

**Keynote Address by Minister for Law, Second Minister for Home Affairs and Deputy Chairman of People's Association, Mr Edwin Tong SC,
at Law Awareness Weeks 2026
3 Oct 2026 (Sat), 10.30 am**

Host Mayor **Mr Baey Yam Keng**

Mayors **Ms Denise Phua, Mr Alex Yam, and Mr Dinesh Vasu Dash**

Vice-Chairman of South West CDC, **Mr Ang Wei Neng**

Chairman-Designate of Pro Bono SG, **Ms Vivienne Lim**

Our many partners, lawyers, law students, friends, and colleagues

Introduction

1. A very good morning to all of you.
2. It's so nice to see all of you here. I recognise many of my colleagues from the Bar, and it is great to spend this Saturday morning with you at Law Awareness Weeks (LAW) @ CDC once again.
3. You have heard from the speakers earlier about the work of Pro Bono SG, about LAW@CDC, and about the collaborations that they have been doing, so I will not go into those areas. But I thought I will take a moment to talk to you a little bit about how the Government sees access to justice.
4. That is particularly important because we are commemorating SGLaw200 this year. 200 years since the establishment of the legal system in Singapore as we know it today, which we inherited 200 years ago but which we have taken on board ourselves to nurture, to nuance, and to contextualise to what we need in Singapore. A big part of that system is how we make justice accessible.

SGLaw200 and Access to Justice

5. When we talk about access to justice, at the heart of that question is really: What kind of a legal system do we want to have? How does it work for us? And who does it serve?
6. I think the answer is: it must be a system that can work for people. It is easy to say, but I think it is much harder to do.
7. Those of us who work in the law, like lawyers, law students, and those in the legal industry, would naturally think of statutes, courtrooms, institutions, processes and procedures when it comes to a legal question. But that is not how most people, particularly laypeople, would think about the law.
8. When they encounter a problem – when a marriage breaks down, when they enter into a contract which they cannot enforce, when they have been cheated, or when they have neighbours in dispute – their first question is not going to be “Which statute would help me?” or “Which court would help me?” Their questions are much simpler: “What can I do?”, “Who can I turn to?”, “Who can help me?” or “How do I find a way forward?”

9. So the starting point is that the true test of a legal system that is open, accessible and inclusive, is not only how well it is designed, but how well it works for the person in practice when they actually need it.
10. Most times, those of us in the law will be familiar with the process. You get a letter of demand. You get court papers served on you. You are used to it. But to most laypersons, getting a letter of demand from a lawyer is a significantly stressful moment. We need to look at it from their lens and not from ours. That, I think, is at the heart of access to justice.
 - (1) Can people understand the law?
 - (2) Can they reach help when they need to?
 - (3) Can the legal system help them navigate their problems and move forward?

Understanding and Accessing the Law

11. Therefore, if we start with the person rather than the process or the institution, then the picture becomes much clearer. Those of you who have been at the Pro Bono SG clinics would know that people encounter difficulty with the law at different points. Sometimes, it is understanding the law, getting the right advice, obtaining representation, or simply navigating the process. Our task, whether at Pro Bono SG or LAW@CDC, is to break down those barriers as much as we can.
12. In fact, one barrier might itself be the law. If people are expected to follow the law, then it must be clear and understandable in simple English. That is why, in 2013, we embarked on a very major exercise in the Government, with our colleagues at the AGC, to modernise our legislation and make our laws clearer and easier to read.
13. The lawyers here are all used to language that are quite unintelligible – “hereinbefore”, “hereinafter”, “aforesaid”. There are some choice Latin phrases as well, to make sure people do not understand what we are saying.
14. We have removed as much of that as possible, and made sure that when you read a sentence, you would not have to go back to the start of the sentence again, or pull out your dictionary to find out what the difficult words are. And I am talking about the lawyers!
15. So, the language of the law itself might restrict accessibility, and therefore, clarity of language and ease of understanding matter a lot. It took us many years to rewrite a lot of the legislation, but I think we are there and we will continue to do so.
16. But understanding the words of the law is just one part of access. People also need to understand what the law means for them – what their rights are and what their responsibilities are. Because the law does not just tell you what your rights are, but it also gives you a framework to interact with one another in society, and that sets the basis for law and order in society.
17. That is where public legal education, including LAW@CDC, and the work that Pro Bono SG does, is really important. When a specific legal problem arises, some might need legal advice, while some might need representation.
18. Over the years, the Government has built up and supported different institutions and programmes for different needs that might exist on the spectrum. We have the

