

**Speech by the Hon Rimsky Yuen, SC, JP,
Secretary for Justice
at the 2016 Law Society
Pro Bono and Community Service Award Ceremony
on 16 December 2016 (Friday)**

[Chief Justice], Mr Thomas So, Ms Melissa Pang, Fellow Members of the Legal Profession, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join you this evening at the Pro Bono and Community Service Award Ceremony 2016. May I start off by expressing my warmest congratulations to all the lawyers and law firms who have just received awards recognising your commitment and participation in pro bono and community work this year. I am particularly delighted to learn that the numbers of individual awards and law firm awards have hit record-high¹ since the inception of the Pro Bono and Community Work Recognition Programme in 2010. Your achievements are exemplary and inspirational to other members of the legal profession, if not also to other professions.

2. People always talk about the importance of the rule of law. However, the rule of law will be no more than a noble ideal until and unless there is put in place an effective access to justice. And in terms of access to justice, pro bono and community services have become increasingly important whether in Hong Kong or in other parts of the world. An increasing number of lawyers provide their legal services “for the public good” and are responding to shortfalls in access to justice by volunteering their legal services, either as individuals, through their law firms, or through NGOs.

3. In many jurisdictions, including Hong Kong, the primary mechanism for ensuring access to justice has been government-funded legal aid schemes. Our Legal Aid Schemes, however, do not provide legal advice service to members of the public. To complement the Legal Aid Schemes, the Home Affairs Bureau provides subvention for the Duty Lawyer Service, under which volunteer lawyers provide free legal advice to members of the public. At present, there are over 1,000 lawyers participating in the scheme, handling about 6,600 cases a year.

¹ 112 individual awards and 22 law firm awards in 2016.

4. Nevertheless, these mechanisms and systems still leave legitimate needs for legal assistance unmet, and this is where pro bono service may step in. Indeed, pro bono service is more than the provision of free legal advice or representation to those with limited financial means. Pro bono lawyers, for example, may act as advisers to social enterprises to advance worthy causes, or support the work of NGOs so as to serve the under-privileged.

5. Like the legal profession, the Hong Kong SAR Government is keen to promote a pro bono culture in Hong Kong. This year we have taken another step forward as the ***Legal Advice Scheme for Unrepresented Litigants on Civil Procedures*** (formerly known as the Pilot Scheme to Provide Legal Advice for Litigants in Person) has become a regular Government programme starting from 2016-17. It is the latest addition to the list of pro bono programmes organized by the Home Affairs Bureau and is a significant step forward in view of the increasing number of cases involving litigants in persons at different levels of the Court. I would like to take this opportunity to appeal to all of you to participate, whether in your personal capacity or as a member of your law firm, in this meaningful programme as community lawyers.

6. Before I conclude, may I once again congratulate and thank all of the awardees. Whether you have already established a long and proud tradition of offering pro bono services, or have just recently committed yourself to this good cause, I am confident that you will keep up with your good work and inspire more to follow your shining example.

7. On this note, it remains for me to express my gratitude to the Law Society of Hong Kong for its sustained efforts in operating the Pro Bono and Community Work Recognition Programme throughout these years. I hope the Programme will continue in the many more years to come, and that we will see an increasing number of lawyers participating in the Programme year after year. Thank you.