

**RESPONSE TO JOINT QUESTIONNAIRE BY  
SPECIAL PROCEDURE MANDATE HOLDERS (SINGAPORE)**

**Introduction**

*“Today, I want to speak to you directly, to explain where we are, and what may lie ahead... The real test is to our social cohesion and psychological resilience... Let us stay united and resolute... Take sensible precautions, help one another, stay calm, and carry on with our lives.”* – Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at his first nationwide address on COVID-19, 8 February 2020

1. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Singapore Government has taken human-centred social and economic measures to ensure that the health, livelihoods and human rights of all our citizens and residents are adequately protected. This document provides an overview of the policies that the Singapore Government has put in place to ensure that no one in our population is left behind in the fight against COVID-19.
2. The key milestones of Singapore’s fight against COVID-19, which lend context to the measures detailed below, are as follows:
  - (i) From January 2020 to 6 April 2020: As cases of local transmission emerged, Singapore implemented travel restrictions and safe distancing measures.
  - (ii) From 7 April to 1 June 2020: Singapore entered the “Circuit Breaker” period, which was approximately two months of enhanced safe distancing measures to slow local transmission of COVID-19. Schools were closed and moved to Home-Based Learning (HBL), and physical workplace premises were also closed, save for those providing essential services and those in critical economic sectors.
  - (iii) From 2 to 18 June 2020: Singapore moved to Phase One of the post-“Circuit Breaker” period (“Safe Re-Opening”), with gradual re-opening of economic activities that did not pose a high risk of transmission, while social, economic and entertainment activities with a higher risk of transmission remained closed.
  - (iv) From 19 June to Present: Singapore is in Phase Two of the post- “Circuit Breaker” period (“Safe Transition”), with more activities such as in-restaurant dining, use of public sports facilities, and retail services resuming. The economy will progressively re-open, subject to safe management measures being in place.

- (v) The third and final stage of Singapore’s phased reopening (“Safe Nation”) where there will be a “new normal” with the resumption of social, cultural, religious and business gatherings and events. This Phase is envisioned to last until an effective vaccine or treatment is developed.

### Protection of Vulnerable Groups

3. Under Singapore’s social compact, the Government ensures access to health services, affordable basic services, creates opportunities for growth, and provides institutional support for individuals and their families. Focussing on low-income and vulnerable residents particularly Singaporeans, the Government has put in place social safety nets to provide help where family and community support is inadequate.

### *Lower to Middle Income Families*

4. Cognisant of the impact on jobs and job security during the “Circuit Breaker” period, the Government stepped up measures to keep enterprises afloat and preserve jobs. These assistance schemes include:
- (i) the **Jobs Support Scheme**,<sup>1</sup> which co-funds between 25 – 75% of the first S\$4,600 of gross monthly wages paid to local employees for a 10-month period;<sup>2</sup>
  - (ii) the **Temporary Relief Fund**<sup>3</sup> which provided immediate financial help with basic living expenses in April 2020 for lower to middle-income Singaporeans who were retrenched or suffered substantial loss of personal income;
  - (iii) the **COVID-19 Support Grant** for citizens and permanent residents who involuntarily lost their jobs, were placed on involuntary No-Pay-Leave or are experiencing at least 30% loss of monthly salary;

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.iras.gov.sg/irashome/Schemes/Businesses/Jobs-Support-Scheme--JSS-/](http://www.iras.gov.sg/irashome/Schemes/Businesses/Jobs-Support-Scheme--JSS-/).

<sup>2</sup> To support the arts and culture sector, the Government set aside S\$55 million for an Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP) ([www.nac.gov.sg](http://www.nac.gov.sg)) to protect the arts ecosystem, provide support and opportunities for arts organisations and artists, as well as develop longer-term capabilities for the post COVID-19 recovery period. Under the Job Support Scheme, the Government co-funds at least 50% of the first S\$4,600 of gross monthly wages paid to each local employee in the arts and culture sector through cash subsidies.

