

JUDICIARY VOLUNTEERS APPRECIATION DINNER 2017

THURSDAY, 14 SEPTEMBER 2017

OPENING REMARKS

BY

CHIEF JUSTICE SUNDARESH MENON

1. Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this year's Judiciary Volunteers Appreciation Dinner. This is the second time that the State Courts, the Family Justice Courts and the Supreme Court have come together to recognise and to express our sincere appreciation for the contributions of all our volunteers.
2. At the inaugural Appreciation Dinner that we held last November, I said that the work of our volunteers is crucial to our efforts at making justice truly accessible to the public, especially to those who may not be able to afford legal representation. I ended my remarks on that occasion with the hope that all of us would continue to work towards entrenching a spirit of service.
3. Over the past year we have seen plenty of signs that such a spirit of service is well and truly alive. Volunteer numbers remain encouraging. For example, this year, the State Courts had 170 volunteers, a comparable figure to the 174 it had in 2016. In addition, the introduction of a number of new initiatives has broadened the range of assistance that volunteers can render to litigants. I am given to understand, for example, that the Family Justice Courts has started

hosting public talks given by volunteer lawyers on matters such as divorce processes and procedures with the aim of helping the many that litigants-in-person that access the courts on their own. The first of these was conducted recently on 25 August 2017.

4. On our part, the Supreme Court established a satellite office of the Community Justice Centre in 2016 to provide support and assistance to those facing bankruptcy proceedings. The office is manned by volunteer lawyers who provide legal advice to unrepresented litigants. But equally they are in turn supported by volunteers from all walks of life who act as “Friends” to the litigants, offering emotional and practical support which is crucial to anyone faced with the prospect of bankruptcy.
5. Let me say how heartening it is to see these new initiatives take root. At the same time, it reminds us that more can be done, and I hope that in time, more such initiatives will be rolled out so as to ensure that assistance is always available where it is needed.
6. I want to say today that your work as volunteers matters at every stage of the legal process. Some of you man help desks and help explain the workings of our courts – you are thus the first point of contact between the court and a litigant-in-person; some of you act as lawyers or counsellors to assist those who cannot afford it to have the benefit of your help in their cases; and some of you help as mediators. Regardless of the particular role that you play, your efforts

are vital in helping us to facilitate access to justice. Let me therefore express, on behalf of all my colleagues throughout the judiciary, my deepest appreciation to all of you present today for having generously given your time in service of a greater cause. I also wish to thank all those who have supported and encouraged our volunteers behind the scenes.

7. Looking ahead, let me mention three broad areas we can focus on to strengthen the spirit of service.

8. First, we should ensure that information about volunteering opportunities is readily available. In this regard, I announced at the State Courts Workplan earlier this year that a Court Volunteers Portal would be established. This was launched earlier today. It will ensure that relevant information is made available to volunteers in a timely way. Beyond that, it will also contain an archive of past events, thus allowing us to preserve a record of the efforts of our volunteers. We hope this will foster a greater sense of community among all our volunteers. Once this is fully operational, I anticipate the other courts will look into adopting such a portal for their use as well.

9. Second, we should ensure that volunteers receive the necessary training to serve the public. This is perhaps most crucial for those who volunteer as mediators. I know the Family Justice Courts regularly holds training sessions for volunteer mediators. So does the State Courts' Centre for Dispute

Resolution, which just held a training session for volunteer mediators today. We should continue to expand our efforts in this respect.

10. Third, we should encourage people to start volunteering as early as possible.

In the Mass Call speech I delivered about two weeks ago, I stressed that a spirit of public service is important to a lawyer, and encouraged the new entrants to the legal profession to seek out opportunities to involve themselves in public service. I am therefore glad to note that a good proportion of our volunteers are in fact law students. In line with this, it is fitting that, this year, we are adding a Student Category for the Outstanding Court Volunteer Awards that we are presenting this evening.

11. Finally, I congratulate all our award winners and wish all of you a wonderful evening. Thank you once again for all your support!