

Speech by SJ at Law Society of Hong Kong's Pro Bono and Community Service Award Presentation Ceremony 2023 (English only)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Paul Lam, SC, at Law Society of Hong Kong's Pro Bono and Community Service Award Presentation Ceremony 2023 today (December 13):

Chief Justice (Chief Justice of the Court of Final Appeal, Mr Andrew Cheung Kui-ning), President CM Chan (President of the Law Society of Hong Kong, Mr Chan Chak-ming), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon. It is my pleasure to join you on this very meaningful occasion. May I first express my congratulations and gratitude to all the awardees and the Law Society for your contributions to pro bono services and community work.

As I have said in this year's Ceremonial Opening of the Legal Year back in January, the maintenance of the common law system in Hong Kong is one of the most important features of the principle of "one country, two systems". To maintain and promote the general public's understanding, trust and confidence in our common law system is of utmost importance. To achieve this objective, we must strive to ensure that the rights guaranteed by Article 35 of the Basic Law, namely, that Hong Kong residents shall have right to access to the courts, and choice of lawyers for timely protection of their lawful rights and interests, can and will be effectively exercised.

In this regard, the legal profession, as a major component of our legal system, has a vital and distinctive role to play. In addition to discharging your professional duties diligently and competently, your commitment to give back to society by performing pro bono legal services will certainly enhance access to justice. When some less privileged groups in the community need legal assistance but cannot afford to engage lawyers on their own, pro bono services can fill the gap of these needs.

The provision of pro bono services and community work in Hong Kong not only counts on the support of lawyers and law firms but also the support of our aspiring law students. The continuing vibrancy of our legal profession definitely hinges on our future generations. In this connection, I am very pleased to see that the Law Society has added a Student Award this year, acknowledging the contribution of the younger members of our legal profession to pro bono services and community work. Exposure to pro bono and community work is beyond doubt a valuable experience to law students. Through participation in these services, students have a chance of meeting clients in real, providing legal assistance and witnessing its impact before they

formally join the profession. Further, as students are not bound by billable targets, they may be in a better position to, for example, assist in legal research which could take quite some time. Students' contributions are surely worthy of recognition and I am very glad that today their efforts are being acknowledged.

The provision of legal aid and pro bono legal work may not serve their intended purposes unless people are aware of these services and how our legal system works in general. The Department of Justice is well aware of the importance of rule of law education, which has always been one of our top priorities.

For sure, it is not always easy to explain the concepts of rule of law or our common law system to lay persons, in particular, young people in a way that they find interesting and easy to understand but at the same time fair, objective and accurate. In this aspect, we set up the Steering Committee on Rule of Law Education earlier this year, which is chaired by me, to explore means by which we may equip the right persons as competent tellers of true Hong Kong stories on the rule of law.

Last month, we rolled out the first phase of the Rule of Law Education Train-the-Leaders Programme. The Programme aims to train leaders in various sectors of the community so that they can effectively promote consistent and correct messages relating to the rule of law to youths and the general public; and inspire others to develop better understanding and respect for the rule of law. With a focus on fundamental rule of law principles, the programme covers various topics such as the main characteristics and basic framework of our common law system, introduction to civil and criminal procedures, etc. It is worth mentioning that one of the topics is about the legal aid system in general in Hong Kong. And I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Mr C M Chan, President of the Law Society, for being one of our guest speakers on this very important issue.

In closing, I would like to thank all the awardees again for offering your precious time and professional knowledge to the less privileged in our society. You have set a very good example for the legal profession and indeed our community at large. Lastly, noting that this marks the 14th anniversary of the Law Society Pro Bono and Community Service Award Presentation Ceremony, I would like to express my gratitude to the Law Society for their continuous effort in promoting the pro bono culture.

As CJ has just mentioned, Christmas and New Year are approaching, may I also take this opportunity to wish you all a very joyful Christmas and a happy and healthy new year. Thank you very much.