<sup>3</sup> Detailed information on the schemes at (ii) to (iv) can be found at [www.gov.sg/article/financial-support-to-help-Singaporeans-affected-by-covid-19](http://www.gov.sg/article/financial-support-to-help-Singaporeans-affected-by-covid-19) and [www.msf.gov.sg/assistance/Pages/covid19relief.aspx](http://www.msf.gov.sg/assistance/Pages/covid19relief.aspx)

- (iv) the **Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme**<sup>4</sup> to assist self-employed Singaporeans with less means and family support to tide over this period of extraordinary economic uncertainty; and
  - (v) a six-month extension of assistance in **ComCare**,<sup>5</sup> Singapore’s national social assistance scheme.
5. The above schemes are accompanied by financial transfers to every Singaporean, including a one-off cash pay-out from the **Care and Support package, Solidarity Payment**, and the **Solidarity Utilities Credit**.<sup>6</sup>

### *Victims of Domestic Violence*

6. To support those at risk of domestic violence during the “Circuit Breaker” period, social services and legal recourse remained available, through the Family Violence Specialist Centres, Family Service Centres, and Crisis Shelters, and via video-link applications for Personal Protection Orders with the Family Justice Courts.<sup>7</sup> In tandem with this, the Singapore Police Force (“Police”) enhanced its responses to domestic violence cases by proactively assessing and referring victims at risk of further violence to social service agencies, contacting victims to find out if they required further assistance, and referring offenders to social workers who would assess whether social intervention was required to break the offending cycle.<sup>8</sup>

### *Persons with Disabilities*

7. While stringent measures are in place to ensure safe distancing measures are complied with, there is operational flexibility in the enforcement of the compulsory wearing of face masks for persons with disabilities and special needs. If assistance is required, the Police refers persons with disabilities to specialised agencies, like Agency for Integrated Care (AIC).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.ntuc.com.sg/sirs](http://www.ntuc.com.sg/sirs)

<sup>5</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.msf.gov.sg/Comcare/Pages/Public-Assistance.aspx](http://www.msf.gov.sg/Comcare/Pages/Public-Assistance.aspx)

<sup>6</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget\\_2020/budget-measures/](http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget_2020/budget-measures/)

<sup>7</sup> Options for advice and assistance on family violence are available at [www.msf.gov.sg/policies/Strong-and-Stable-Families/Supporting-Families/Family-Violence/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.msf.gov.sg/policies/Strong-and-Stable-Families/Supporting-Families/Family-Violence/Pages/default.aspx)

<sup>8</sup> Additional information is available at: [www.police.gov.sg/Media-Room/News/20200514\\_OTHERS\\_Enhancing\\_Police\\_Response\\_To\\_Combat\\_Family\\_Violence](http://www.police.gov.sg/Media-Room/News/20200514_OTHERS_Enhancing_Police_Response_To_Combat_Family_Violence)

<sup>9</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.aic.sg](http://www.aic.sg)

## *Older Persons*

8. The Government recognises that older persons are at higher risk of developing serious health complications if infected with COVID-19. Measures have been implemented to safeguard the well-being of our elderly residents whether at home, or at senior residential care homes (“Care Homes”).<sup>10</sup> Older persons are advised to stay at home as much as possible and are encouraged to use online alternatives for essential services, such as tele-health, digital transactions, and food deliveries. The Silver Generation Office (SGO) under the AIC provides support to about 47,000 vulnerable senior citizens, by monitoring their well-being and helping them run simple errands. As social isolation is the unfortunate by-product of safe distancing, the SGO also refers senior citizens to relevant support services, including befriending services for those who need a listening ear.
9. The Government carries out active testing for COVID-19 for the especially vulnerable and frail members of the elderly population, especially those in Care Homes. This ensures that any infections are detected as early as possible for treatment and to limit further transmission.