community legal clinics, such as those run by the CDCs and Pro Bono SG. We have the Legal Aid Bureau, which has been running and serving Singaporeans and Singapore since before 1965. We have set up the Public Defender's Office. We also have the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme, which the Government started supporting some years ago, both in funding as well as in driving the programmes, so that lawyers themselves have a platform to contribute and give back to society.

19. We also continue to find different ways in which we can bring that help closer to the community. Pro Bono SG's Community Law Centres at Tian De Temple in Hougang the Realm of Tranquillity in Woodlands are two good examples of what it means to bring access to justice physically closer to the ground.
20. For someone who is already feeling overwhelmed when they receive a letter of demand, having a place that they can go to, which is not in the middle of the CBD or in an unfamiliar place, but right in the heartlands, really helps to narrow the gap that you would feel between yourself and where help can be found.
21. Access to justice also means widening access to existing forms of support. That is why, two days ago, the PCHI threshold for civil legal aid was raised, so that more people can qualify for civil legal aid. This could benefit up to 1,000 more Singaporeans every year.
22. At this juncture, I want to say that while we have all these programmes, the real lifeblood of these programmes are the lawyers and the volunteers. I want to take a few moments to say a big thank you to those who make these happen – lawyers and volunteers who sit down week after week listening to the issues that the residents come forward with. They give more than advice; they give comfort and reassurance, and lend a listening ear. So to the volunteer legal professionals, I thank you very much for stepping forward and paying it forward. It means a lot to us.

Appropriate and Effective Legal Processes

23. At the same time, for us in the Government, access to justice also means asking ourselves continually whether the process that we have in place fits the problem and whether it addresses the issues that our residents face.
24. For example, when you have a simple consumer dispute, it should not take the same amount of time as a complicated, complex civil action. If it costs you more to find help than the amount that you are trying to recover, then I think we have to relook at the process. So we are looking at how we can expand the ways in which Small Claims Tribunals or simpler processes can help residents who face these problems navigate the process.
25. We also have avenues, such as the Employment Claims Tribunals or the Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals. The purpose of these is to ensure that the process fits the problem. You do not need to go through a complicated process to resolve what might be a neighbourly dispute. We have set up the Community Disputes Management Framework to ensure that there is a framework to resolve what we might face on a day-to-day basis, without having to end up in court and in an adversarial position all the time. So we use mediation a lot for disputes that arise in the community.
26. At the same time, going beyond the process itself, we must also be responsive to what the person needs out of the process. When you go through a process, what do you want out of it?

