

COURTS

Justice centre to aid the self-represented

Facility to simplify court processes for unrepresented litigants to open this year

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SINGAPORE—More help will be available for those representing themselves in court when the new Community Justice Centre (CJC) opens in the fourth quarter of this year at the Subordinate Courts, providing a one-stop hub for unrepresented litigants needing support at no cost.

This comes as statistics from the past three years showed a growing “sizeable number” of defendants and respondents without legal representation.

At the Family Court, more than 96 per cent of applicants and more than 99 per cent of respondents for maintenance and personal protection orders were unrepresented. Of

divorce cases, 80 per cent involved defendants without legal representation.

In the Criminal Courts, more than one-third of accused persons, many of whom face charges for serious offences, were unrepresented during pre-trial stages, as were half the defendants in the Community Court.

The CJC is a joint community partnership between the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Law, the Subordinate Courts, the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation and The Law Society of Singapore to streamline resources for Litigants-in Person (LIPs).

The centre will help to simplify court processes so LIPs will not be disadvantaged in not being able to effectively participate in court proceedings, and end up coming away from a court case “with a sense of grievance that the justice system has ignored them”, said Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong yesterday at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding for the CJC.

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Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong is the patron of the new Community Justice Centre. TODAY FILE PHOTO

Some of these LIPs “are victims of poverty, exacerbated by language barriers and limited means”, added CJ Chan, who is the patron of the centre.

A 2010 study on LIPs had found that 80 per cent of the 600 respondents emphasised the need for more information on court procedures and access to some form of legal advice.

The CJC will also be able to help those needing practical and emotional support.

For instance, volunteers will provide moral support under its Lay Assistance Scheme, and the centre can help out on practical issues such as looking for temporary housing.

The existing Helping to Empower Litigants-in-Person centre at the Subordinate Courts, which provides LIPs with information on court jurisdiction and procedures, court forms and legal applications and referrals to legal clinics and relevant community programmes, will be integrated into the CJC.

The Tan Chin Tuan Foundation will provide seed funding of S\$250,000 annually for the centre for the first three years, and the centre will be manned by volunteers.