## *Migrant Workers*

10. The Government’s priority has been to ensure that migrant workers remain safe and that the number of infected workers, severe cases and COVID-19-related deaths are kept to a minimum. Any migrant worker tested positive is given the same medical care extended to Singaporeans, with costs covered by the Government. Most have had mild symptoms and are on the path to recovery. The Government has worked to ensure that the livelihoods of migrant workers are protected, and that they continue to be paid their salaries. At the beginning of the “Circuit Breaker” period, an Inter-Agency Task Force (ITF) was set up as part of a whole-of-government response to provide comprehensive support for migrant workers in three phases.
11. **Phase One** of the ITF’s work was completed within the first week, by providing for the immediate needs of migrant workers that reside in 43 Purpose-Built Dormitories (PBDs). An effective safe distancing regime was established where educational materials were provided to workers and their employers, basic conditions were improved, and meals and care packs were provided to the workers:
  - (i) **Provision of Meals/Goods:** The ITF ensured that meal runs were organised for Muslim residents observing Ramadan. To date, over 10 million meals have been served. Residents can also purchase items from the dormitory mini-marts through online orders and delivery of goods.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/support-measures-for-seniors-during-COVID-19](http://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/support-measures-for-seniors-during-COVID-19) and [www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/post-circuit-breaker-measures-for-seniors](http://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/post-circuit-breaker-measures-for-seniors)

More than 410,000 care packs containing daily essentials such as thermometers, hand sanitisers and masks have also been distributed.

- (ii) **Connectivity Services:** WIFI access is available across all dormitories and more than 300,000 data SIM cards have been distributed to workers. More than 300 free movie channels are also available.
  - (iii) **Payment of Salaries and Remittances:** The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has engaged employers to ensure that workers are paid their salaries punctually and mandated that this be done electronically as dormitories had been gazetted as isolation areas. Migrant worker levies for employers have been waived and levy rebates have been provided, which will enable employers to retain workers in their employment where necessary. For employers facing financial difficulties, the Migrant Workers' Assistance Fund stepped in to provide relief.<sup>11</sup> To ensure migrant workers at all dormitories have access to remit money back to their families, MOM works closely with banks and remittance agents to set up temporary manned remittance booths, deploy self-service kiosks, and provide guidance on using e-remittance in the migrant workers' native languages.
12. **Phase Two** of the ITF's work involved the provision of strong medical support for dormitory residents, with forward deployed medical teams and improved access to medical services, including the use of telemedicine. For PBDs housing around 200,000 workers, medical facilities were set up on-site to ensure that unwell workers or those displaying symptoms of acute respiratory infections could receive appropriate and timely medical treatment. Additional medical posts were set up at Factory-Converted Dormitories housing around 65,000 workers.
13. **Phase Three** of the ITF's work is ongoing, and involves housing recovered workers in suitable accommodation and minimising the risks of recurring transmissions. The ITF has stepped up care for workers in the most affected dormitories by setting up onsite Community Care Facilities (CCFs) to house COVID-19-positive patients who are clinically well or display mild symptoms. Patients are moved to the CCFs almost immediately after diagnosis, instead of waiting to be transferred to an off-site medical facility. Once patients are no longer infectious, they are transferred out of the CCFs to onsite Community Recovery Facilities (CRFs) which ensure safe recovery within the dormitories. The Singapore Government will implement a programme to build additional dormitories over the coming months to reduce the current density of existing dormitories.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.mwc.org.sg/wps/portal/mwc/home/getinvolved/donate/](http://www.mwc.org.sg/wps/portal/mwc/home/getinvolved/donate/)

## *Workers in the Food Industry*

14. Workers employed in the food industry are particularly vulnerable and need to be protected from COVID-19, as they perform an essential service in ensuring that food can continue to be produced and supplied to support Singapore's daily needs. The Government has therefore provided guidance to operators of food establishments on good practices in food hygiene, sanitation and personal hygiene, and implementation of safe distancing measures to minimise the transmission of COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> Fishery ports, wholesale centres, slaughterhouses and markets remain open, and safe distancing measures have been similarly put in place to protect personnel and patrons.
15. With the intention of encouraging the public to minimise visits to crowded areas during the outbreak, the Government facilitated the supply of food to consumers by facilitating interim business models. Special temporary licenses were issued to food establishments to allow the sale of shelf-stable food via food trucks in the neighbourhoods. Social agencies also facilitated the delivery of groceries and meals to more vulnerable persons. The Government also provided regular and timely updates to maintain public confidence in our food security strategies and discourage hoarding behaviour.