27. For us as lawyers, sometimes we only see the process, but if you look at it through the lens of the individual, you might find that they have a very different outlook.
28. So in family justice for example, we have embraced Therapeutic Justice because we recognised that going through the proceedings is not necessarily helping a family navigate life after a divorce. If you look at it strictly through the lens of the law and procedures alone, without Therapeutic Justice, then you might forget that the most important people in a divorce are not the people before the Judge, but the children who are often not in court during the proceedings. They are the most important concerns that we have got to bear in mind.
29. The same thinking also lies behind our recent introduction of the Maintenance Enforcement Division (MED). If someone, usually a single mother who has gone through a divorce, has to keep going back to court just to get maintenance that has already been ordered, then the court order has not quite solved the problem. So we have set up the MED to lower the barriers – to allow someone who is in that position, to collect maintenance more easily, than having to apply to court each time.
30. I use these examples to show that we sometimes need to look at, not only whether a remedy exists, but whether the remedy is easily and practicably accessible by the individual.
31. Others may face other kinds of additional barriers, which the system also needs to recognise. These other barriers may sometimes arise because of age, access to technology, disability, mental health condition, or other vulnerabilities.
32. Access to justice also means that we cannot treat everyone the same. It means recognising where someone might need perhaps additional protection or additional support in order to be able to participate effectively in the process that we have designed.
33. Over the years, we have taken a lot of care to strengthen protections for vulnerable persons in different parts of our legal system. We do that because access to justice is not just about applying for legal aid. It also means designing the law to proactively and structurally help those who are most vulnerable and might not be able to know when they can approach the system for help. So we proactively assist them and make sure that we protect the vulnerable persons from harm.
34. In 2020, for example, we enhanced penalties – in some cases up to twice the maximum – for certain offences that are committed against young children and vulnerable persons who cannot protect themselves. Vulnerable persons can be people in unequal bargaining positions or are not in a position to speak up or fight back. The law proactively protects them. If you commit offences against these persons, then you can expect that the punishments will be enhanced.
35. We also set up the Inclusive Justice Taskforce to look at how persons with disabilities and mental health conditions can be better supported in the criminal justice system. These are people with invisible disabilities. They may look like you and I, but they might not be able to navigate the system in the same way as you and I. So what can we do to help them?
36. We are studying this. We have the help of the community partners and social service agencies. We are coming together to see what changes we can make in the legal system to help these people.

- 37. A system may be equally open to everyone on paper, but that does not mean that everyone is necessarily equally able to use it in the same way. That is at the heart of what we in the Government regard as proper access to justice. How do we level up, and in some cases, even level down, to ensure that as far as possible everyone has equal access.
- 38. So the question is what I had asked at the start – Does the system work for the person who needs it?

The Access to Justice Ecosystem

- 39. When you put it all together, one thing is clear – access to justice cannot be delivered by one programme, one profession or the Government alone.
- 40. When we look around this room, I think we have that ecosystem that allows us to deliver equal, accessible and inclusive justice in Singapore. We have lawyers and volunteers, the CDCs and the People's Association, our treasured community and social service partners, our Whole-of-Government colleagues, and very importantly, young people who are prepared to lend their fresh ideas to our ventures.
- 41. Access to justice is an age-old problem. As I have said, we started LAB before Singapore became independent, but we can always benefit from a fresh perspective and I am very glad to see that here today.
- 42. The two MOUs that we will sign today – one for the Community Legal Clinics @ CDC, and another for the LAW@CDC – deeply reflect the partnership that access to justice depends on. Different organisations bringing different skillsets, experiences and strengths towards the same goal.
- 43. I do not want to say more about the Access to Justice Community Co-Lab, as the speakers before me have done so. The best thing we can do is to visit their booths and hear from them, as well as to share our thoughts and views with them. Because that is how we can really encourage our young people to step up and play an active role in access to justice.

Conclusion

- 44. Finally, I go back to SGLaw200 – 200 years since Singapore inherited our legal system. As I said, we have changed it, nurtured it, and made it fit for our own purposes. As we reflect and commemorate on these 200 years, all of us in this room also carry a heavy burden, because the question that will be asked of us is: what is the next chapter beyond 200 years?

45. One day, at SGLaw300, 400 or 500, when they look back, what will they say of what the people at SGLaw200 have done to continue building and nurturing the system? How do we remain accountable to the future generation? That is also at the heart of what my colleagues and I at MinLaw always think about. I would like to invite all of you to also think about that, because the issue is not just for the Government alone, but for all of society.
46. If we can continue to play our part, do our bit and pay it forward, then at those occasions, people will look back and say that they have inherited something that was valuable. They stood on shoulders of giants and that has allowed them to reach out further, to help even more, and to make justice even more inclusive and far more accessible. That is the goal of LAW@CDC.
47. On that note, I thank you very much for being here. Your presence on a Saturday morning alone signifies the importance of the occasion. I thank you very much for your presence and for paying it forward well beyond LAW@CDC – day in and day out, and throughout the whole year.
48. Thank you very much.

++