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**SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS, AND CHAIRMAN OF THE INTER- MINISTRY COMMITTEE ON YOUTH CRIME (IMYC) AT THE SEMINAR ON NARRATIVE SOLUTIONS APPROACH ON 12 DECEMBER 2000, 9.00AM AT THE GRASSROOTS' CLUB**

Good morning

Members of the IMYC

Principals, Teachers and Youth Workers

Ladies and Gentlemen

Youth crime and juvenile delinquency in Singapore are under control. The statistics signal a downward trend. The agencies here are resolute in working together to address this worldwide phenomenon, which is present in all countries. Here in Singapore, many innovative programmes have been put in place. These are continually fine-tuned.

2 To reach this happy situation, we have adopted a comprehensive and strong approach in tackling youth crime and delinquency issues. In 1995, the Inter-Ministry Committee of Youth Crime or the IMYC was formed as a catalyst to pull everything together. I chair the Committee made up from representatives from the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Police Force, the Prisons Service, the Subordinate Courts, National Council of Social Service

and National Youth Council, as well as experts from the academia. In essence, the IMYC represents an on-going concerted effort to keep on top of social problems and issues arising from some of our young who choose to live in the fringes of or even outside lawful confines, as well as, those who are at risk of drifting into these fringes.

3 Over a period of five years since its inception, the IMYC has coordinated and initiated more than 15 broad based programmes to guide our youths onto the right path. Some programmes are preventive in nature, designed to curb the onset of delinquent behaviour. Mentoring is an excellent example. Spearheaded by British Petroleum or BP in the early nineties, it has been incorporated in IMYC's philosophy of steering youths away from the deviant route. Mentors are role models to instil a positive mental outlook in youths at risk. Mentors act as "big brothers or sisters", nudging their mentees to embrace values such as self-belief, responsibility and self-esteem.

4 Project Bridge is another excellent preventive programme launched this year. Supported by the IMYC and administered by YMCA, Project Bridge is a programme tailored to provide an avenue for pre-mature school leavers to re-orientate themselves and find their bearings. Not knowing what to do next after leaving school, these out-of-school youths tend to while away their time, take up odd jobs, or worse, fall prey to deviant elements and negative outlook in life. Counsellors and volunteers of the Project

Bridge Centre assist these youths to adopt positive mindsets. The Centre also provides tuition in academic subjects and, offers opportunity for vocational and computer as well as lifeskills courses. Schools are supportive of this programme, and have referred recent cases of out-of-school youths to Project Bridge.

5 For youths who have run afoul of the law, programmes to rehabilitate and reintegrate them back into society are in place. The Guidance Programme is a good example of a rehabilitative programme initiated for youths who have committed minor crimes such as theft. Youths are given a short six-month programme to help them realize the folly of their acts through structured modules of counselling and community service.

6 Probation for young offenders provides another example of how a rehabilitative focus is weaved into our overall approach. Through the loss of freedom governed by curfew hours, and mandatory community service for some, youths are made to realise that they may lose much more through possible incarceration should they continue to lead a deviant lifestyle. Performing community service and regular counselling instil a sense of worth and mission in the youths.

7 Yet another key programme is the Streetwise Programme that provides a second chance to youths caught for unlawful assemblies or involvement in street corner gangs. It is a six-month programme where participants receive counselling sessions, learn life-skills and perform

community service. They also have to adhere to conditions such as curfew hours and dissociate with gang members. This programme is the last stop for these youths to leave gangs or they will face the full brunt of the law should they be caught in association with secret societies members and activities.

8 In essence, all the programmes that I have highlighted, whether preventive or rehabilitative in nature, reflect the wide arsenal of tools that IMYC uses to tackle youth crime and delinquency at different stages of development. We realise that we are dealing with a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that requires all-hands to be on board. Strong community involvement is a key to successful mounting of these programmes . But these measures are by no means exhaustive or exclusive. We have to continuously explore new ideas and programmes to adapt to the constantly changing environment confronting our youths.

9 To better equip our teachers, pastoral care givers, social workers and parents who have a stake in shaping and nurturing the behaviour of our youths, we need to keep abreast of latest learning on the subject that are available and apply them in a relevant and sensitive manner.

10 Today's seminar explores one such tool. The "Narrative Solutions" by Dr Joseph Eron seeks to bring out the best in people through helpful conversation techniques. I think that most of you on the ground would agree that many of your wayward charges seem to erect unseen barriers that

impede effective communication. Conversation with them presents quite a challenge. Often talking to them seems to reinforce the confrontational divide between you and them. They hear but do not listen. And we are not able to help them.

11 Dr Eron's Narrative Solutions Approach will present a different perspective to engaging delinquents and at-risk youths in conversations that do not lead to the feeling of talking to a brick wall. His approach has been integrated into existing programmes at placement homes for juveniles and has also been applied successfully by educators, youth mentors and child welfare workers in the United States.

12 The Narrative Solutions Approach assumes that youths can change. They are more likely to change when the focus is on what is strong in them rather than on what is wrong with them. We would be more likely to help youths alter their behaviour when our conversation focus on their preferences, hopes and intentions. Through such conversational techniques, we would learn to better understand youths and take the first step in helping them discover meaning and purpose in life.

13 Whether as parents, counsellors or teachers, effective communication with our children, counselees or students is a critical consideration. This is especially so for parents who must know their children very well. Every child is formed differently. As parents, we must come across to our children as being understanding of their concerns and especially stresses. They must

feel sufficiently comfortable to want to share and confide in us. Busy parents must make the effort to be disciplinarian, confidante and friend all rolled into one.

14 I applaud your participation at this seminar. Every skill that we pick up toward enhancing our wealth of knowledge is invaluable in helping our young charges. I remember the words that were echoed at the Youth Justice 2000 in September this year when a speaker recounted an incident when questioned on the cost effectiveness of implementing programmes for delinquent youths. In reply, he said to the person who asked, "What if he were your child?"

15 On this note, I am pleased to announce the launch of the IMYC website and the IMYC logo. The logo will inject a strong sense of identity and focus to IMYC's ongoing efforts. It is a symbol of all the agencies' and partners' unwavering commitment to the cause. The web site will serve the practical purpose of providing teachers, counsellors, social workers and the public useful information and resources on the wide range of IMYC programmes and, in particular, where they can turn to if they need help with delinquent youths and at-risk youths.

16 The electric blue in the new IMYC logo reflects the dynamism, vibrancy and potential of every youth. The silver colour symbolises the ever-changing environment youths operate in that calls for creative and innovative programmes to help steer youths away from the wayward path.

That the letters in the word "IMYC" are linked is a strong commitment on the part of all IMYC partners and agencies, including the community, teachers, youth workers and parents, to our common cause, which is to help youths at risk.

17 Lastly, I thank the National Youth Council and Family Resource and Training Centre for co-organising this seminar. May all of you have an enriching experience learning and discussing innovative ways to tap the strengths in our youths.

18 Thank you.