## Economic Measures

### *Temporary Relief from Legal Obligations, Insolvency and Bankruptcy*

16. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented economic impact. Supply chain disruptions and manpower shortages, among others, have undermined the ability of individuals and businesses to fulfil contractual obligations and rendered them vulnerable to actions for damages and the forfeiture of deposits. Otherwise stable businesses may now face insolvency. As a complement to the Resilience Budget (see section below), the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act seeks to address and limit these negative economic consequences. **Part 2** of the Act provides temporary relief from stipulated types of legal action for the inability to perform certain contracts that were entered into before 25 March 2020 and where the contractual obligations are to be performed on or after 1 February 2020. Relief applies where a party's inability to perform a contract is, to a material extent, caused by a COVID-19 event. The period of relief will be for six months in the first instance, from 20 April 2020 to 19 October 2020, but may be extended by a further six months. Contracts covered under Part 2 include:
  - (i) Leases and licenses for non-residential property;
  - (ii) Construction and supply contracts;

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<sup>12</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.sfa.gov.sg/covid-19/](http://www.sfa.gov.sg/covid-19/)

- (iii) Event and tourism-related contracts;
  - (iv) Certain secured loan facilities granted by banks and finance companies to Small & Medium Enterprises (SMEs);
  - (v) Hire-purchase and conditional sales agreement for plant or machinery used for commercial purposes or commercial vehicles; and
  - (vi) Options to purchase granted by housing developers, and sale and purchase agreements between housing developers and purchasers, for residential property.
17. On 5 June 2020, Singapore’s Parliament passed a Bill to amend the Act<sup>13</sup> (“the Amendment Bill”), introducing additional legal safeguards to cushion the impact of the accumulated payments at the end of the prescribed period for prescribed contracts covered by the Act, by providing that late payment interest or charges under such contracts will be capped at a prescribed rate. A Panel for Assessors for COVID-19 Temporary Relief (PACT) has also been appointed to resolve disputes arising from application of the Act.<sup>14</sup> **Part 3** of the Act temporarily increases thresholds and time limits for bankruptcy and insolvency for financially distressed individuals and businesses by increasing the monetary threshold for bankruptcy and corporate insolvency to S\$60,000 and S\$100,000 respectively. The Act also lengthens the statutory period for parties to respond to demands from creditors and temporarily relieves directors of their obligations to prevent their companies from trading while insolvent, if the debts are incurred in the company’s ordinary course of business.

### *Rental Relief*

18. As SMEs and non-profit organisations (NPOs) see a significant reduction in their revenues and takings as a result of COVID-19, they require additional and immediate relief from their rental obligations during the “Circuit Breaker” period. Under the Amendment Bill passed on 5 June 2020, a legislative framework for the fair and equitable handling of rental obligations was introduced. The Amendment Bill introduced mandatory rental waivers for SME and NPO tenants and sub-tenants, requires landlords to provide additional rental waivers for eligible SME and NPO tenants who are substantially impacted by COVID-19 and gives eligible SME and NPO tenants the ability to defer payment of rental arrears that have accrued during the prescribed period in accordance with a statutory repayment schedule, with interest capped at a prescribed rate.

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<sup>13</sup> [www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/covid-19-\(temporary-measures\)-\(amendment\)-bill-28-2020.pdf](http://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/covid-19-(temporary-measures)-(amendment)-bill-28-2020.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/press-releases/2020-04-20-covid-19-temporary-measures-act-provisions-relating-to-temporary-reliefs-to-commence-on-20-April-2020](http://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/press-releases/2020-04-20-covid-19-temporary-measures-act-provisions-relating-to-temporary-reliefs-to-commence-on-20-April-2020)



## *Tax Reform*

19. During this period of uncertainty, the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS), as tax administrator, continues to extend assistance to taxpayers who may need help. Among others, income tax payments for self-employed individuals from May to June 2020 have automatically been deferred for three months, while taxpayers facing financial difficulties may apply for a longer tax payment plan online.<sup>15</sup>

