

## Mediation urged when untying the knot

By Peggy Chan (HK Edition)  
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The financial upheaval is putting more couples at risk of breaking up, and a few of those who have gotten a divorce say they're unable to pay alimony, the Hong Kong Family Welfare Society (HKFWS) said.

The society's family mediation service received four enquiries last month about adjusting the level of alimony. In past years, there was, at most, one such enquiry.

HKFWS Solicitor Cecilia Lau also said the number of clients asking for such adjustments rose 20 percent in the past two months.

"One of them asked to cut monthly alimony by HK\$3,000 from the current HK\$12,000," Mediation Services Coordinator Ruth Wong Chan Tsz-ying said at a press conference yesterday.

Another person who is paying HK\$5,000 in monthly alimony decided to pay a one-off sum for four years by selling all his stocks and funds, as he faces unemployment.

The financial turmoil also endangers the relationship of some married couples.

"A couple sought mediation services from us because one of them lost (money in) Lehman mini-bonds, and they argued fiercely on the division of assets," Wong said.

In another case, the husband was laid off, and the couple could not afford daily expenses and housing mortgage. This gave rise to their marriage crisis.

Wong suggested that couples who encounter problems not hesitate to seek mediation. "The obscure economy will cause heavier family pressure, but divorce may not be a solution," Wong said.

Meanwhile, the HKFWS said mediation services can raise the chance of divorce settlement implementation and maintain parent-child relationships.

In its survey from August through September of 103 divorced or separated couples with at least one child, 25 of the respondents had reached a settlement with their partners under mediation services. And 24 did so with the assistance of solicitors, while four couples did it in court.

According to the survey, 68 percent of respondents who used mediation services said they maintained their parent-child relationships, and 84 percent could visit the children at least once a month.

The divorced who were helped by mediators also have greater responsibility (84 percent) in paying alimony than those using legal means (less than 22 percent).

"Mediators help both divorced parties make settlement conditions according to their willingness, so they feel respected and are willing to implement," Mediation Services Coordinator Patrick Chung Kwok-shing said.

As a solicitor, Lau also encourages divorced couples to seek mediation services to save legal expenses and time.

Putting divorce on the court can take more than two years and cost more than HK\$100,000, but the fastest case under mediation services took just three months and several hundred dollars.

A man surnamed Kwan recently divorced using the assistance of mediators. He praised the service for a peaceful settlement with his ex-wife.

"As a third person, the mediators do not have any conflict of interest, so both of us respected them, and we were sincere in the discussion," he said.

He added that the mediators would calm them down when they became insistent, thereby speeding up the process.