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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY GUEST-OF-HONOUR, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW AND HOME AFFAIRS AND CHAIRMAN OF THE INTER-MINISTRY COMMITTEE ON YOUTH CRIME AT THE COUNSELLING ONLINE LAUNCH ON SATURDAY, 17 MARCH 2001 AT 10 AM AT THE KAMPONG GLAM COMMUNITY CLUB**

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentleman

Singapore has made great progress over the last 35 years. Today, we live in a land of wealth, peace and opportunities. However, our rapid progress has also resulted in new challenges. One such challenge is the possible weakening of the family as our primary social unit.

2 The competitiveness and uncertainties of the new economy have placed greater strain on our workers. We are expected to work longer and faster. Some are finding it increasingly difficult to balance their responsibilities between work and family. Compounded with the increase of dual-income families, it has taken its toll on spousal and parent-child relationships in some families.

3 Children today therefore live in many different family settings. Their parents may not be their primary caregivers; there are maids, grandparents, baby sitters, the extended family, and even tuition teachers who fill that role. In some cases, there is no caregiver and the child is left to his own devices until the parents come home from work. Teachers and friends then play an integral role in the kind of values picked up by the child. Hence, the school experience has a major effect on the lives of our youths.

4 Following from this, it is clear that parents may not always be the first people children turn to for information, guidance, and advice in times of crisis. The provision of easily accessible and responsible information and help to our young must therefore be enhanced. This is especially so because youths today live in a challenging environment. Many rise to the occasion and are doing their best to meet these challenges. A few can do it on their own. Most will need a helping hand. Indeed, some fall by the wayside and need strong helping hands to help them up.

5 IMYC has been working with many partners to form a strong network of helping hands. These include Community Development Councils and VWOs in the organising of forums and workshops for parents, social workers, principals and teachers to equip them with skills to more effectively communicate with youths.

We have also reached out to youths in more direct ways eg through formation of mentoring and peer mediation schemes as well as setting up a hot line for youths who want to leave teen gangs to call in (tel. no. 440-1865). We have also worked with volunteer action groups which have sprung from the ground such as the Parents' Advisory Group on the Internet (PAGI) whose mission is to help parents better understand and cope with the phenomenon of possible internet abuse by their children. Today, I welcome additional helping hands in the form of Counselling On-Line Singapore, yet another volunteer action group comprising earnest and committed volunteers who have decided to come together for a worthy cause.

6 Many young people today are active on the Internet. Internet is well suited as a means to reach out and engage our youths in meaningful dialogue. Therefore, I commend Counselling Online, a non-profit and volunteer-run organisation, for setting up a free 24-hour e-counselling portal to complement the advisory role parents play. I understand that the e-counsellor will answer queries from our youths and young children within a 48-hour response time. It has all the advantages of confidentiality, accuracy, anonymity and accessibility. The modules on criminal law, family law, substance abuse and education cover the spectrum of problems youths may face. Information on these topics will go a long way towards mitigating social, economic and emotional problems borne out of ignorance and misinformation. The launch

of this on-line service will therefore be a boon to teenagers and parents who need urgent counselling in the convenience and anonymity of their homes. They will be able to find useful guidance to any seemingly intractable problem they are facing. Sometimes, timely guidance can avert a larger personal disaster.

7 I am indeed heartened to see that the initiating, setting-up and running of the e-counselling portal are the efforts of volunteers from diverse backgrounds including busy lawyers, psychologists, social workers, educators and businessmen. This is an excellent example of active citizenship where Singaporeans take ownership of society's social problems and share responsibility in resolving them in a meaningful way.

8 I am also pleased to see that the Central Singapore Community Development Council, Info-Comm Development Authority, the Law Society and other agencies supporting and assisting in this e-counselling portal. It provides an excellent example of government, community and citizens leveraging their resources to strengthen and support the family.

9. It gives me great pleasure now to officially launch the Counselling Online website. Thank You.