## *Supply Chain Resilience & Access to Food*

20. Singapore imports more than 90% of our food from more than 170 countries and regions, making supply chain resilience a cornerstone of our COVID-19 response. While our diversified range of sources has helped to minimise the impact of disruptions on international supply chains, there are still challenges given the drop in overall freight frequency (via sea and air).
21. To this end, Singapore launched a Joint Ministerial Statement (JMS) with Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nauru, New Zealand, Uruguay, and the UAE that affirmed our commitment to supply chain connectivity amidst the COVID-19 situation. Singapore and New Zealand also set out a Declaration on Trade in Essential Foods for Combatting the COVID-19 Pandemic. This Declaration commits both Singapore and New Zealand, amongst other things, to expedite the release of essential goods, including medical, pharmaceutical, agriculture and food products, upon arrival. These efforts contribute to supply chain connectivity and a continued supply of food for Singapore and the world.
22. The COVID-19 situation also underscored the importance of local food production which can serve as a buffer during supply disruptions. To further strengthen food security, the Government has sought to further diversify our food import sources, stockpile key food items, and expedite efforts to ramp up local food production. The Government has also been investing in R&D to raise agriculture productivity in Singapore.

## Social Support

### *Mental and Physical Health*

23. To support the emotional and psychological welfare of all Singaporeans who may be susceptible to additional stress during the pandemic, the Government has

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<sup>15</sup> Additional information is available at [www.iras.gov.sg/irashome/COVID-19-Support-Measures-and-Tax-Guidance/Support-Measures/Resilience-Budget--Solidarity-Budget-and-Fortitude-Budget/](http://www.iras.gov.sg/irashome/COVID-19-Support-Measures-and-Tax-Guidance/Support-Measures/Resilience-Budget--Solidarity-Budget-and-Fortitude-Budget/)



implemented a 24/7 National CARE Hotline to provide emotional support.<sup>16</sup> Individuals who require further assistance will be referred to appropriate agencies for follow-up. Healthcare institutions and social service agencies in Singapore have also maintained the provision of essential mental health support and services with precautionary measures such as remote service delivery where it is possible and within safe distancing measures.

24. Arts and culture lift our spirits in these difficult times and sustain our emotional well-being. To ensure Singaporeans have access to the arts and culture during COVID-19, the Government is promoting digitalisation of the arts and culture through the Digitalisation Fund.<sup>17</sup> This includes a Digital Presentation Grant for the Arts (DPG) which supports efforts by arts and culture groups and practitioners, including the self-employed and arts educators, to present their work in digital form during COVID-19. The grant has created work opportunities for arts practitioners, developed industry capabilities in producing digital arts content, and supported continued access to arts and culture for Singaporeans during COVID-19. The Fund also supports commissioned works and partnerships such as the digital presentation of key festivals and events like the Singapore Heritage Festival and Singapore Art Week. Museum exhibitions and collections have also been made accessible through virtual platforms.
25. During the “Circuit Breaker” period, public and private sports facilities were closed to minimise the transmission of COVID-19. Nevertheless, residents could exercise in the open, albeit with safety measures in place, such as running alone, observing safe distancing, and putting on a mask after exercising. The national sports agency, Sport Singapore, concurrently launched ActiveSG Circle,<sup>18</sup> a virtual platform that connects private fitness instructors and freelancers with its 1.6 million subscribers, for virtual workout sessions.

## Education

26. During the pandemic, the Government remains committed to providing children with a well-rounded education. Our education system has additional provisions for vulnerable students, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and disabilities, and those from disadvantaged families.
27. Singapore implemented full HBL for all schools during the “Circuit Breaker” as part of our efforts to enhance safe distancing measures. Students who faced uncondusive environments at home for HBL or had parents who were essential

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<sup>16</sup> For more information, see [www.gov.sg/article/call-these-helplines-if-you-need-emotional-or-psychological-support](http://www.gov.sg/article/call-these-helplines-if-you-need-emotional-or-psychological-support)

<sup>17</sup> For more information, see [www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/press-statements/2020/apr/\\$55-million-arts-culture-resilience-package](http://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/press-statements/2020/apr/$55-million-arts-culture-resilience-package) and [www.a-list.com.sg](http://www.a-list.com.sg).

