

# New coalition to help migrant workers here seek legal aid

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**Dominic Low**

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Migrant worker John Britto was terrified when he received a lawyer's letter asserting that he had failed as a supervisor in taking care of a colleague who had suffered an injury at work.

Fortunately, the 37-year-old Indian national sought advice from non-governmental organisation Migrant Workers' Centre, which told him he was not at fault over the incident.

The claim in the letter, sent in 2019, was eventually withdrawn, he told *The Straits Times*.

Migrant workers in Singapore like Mr Britto may now be in a better position to seek help, with the launch of the Migrant Workers' Group (MWG) on Saturday.

A coalition of about 20 organisations and the Law Society Pro Bono Services (LSPBS), the MWG aims to foster greater collaboration between organisations in enhancing legal awareness and access to justice for the migrant worker community in Singapore.

The coalition will allow the LSPBS, which is the Law Society's pro bono arm, and other organisations to coordinate efforts in pro-

viding legal aid for workers.

Organisations in the coalition include law firms Allen & Gledhill and Lee Shergill LLP, non-governmental organisations Project X and the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, and the National University of Singapore.

It was originally slated to be launched in the fourth quarter of 2019, but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

LSPBS chairman Gregory Vijayendran told ST on Saturday, before the launch, that the coalition members meet quarterly, sharing ideas and best practices on issues relating to Singapore's migrant worker community.

With the MWG, there will be an increased focus on giving talks for migrant workers in languages they are conversant in – to educate and inform them of their legal rights.

The LSPBS, a registered charity, will also continue to provide pro bono or subsidised legal representation to those in need through its various existing schemes.

In his speech at Saturday's launch, Mr Vijayendran noted that the difficulties in pursuing legal action here are compounded for migrant workers, given the unequal bargaining power with their employers and practical legal obsta-

cles such as language barriers.

"In addition, when migrant workers become embroiled in disputes with their employers, psychologically there would be a natural fear of losing their jobs, forced repatriation, and loss of income while claim proceedings are ongoing," he added.

Mr Vijayendran invited migrant worker organisations to refer workers needing legal help to the charity's specialised consultation clinics.

"We will also be working closely with our migrant worker organisation partners to afford a suite of complementary services such as psychosocial and other forms of support to the target demographic," the Law Society president said.

Senior Minister of State for Defence and Manpower Zaqy Mohamad, who attended Saturday's event, said the Ministry of Manpower will continue to educate migrant workers on their rights and responsibilities.

"We will also leverage technology to better detect and address well-being issues, such as our use of the FWMOMCare mobile app to seek direct feedback from workers on salary issues," he said.

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[domlow@sph.com.sg](mailto:domlow@sph.com.sg)