

Lawyers work from a container office at free legal centre

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From marital issues to employer disputes and criminal matters, a first-of-its-kind free legal centre in Hougang has already come across a plethora of legal issues in the days before its official opening on Tuesday.

The community law centre at Tian De Temple, run by Pro Bono SG, aims to bring legal assistance to those with mobility and technological difficulties. Pro Bono SG, formerly known as Law Society Pro Bono Services, also provides free legal assistance at its office at the State Courts building in Chinatown.

Two full-time lawyers work from a container office set up in the temple compound.

One of the lawyers, Ms Alice Tan, said a woman who is permanently incapacitated visited the centre with her caregiver on Tuesday morning. “That really brings meaning to this place – that she does not have to travel anywhere, but just walk a couple of blocks and she gets legal advice from us.”

The other lawyer, Ms Goh Qian Hui, said that from her experience, vulnerable individuals with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty navigating beyond their neighbourhood. “Social workers told us they actually needed to go to the individual’s house to physically take them to State Courts in the past, but with the new centre reaching out to people in the heartland, that’s not as necessary.”

Tian De Temple chairman Raymond Wang said the container office can be accessed from the public carpark, so people from all religions can feel comfortable seeking legal help.

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong, who is also Second Minister for Law, said on Tuesday: “This is the hallmark and essence of the CLC (Community Law Centre) – to be located in a place where people don’t feel uncomfortable. You don’t feel out of place, and you’re able to freely walk up to the CLC to ask for assistance. And also, for the first time, there will be full-time lawyers serving the community through the CLCs.”

Mr Tong, who was the guest of honour at the opening, added that this practice will be embedded in the five eventual community law centres in different districts.

The centre will also provide training for volunteer lawyers at Pro Bono SG and conduct law awareness talks for the community. The Singapore University of Social Sciences will support its manpower needs by recommending suitable graduates to be recruited as full-time lawyers and students for internship opportunities.

The Singapore Teo Chew Foundation will donate \$200,000 over two years for the centre’s running costs.

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