

**Chief Justice's Opening Remarks at  
the Law Society of Hong Kong's Pro Bono and  
Community Service Award Presentation Ceremony 2022  
(12 December 2022)**

Secretary for Justice, President of the Law Society, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

1. It is a great honour for me to be invited by the Law Society to give these opening remarks. This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. In the past 25 years, we have seen pro bono work and community service taking a steady foothold in the legal profession. The Judiciary takes a keen interest in the development of pro bono practice in Hong Kong, and is pleased to witness its growth over the past decades. On this special occasion, it is apt to remind ourselves of the values that drive us to provide pro bono assistance to those in need, and to celebrate those who embody these values and contribute to this endeavour.

2. Hong Kong prides itself on the rule of law. The rule of law assures all individuals and entities in our society that their rights are meaningful, enforceable and equal. Indispensable to this concept is access to justice. Article 35 of the Basic Law specifically guarantees that Hong Kong residents shall have the right to confidential legal advice, access to courts, choice of lawyers for timely protection of their lawful rights and interests or for representation in the courts, and to judicial remedies. To this end, lawyers play the essential role of advising people of their legal rights and obligations, and where required, assisting in their enforcement or defence.

3. Naturally, such an important role deserves recognition and reward. Whilst it is perfectly proper for such recognition and reward to manifest in the

form of legal fees, the reality remains that people in need of legal assistance differ in their ability to render them. It is therefore heartening to witness the rising prominence of pro bono responsibilities among our lawyers, and for such responsibilities to be embraced by a broad spectrum of individuals and firms, diverse in expertise, experiences and perspectives. On this note, it is apposite for me to observe that in the past five years alone, the number of lawyers that were given awards under the Law Society's Pro Bono and Community Work Recognition Programme increased from 117 in 2016 to 236 in 2021; and the number of law firms awarded increased from 26 to 42.<sup>1</sup> Long may this trend continue.

4. The public interest associated with the provision of legal services is of course not limited to litigation and access to justice. The provision of legal services of whatever kind is never a purely private matter. For, by definition, law governs the legal relationships between the State and individuals, and that among members of society. A correct understanding of and a healthy respect for these legal relationships by all those concerned is essential to the proper functioning of society, and is conducive to the public good. This explains why the availability of adequate and affordable legal services is always a matter of public interest. This also explains why the provision of pro bono legal services is important as a facet of serving the public interest, and ultimately, the rule of law.

5. Pro bono work helps send a clear message to the society at large that upholding the rule of law is not merely a slogan, but an integral part of the legal profession, and one that transcends purely commercial considerations. This is evidenced in, for instance, the Free Legal Helpline and Free Legal Consultation

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<sup>1</sup> The Law Society of Hong Kong: Annual Report 2016 (Page 10) & Annual Report 2021 (Page 46).

Service, which provide the general public with access to free legal advice across a broad range of practice areas.

6. There are two particularly commendable features of the Free Legal Helpline. First, its comprehensive coverage, ranging from criminal law to matrimonial law. Secondly, the speed at which requests are processed: within 3 working days of a call to the Helpline, a panel solicitor will be available to provide up to 45 minutes of free legal advice. These features are meaningful and considerate, demonstrating careful deliberation of the needs of prospective litigants.

7. Another encouraging sign is the increase in the diversity of pro bono and community programmes being offered, and the collaborations with other organisations. For instance, the “Legal Pioneer” Mentorship Programme, introduced in 2009, and Teen Talk, which has recently celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, provide much needed connection with the youth through their legal seminars, interactive discussions, and organised events. Indeed, the very fact that there are too many pro bono initiatives to mention and be given credit to on this occasion bodes well for the breadth of the community that has been served by your pro bono and volunteering efforts. It is also a testament to the commendable efforts undertaken by the Law Society over the years to continuously innovate and expand upon its pro bono initiatives.

8. In light of the above, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the Law Society for facilitating and celebrating this cause. I would also like to congratulate all practitioners and firms having taken part in the past and present. Your efforts and achievements have not gone unnoticed. It is fitting that they are recognised and celebrated in this Award Ceremony.

9. Looking to the future, it is important to adopt an unrelenting outlook towards continuing your pro bono responsibilities, to integrate such responsibilities into talent development, and to build upon the foundation set by your predecessors and yourselves. As we reflect on our progress in Hong Kong, I think it is safe to say that pro bono work is also rising in prominence in many mature jurisdictions where the provision of pro bono services by law firms is very much regarded as the norm. Different jurisdictions may have different approaches to matters such as whether the relevant professional rules of conduct should specifically require the provision of minimum hours of pro bono services annually, either as a mandatory target or as an aspirational one. Nonetheless, the importance of pro bono services to society is almost universally acknowledged.

10. It is important for us to bear in mind that the competitiveness of Hong Kong's legal industry rests not only on the quality of the legal services we provide, and the calibre of the legal practitioners we cultivate, but also on the rendering of pro bono services to the broader community, as an indispensable facet of the rule of law. It will be most pleasing to see Hong Kong continue to push its pro bono aspirations to be in line with that of its international counterparts.

11. For now, we must pay our utmost respect to those who have taken us this far in the journey. The Judiciary is grateful to you for playing such an indispensable role in our rule of law. Long may your efforts and achievements continue. Thank you.

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