the challenge of serving the needs of Singapore and Singaporeans in the future and think about how we can use legal pro bono services and the skills that we have to help to strengthen the causes of the many in our community who are invested in and are passionate about environmental sustainability.

31. It's forward-looking, and I would say it's somewhat visionary for LAW@CDC to be looking at this area today. This year's theme, ***Law and the Environment - Building Sustainable Communities for the Future***, I think is very apt, also very timely.
32. While we know that legal knowledge can help to empower individuals, level them up, give them a sustainable platform. We also need to be mindful of the broader, more complex issues affecting our communities. Environmental sustainability is one of those issues.
33. As a nation, we have decided that however small Singapore is, we must play our part, we must punch above our weight, and we must play our part in all of the international UN-led initiatives. We've set more targets, including achieving net zero emissions by 2050. That's just 25, 26 years away. And we have the Singapore Green Plan 2030, which lays out deliverables, targets for every sector, and that sets up our roadmap to getting far more green by 2030.
34. Various agencies such as our five CDCs also run numerous initiatives on the ground towards these targets, such as the Pass-It-On@Central Singapore aimed at donation and upcycling; Green Adventure Programme @North East that educates children on eco-habits such as Zero Waste, Recycling; the annual Sustainability Festival @North West focusing on food sustainability this year; the Wormery Movement @South East that addresses food waste treatment through an organic approach, and Clean Up @South West where residents can donate their recyclables in exchange for groceries. All of these local initiatives, they all play an important part in the overall national movement.
35. But it's not just the big actions that count; small actions matter too.
36. And we believe that by expanding residents' understanding of environmental issues through a legal lens, we can spark change – whether that's something as simple as reducing plastic bag usage among individuals; or a larger collective community effort to embrace more long-term sustainable practices.
37. In this year's talks and webinars, there will be an environmental slant. Residents have the chance to delve into and understand what are some of the laws that protect Singapore's biodiversity, the legal responsibilities of pet owners, and ways to reduce pollution in our communities.

38. These all are initial early steps, but I think if you look at the way we made early steps in the early years of law at CDC, and today we are really galloping at pace, I think these early baby steps will go a long way in years to come.
39. One shining example of how legal frameworks and community action can come together is Project Midori. This is a student-led community service project in SMU that works hand-in-hand with the campus' Food & Beverage tenants. You may learn more about them at the student booths outside the hall. Project Midori aims to cut food waste and foster sustainable food practices to help SMU as an organisation comply with the Resource Sustainability Act (RSA). This project exemplifies how, when legal framework is paired with community action, real change can happen.
40. When everyone does their part, we can make a big toward a greener, more sustainable Singapore.

### **Thanking Partners**

41. I would like to say thank you to the Mayors, CDCs and Pro Bono SG, and the team behind this that is dedicated, focused and very much leading with not only the head but also with the heart. Your commitment has been the foundation of LAW@CDC's success.
42. To our volunteers, students, and partners, your contribution, your serving, to come together to collaborate, to think of what we can do exponentially to raise and have a bigger impact, has been tremendous. You're not just providing legal assistance, and I want you to know this. You are empowering people, strengthening communities, building a far more resilient, inclusive Singapore. Not just for today, but for future generations. And when we say we want to leave Singapore for our children in a better state than it is today, then the work starts now.
43. All these efforts make a big impact. So as we look ahead, I'm very confident that these efforts, plus more that will come in future editions of LAW@CDC, will really turn Singapore into an inclusive society, one where the less privileged will feel empowered, where we feel that we are not just defined by how far we can achieve, what the person at the top can achieve, but how far the last person has moved in society. This

is a mark of how inclusive, caring and compassionate we are as a society.