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OPENING SESSION OF THE TENTH TRAINING COURSE  
FOR VOLUNTEER PROBATION OFFICERS HELD AT  
CONFERENCE ROOM A, MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS  
BUILDING, PEARL'S HILL, SINGAPORE ON WEDNESDAY,  
2 FEBRUARY 77 AT 5.30 PM - WELCOMING ADDRESS  
BY MR LEOW JWEE MENG, CHAIRMAN, PANEL OF  
ADVISERS TO THE MAGISTRATE, JUVENILE COURT

I consider it a great privilege to be called upon to render the welcoming address to you this evening. I am impressed by the expressed aim of this ceremony and I hope it will lead to greater public enthusiasm and participation in the Community Probation Service.

2 Progress in every human endeavour is only achieved through the efforts of individuals and organisations that are willing to try out new ideas and methods and courageous enough to put them into practice, even in the face of sceptics. Because of the general element of security in all correctional systems, probation and aftercare elsewhere have a tendency to become rigid. The systems are considered immutable. To rely on stereotyped systems and services uncritically can often lead to stagnation.

3 I am happy to note that the Probation and Aftercare Service of the Ministry of Social Affairs has in the last few years, made impressive efforts to try out imaginative innovations in order to strengthen its usefulness to the rehabilitation of offenders and drug addicts. And one of such programmes, is the Community Probation Service.

4           I have been closely associated with its development since it was launched in 1971. I recall that the programme started off with ten volunteer probation officers. Today, after five years, I gather it has rapidly grown to 232. And, from their limited function as 'welfare-aides' to the fulltime probation officers, volunteer probation officers are now working side by side with full-time probation officers, assuming sole statutory responsibility for offenders who are placed under their personal care and supervision.

5           The Juvenile Court is often considered as the focal point for the treatment of juvenile offenders. While this may be true, the Juvenile Court alone cannot solve the problems and needs of those placed on probation. These can only be solved through a bond of confidence and trust among the offender, his family and his probation officer. We are fortunate in having a fine set of full-time probation officers, but heavy caseloads have long placed an onerous task on them. As caseloads increase, supervision and personal attention in probation invariably diminishes. Creating a human relationship through which problems can be discussed and alleviated takes time and effort. It cannot be achieved on a perfunctory or occasional basis.

6           I am glad that you have come forward as those before you to provide the necessary time and concern in supplementing the work of full-time probation officers. It is this contribution that will make your volunteer services extremely precious. I am confident that you will find a sense of fulfillment in your ability to help a fellow citizen in distress.

7 I am a volunteer myself. I volunteer my services to the Panel of Advisers to the Magistrate, Juvenile Court. While you, after your successful training, will undertake the day-to-day management of offenders under your care and supervision, my function is to inform and advise the court with respect to any consideration affecting the treatment of juveniles brought before it. I do not pretend, merely by virtue of the office I hold now, to be an expert on crime and delinquency, but I do think that the experience from about ten years as an adviser to the court, qualifies me to make some observations on the treatment of juvenile offenders.

8 The Panel has been for sometime perturbed at young children under 14 years of age being charged in the Juvenile Court for very minor offences. It would appear that the offences of these children are a manifestation of behavioural problems stemming from lack of parental control, care and supervision rather than an expression of deep-rooted criminal tendencies. I would have felt that such children could have been dealt with at the police level with a warning to them and their parents. This may be sufficient to make them realise the implications of their behaviour. If there is a slightest doubt that such children required specialised treatment, the police could refer them to appropriate social service agencies. I think it would be more beneficial to our society in the long run, if such children are unofficially dealt with outside the ambit of the Juvenile Court. It avoids the labelling of them as delinquents in the eyes of their families, schools and peers and therefore facilitates their rehabilitation and reintegration in the community.

9        On the other hand, there are young persons between the ages of 14 and 16 years, who commit fairly serious and violent offences or whose social backgrounds indicate that they are beyond the control of their parents. Some of these youthful offenders often think that they were getting away without punishment for their offences by virtue of their youthful age. Such persons and those who had not taken advantage of probation and in particular, a stay in an approved school, would benefit more with a stricter regime in the Young Offenders Section of the Reformative Training Centre. Seven youthful offenders were committed to the Young Offenders Section last year. The Panel of Advisers will not hesitate to recommend to the Magistrate, Juvenile Court, a greater use of committals to the Young Offenders Section, if young persons think that they can get away easily with committing serious and violent offences and taking lightly probation or approved school treatment.

10       I wish you every success in the volunteer career you have chosen.