

Bar Council's move to help the poor

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. — A Legal Aid Centre (LAC) which will "not compete" with the Government's Legal Aid Bureau will be set up by the Bar Council next month to provide free legal aid to the poor.

Basically, it will provide full legal aid to anyone with at least two dependants, with an income of below \$591, and having disposable income (car, shares, etc) of less than \$3,500.

The centre, which will start operations here on Aug. 2, will provide services in the following areas:

- Family Law matters (maintenance, custody, divorce, juveniles);
- Industrial accidents;
- Employment;
- Tenancy matters and housing;
- Detentions under Internal Security Act, Preservation of Public Order Ordinance, and Prevention of Crimes Ordinance;

● Consumer problems; and

● Criminal cases.

The LAC will not handle any commercial and conveyancing work or motor accident cases.

Bar Council president Siva Subramaniam said today initially, the LAC will be based only in Kuala Lumpur, "but if it proves functional, centres will be set up in other States.

Manpower

"But we will accept outstation cases," he said.

He said 68 lawyers, of whom 22 are from outstation, have volunteered their services for this pilot project.

Explaining the need for a LAC, he said the Government Legal Aid Bureau suffers from shortage of manpower and finance, even more so now in the present economic slowdown.

"Further, the means

test of the Government Legal Aid Bureau is very stringent and only the very poor can qualify for free legal aid.

"The Bar Council's LAC will provide free legal aid to those who cannot qualify for free legal aid from the Government," he said.

The means test used by the Legal Aid Bureau, he said, are "outdated" and hence "unrealistic".

"It does not make any allowance for the fact that although there has been a general increase in wage levels, there has been a corresponding or even greater increase in the cost of living.

"Hence the real income level of a vast majority of the population has dropped," he said.

He said a legal aid sub-committee of the Bar Council will oversee the implementation of the project.

Besides volunteer lawyers from the Malaysian Bar, law students of the University of Malaya Law Faculty and Mara College will be seconded to assist in the management and administration of the LAC.