<sup>18</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.circle.myactivesg.com/landing](http://www.circle.myactivesg.com/landing)

workers and unable to make alternative care arrangements were allowed to continue learning in school, under the supervision of their teachers.

28. To support students' well-being, teachers checked in on students regularly and referred them to school counsellors when necessary. Schools also loaned out computing devices and internet dongles to students who required them for HBL but did not have access to these devices. For primary and secondary school students on the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS), meal subsidises were extended regardless of whether they returned to school during the full HBL period. From 2 June 2020, most mainstream students adopted a blended learning approach, rotating between weekly HBL and returning to school for lessons, for a period.<sup>19</sup>
29. Special arrangements were made to support students in Special Education (SPED) schools. While SPED schools also implemented full HBL, caregivers received daily check-ins from school personnel. This was done in tandem with the provision of allied health services implemented on a systematic and incremental basis, to address the clinical needs of students with SEN and disabilities during the "Circuit Breaker" period. All SPED school students returned to school from 8 June 2020, as these students benefit more from face-to-face interactions with teachers and are less able to access HBL independently. Regardless, all schools have put in place enhanced safe management measures.

### Access to Justice

30. The Ministry of Law and its partners continue to provide legal assistance during the pandemic, through existing measures such as the Legal Aid Bureau<sup>20</sup>, the Law Society Pro Bono Services<sup>21</sup> and Community Legal Clinics<sup>22</sup>. Services are delivered remotely via video conferencing, email or telephone, where possible. The public can also access various online tools that provide useful legal information understandable to the layman.<sup>23</sup>
31. The Judiciary has also taken steps to ensure that court services and hearings remain largely available and uninterrupted while reducing person-to-person contact. In that regard, it is assisted by Part 5 of the COVID-19 (Temporary

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<sup>19</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/arrangements-for-schools-and-institutes-of-higher-learning-at-the-end-of-circuit-breaker](http://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/arrangements-for-schools-and-institutes-of-higher-learning-at-the-end-of-circuit-breaker) and [www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/arrangements-for-schools-and-institutes-of-higher-learning-in-phase-two](http://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/arrangements-for-schools-and-institutes-of-higher-learning-in-phase-two)

<sup>20</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.lab.mlaw.gov.sg](http://www.lab.mlaw.gov.sg)

<sup>21</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.lawsocprobono.org/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.lawsocprobono.org/Pages/default.aspx)

<sup>22</sup> A list of legal clinics is available at [www.legalclinics.sg](http://www.legalclinics.sg).

<sup>23</sup> One such resource is the "Know the Law" handbook, which is accessible at [www.lawsocprobono.org/Documents/Know%20the%20Law%20NOW-FINAL.pdf](http://www.lawsocprobono.org/Documents/Know%20the%20Law%20NOW-FINAL.pdf).

Measures) Act<sup>24</sup>, passed by Parliament on 7 April 2020 upon the commencement of the “Circuit Breaker” period. Among other matters, the Act temporarily facilitates the wider use of remote communication technology in court proceedings by allowing (i) judges to hear cases remotely; (ii) accused persons to make an appearance or give evidence remotely; and (iii) witnesses/experts in Singapore or elsewhere to give evidence remotely. The expanded use of remote communication technology in court proceedings is also subject to conditions specified under the Act, in order to ensure the propriety and fairness of the proceedings. These include the giving of evidence only via live video or live television link, while accused persons may only appear or give evidence remotely from a place within a court or a prison in Singapore.

32. During the “Circuit Breaker” period, all matters scheduled for hearing were adjourned to a date to be fixed, unless the matter was assessed to be essential and urgent<sup>25</sup>. Such matters were then heard via remote communication technology. Despite movement restrictions, the Family Justice Courts were able to hear about a third of their caseload (more than 2,400 cases), which was facilitated by the setting up of “Zoom rooms” in two locations for the use of unrepresented litigants.
33. Hearings for most cases resumed during Phases One and Two of the post-“Circuit Breaker” period, through the use of video and teleconferencing and the implementation of safe distancing and other appropriate measures for hearings involving physical attendance. The Supreme Court did not enter its usual recess in June 2020 to facilitate the disposal of matters that have accumulated. The State Courts and the Family Justice Courts likewise continued to hear matters in June 2020.

