

## **Resolving Community Disputes Seminar**

**23 September 2016**

**Welcome Remarks by**

**Judicial Commissioner See Kee Oon, Presiding Judge of the State Courts**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

1. Good morning and a very warm welcome to the Resolving Community Disputes Seminar 2016, organised by the Community Justice and Tribunals Division (“CJTD”) of the State Courts. We are privileged that you are able to join us today for this inaugural event. I thank all of you for your interest and participation, and we look forward to a fruitful exchange of expertise, experiences, views and ideas.
2. It gives me great pleasure to know that we have with us distinguished speakers and about 300 participants from a wide spectrum of government and community stakeholders along with my fellow judges and court administrators from the State Courts. You are here because you are actively involved, in your own special way, in resolving disputes between members of our community. You bring with you and to this Seminar an impressive array of professional expertise and experience from a wide range of disciplines. We trust that you will participate actively and share your views generously, and through today’s interactions you will help contribute to the continued development of effective policies, legislative and administrative frameworks, methodologies and initiatives in this very important area of our nation’s community life.
3. From the government stakeholders, we have representatives from the Ministry of Law, the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (“MCCY”), the Ministry of Social and Family Development (“MSF”), the Ministry of National Development (“MND”), the Singapore Police Force (“SPF”), the Housing & Development Board (“HDB”), the Town Councils, and the National Environment Agency (“NEA”).
4. From the community stakeholders, we have representatives from the Institute of Mental Health (“IMH”), the Agency for Integrated Care (“AIC”), the Community Justice Centre (“CJC”), the Inter-Religious Organisation (“IRO”), as well as counselling agencies Centre for Psychotherapy, Counselling and Care Centre, We Care Community Services and Silver Ribbon. We also have many volunteer mediators from

the Community Mediation Centre and the State Courts who work hard to help members of our community to resolve their disputes through constructive engagement and dialogue.

5. We are a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-faith and multi-lingual community living in a small and densely-populated island. Each of us goes about our daily lives in a fast-paced and potentially stressful environment. These factors have the potential to stretch and potentially fray the social fabric of our uniquely cosmopolitan society. Whenever groups of people congregate and interact with one another, whether within the family, school, workplace, neighbourhood or any social group, there will occasionally be friction. Much as we may try to avoid them, there may be disagreements and disputes.
6. Disputes may arise because of household practices that infringe on a neighbour's enjoyment of his flat; arguments, silent wars or acts of harassment arising from breakdown of relationships between couples, family members, colleagues, friends and acquaintances; physical or verbal abuse between strangers or known persons; or disputes between customers and businesses over the sale and purchase of goods or services. Each of these disputes, if not resolved thoroughly and effectively, has the potential to cause a rift between the individuals concerned. They can easily escalate in complexity and magnitude, and create bitter discord between groups of persons within the community.
7. Our upbringing, education and life experiences may have taught us to manage differences, resolve disagreements and find compromises, "to live and let live" and to let "大事化小, 小事化无" (*"Let big issues become small issues, and let small issues become non-issues"*). Yet what we know in theory is frequently not so easy to translate into practice. Sometimes, we can do with a little external help, such as friendly reminders, frameworks or road maps to guide us in resolving these disputes.
8. This Seminar coincides roughly with the 1<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the implementation of the Community Disputes Resolution Act ("CDRA") on 1 October 2016 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the implementation of the Protection from Harassment Act ("POHA") on 15 November 2016. Both pieces of legislation are fundamental pillars in Singapore's framework to strengthen social cohesion and defuse tension within the community.

9. CJTD was set up on 24 April 2015 to cultivate expertise amongst a team of court administrators and judges to administer and adjudicate community-related disputes, such as harassment cases under POHA and neighbour dispute cases under CDRA, and also to develop court processes and skills to handle a court-user base made up primarily of litigants-in-person. The court administrators comprise Registry Managers, Case Managers, Pre-Filing Consultants and Interpreters, Counter Officers and Registry Officers, and are supported by an in-house team of Psychologists, Counsellor and Social Worker.
10. The CJTD judges have, between them, a wealth of experience dealing with criminal and civil cases, and have been sharpening their skills in dealing with harassment and neighbour dispute cases. Importantly, each Judge who is appointed to CJTD has a passion for community law, and possesses not only the skills and temperament of a good judicial officer but also the personal attributes of an effective peacemaker. As provided for in the POHA and CDRA frameworks, the Judges play an active role in managing cases and hearings, and frequently employ mediation and counselling as part of pre-trial case management to enable parties to surface, identify, address and resolve any deep-seated emotional issues. They do their best to facilitate discussions between the parties with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable settlement of the dispute and to provide psychological and emotional support to the parties where necessary.
11. Many government and community agencies have been doing much good work over the years to help members of our community resolve their disputes. I am heartened to see many of these agencies represented in this Seminar. You are the unsung heroes who have helped to strengthen the social fabric and to preserve the peace and stability that are a hallmark of our cohesive society.
12. It is this recognition of our inter-connectedness with each of your agencies that we have organised this Seminar, through which we hope to achieve the following objectives. First, to provide a platform for stakeholders across government agencies and community partners to interact and to establish the foundation for collaboration and greater synergy, what we call “Building Bridges”. Second, to reflect on our current strategies in resolving community disputes, with a view to building a shared vision for the future, what we call “Reflection and Visioning”. Third, to deepen our knowledge in some areas of interest which we have identified and which we hope will be of utmost interest and relevance to your individual practice.

13. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to our guest speakers for this Seminar, namely:

Professor Kumaralingam Amirthalingam from the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore, who will speak on **“Interplay between the Community Disputes Resolution Act and the tort of private nuisance in Singapore”**

Associate Professor Goh Yihan from the School of Law, Singapore Management University, who will speak on **“International developments in jurisprudence on Harassment and the management of Harassment cases”**

Dr Jared Ng and Dr Kenji Gwee from the Institute of Mental Health who will speak on **“Psychiatry, psychotherapy and counselling - How these feature in disputes and dispute resolution”**

Representatives from the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore, who will share on **“Neighbour Disputes - Appreciating the religious beliefs and practices of the main religious groups in Singapore”**

**as well as our guest panellists for the Panel Discussion, namely:**

Associate Professor Eugene Tan from the School of Law, Singapore Management University

Ms Lim Chin Chin, Senior Consultant Forensic Scientist of The Forensic Experts Group, Singapore

Ms Chia Poh Ling, Consultant Forensic Scientist of The Forensic Experts Group, Singapore

14. Apart from being enriched by the speaker sessions and panel discussion that we have lined up for you, I am confident that each of you will take away from this Seminar newly-established friendships and contacts, strengthened working relationships, fresh insights, new ideas and renewed vision as you share your thoughts with one another and participate in the discussions. I wish all of you a very fruitful and enriching Seminar. Thank you.