

~~\$27m legal aid fund proposed~~

LEGISLATORS will be asked to approve a \$27 million fund for the Supplementary Legal Aid Scheme at a Finance Committee meeting this Friday.

The amendments to the original scheme, passed by legislators last Wednesday, will provide assistance for more members of the "sandwich class" by increasing the current financial eligibility limit of \$280,000 to \$400,000.

It also extends coverage claims for damages arising from negligence by the medical, dental and legal professions.

The government has promised to extend the coverage to other professions. It says, however, that the three professions have the most contact with the general public, and to include more, at this time would, be too costly.

The dental, medical and legal professions said before the bill was passed that it was unfair to both the "sandwich class" and the three professions. They said they should not be singled out for the scheme.

The scheme was originally set up in 1984 with a loan of \$1 million from the Lotteries Fund with the purpose of providing assistance to those whose financial resources exceeded the ceiling under the standard legal aid scheme of \$120,000 but who may not be able to meet the high cost of private litigation.

Legal Aid Director Pauline Cheung Cheng Po-lin said in a paper given to legislators that the \$27 million would meet the net cash outflow in the first three years before the scheme again became self-financing.

Mrs Cheung said it was estimated that the scheme would begin to generate a steady annual income four years after the \$27 million injection, and it was unlikely that further funding would be needed.