### Transparency of Communication

34. In the era of fake news, Singapore’s response to COVID-19 has been based on complete transparency. Through the Gov.sg WhatsApp account, the Government issued daily updates in four languages – on our knowledge of the virus, new cases, latest Government measures, and the actions that individuals should take at various stages of the “Circuit Breaker” and post- “Circuit Breaker” phases.<sup>26</sup>
35. Information is available through multiple reliable channels, including free-to-air television and radio, newspapers, government websites, social media, digital display panels in public housing estates, and social media applications such as

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<sup>24</sup> A copy of the Act is available at [www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/covid-19-\(temporary-measures\)-bill-19-2020.pdf](http://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/covid-19-(temporary-measures)-bill-19-2020.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.supremecourt.gov.sg/news/media-releases/supreme-court--state-courts-and-family-justice-courts-to-hear-only-essential-and-urgent-matters-from-7-april-to-4-may-2020](http://www.supremecourt.gov.sg/news/media-releases/supreme-court--state-courts-and-family-justice-courts-to-hear-only-essential-and-urgent-matters-from-7-april-to-4-may-2020). The list of essential and urgent matters are set out in **Schedule 1** of the Registrar’s Circular No. 4 of 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Please refer to [www.gov.sg/article/govsg-on-whatsapp](http://www.gov.sg/article/govsg-on-whatsapp). The platform currently has over one million subscribers.

WhatsApp and Telegram. Recognising that people with disabilities may need additional support, content on free-to-air television is made accessible to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community by introducing sign language interpretation for live telecasts of key public broadcasts (e.g. key Government announcements related to COVID-19). This is in addition to the ongoing practice of providing subtitles for non-live programmes.

### Improving Digital Literacy

36. The pandemic has also brought to the fore the importance of having a digitally inclusive system, at a time when many have had to adapt to learning, working, interacting and transacting online. The Infocomm Media Development Authority's (IMDA) Home Access (HA) and NEU PC Plus (NPP) programmes subsidise Internet connectivity and one digital device for every low-income household.<sup>27</sup> Given the rapid switch to full HBL, the NPP scheme was enhanced to subsidise more computers for households with school-going children and the application process was streamlined to hasten the provision of assistance to those in need. Senior-specific digital literacy initiatives have also been launched. IMDA's IMSilver portal<sup>28</sup> provides resources aimed at helping seniors learn how to use digital and mobile technologies effectively, while the recently launched SG Digital Office helps all seniors build their digital capabilities and widen their horizons through digital adoption.<sup>29</sup>

### Preventing Racial Discrimination

37. Our existing legal framework against racial and religious discrimination remains robust during the pandemic. Under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and the Penal Code, individuals or groups attempting to promote racial and religious disharmony, and cause societal conflict face strict penalties. Among others, it is an offence to utter words with the deliberate intent to wound the racial or religious feelings of any person, or to knowingly promote, through words, disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.imda.gov.sg/programme-listing/home-access](http://www.imda.gov.sg/programme-listing/home-access) and [www.imda.gov.sg/programme-listing/neu-pc-plus](http://www.imda.gov.sg/programme-listing/neu-pc-plus)

<sup>28</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.imsilver.imda.gov.sg](http://www.imsilver.imda.gov.sg)

<sup>29</sup> For more information, please refer to [www.imda.gov.sg/infocomm-media-landscape/SG-Digital-Office](http://www.imda.gov.sg/infocomm-media-landscape/SG-Digital-Office)

<sup>30</sup> Sections 298 and 298A, Penal Code (Cap. 224, 2008 Rev Ed). See also Part III, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (Cap 167A, 2001 Red Ed).

## Conclusion

38. The world has undergone an upheaval with COVID-19, and Singapore has not been immune to its consequences. The Government has taken on the challenge to rapidly and effectively adapt and put in place measures that will guide the country through the pandemic and on to the path of recovery – both socially and economically. As we head into a new normal, we will continue to shape our response to the benefit of all in Singapore.

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