

RESOLUTION REGARDING LEGAL AID CUTS

Summary:

The Renfrew County Legal Clinic provides direct front line legal services to low income clients across Renfrew County. Our service numbers continue to go up annually and we are working to further expand service delivery.

The Renfrew County Legal Clinic is in danger of having our budget significantly reduced which will have an immediate and substantial effect on direct client service delivery across the County.

We are calling upon the Township of Head, Clara and Maria to give immediate direction that budget cuts to Legal Aid Ontario should not be downloaded onto Legal Clinics. This direction is needed to preserve front line service delivery in our local community.

WHEREAS:

1. The Renfrew County Legal Clinic (the “**Clinic**”) has delivered services in Renfrew County for over 30 years. We provide direct front line legal services to low income clients across Renfrew County and our service numbers continue to go up annually. We are an extremely busy legal office. We have 4 practising lawyers including the Executive Director. We are audited annually and all staff provide front line service;
2. The Clinic’s main office is in Renfrew, but it also has satellite offices across the County and are given free ad hoc office space when needed to meet with clients who live in communities where there is no satellite office;
3. The Clinic assists area residents who cannot afford legal assistance due to financial hardship – including those on social assistance, pensioners, the unemployed, or those with low income;
4. The Clinic’s services are aimed at ensuring that people with low incomes are able to meet their most basic needs, which in turn gives them the ability to live with health and dignity as active members of their community;
5. The Clinic is committed to upholding the rights of the most vulnerable people of Renfrew County on issues that are most critical to them – including Canada Pension Plan, Ontario Disability Support Program Workplace Safety and Insurance, Ontario Works, Landlord and Tenant, Criminal Injuries Compensation, powers of attorney, wills, human rights, consumer and debt issues, administrative legal issues and many other areas that impact low-income people;
6. The Clinic also provides public legal education sessions, duty counsel services at the Landlord Tenant Board hearings and we work with different community

groups on issues such as domestic violence and homelessness in Renfrew County;

7. Like other community legal clinics across the province, the Clinic carries out this work through funding provided by Legal Aid Ontario (“**LAO**”);
8. The provincial government’s 2019 budget cut funding to LAO by \$133 million – which is 30% of its budget – retroactive to April 1, 2019. Legal Aid is downloading a large portion of these cuts to Legal Clinics.
9. Budget cuts could result in the closure of the Renfrew County Legal Clinic. As a rural community service provider, we are at risk of local services being cancelled with the expectation that services will be delivered out of Ottawa for example. A second scenario is that we stay open, but with a smaller staff and we become ineffectual.
10. The Clinic is in danger of significant budget cuts despite how much the Clinic accomplishes with so little resources. Last year, the Clinic won 1.5 million dollars for our clients. This money was spent locally and it came from outside sources. Clients got off of Ontario Works benefits, the municipalities financially benefited and the local economy was strengthened.
11. This significant cut will result in a loss of legal services to low income residents in our community, including a loss of critical legal clinic services – such as access to landlord-tenant law, seniors’ law, consumer debt issues, legal interventions that ensure access to income supports like Canada Pension Plan Disability benefits, protection for injured workers, community development and public legal education;
12. The cut to the LAO budget has already had a direct negative impact on the Clinic and the services they provide, and in the near future, it will have a devastating impact on the Clinic’s ability to continue to provide legal services to our community’s most vulnerable citizens;
13. The absence of the Clinic’s services will have adverse social consequences for the Township of Head, Clara and Maria and other communities served by the Clinic – including by increased homelessness resulting from avoidable evictions, and increased poverty resulting from lack of income supports and employment supports;
14. The absence of these services will have adverse economic consequences for the Township of Head, Clara and Maria and surrounding communities as well – resulting from increased reliance on municipal services such as mental health services, hospitals and public housing, increased demand on our local court from unrepresented people appearing without legal assistance, and increased reliance

on social assistance administration resulting from people being denied appropriate supports;

15. Full and effective access to the justice system is a fundamental right that should be accorded to all the people in our municipalities, including our most vulnerable, many of which experience poverty or live on low incomes; and

16. The Township of Head, Clara and Maria believes all levels of government should provide fair, economically-sound, and evidence-based programs and supports to help low-income residents, vulnerable people, and other equity-seeking individuals escape poverty, precarious housing, and systemic disadvantage, and realize their full potential by living healthy and safe lives.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Township of Head, Clara and Maria:

17. Calls upon the Premier and the Attorney General to make a commitment to access to justice, to respect the commitment of their government to not decrease front line services; and to confirm that funding for community legal clinics will not be decreased;

18. Urges the province to restore funding to these critical services and ensure that all the residents of Renfrew County have access to a fair and equitable justice system, regardless of their incomes; and

19. Directs that a copy of this resolution be issued forthwith to the MPP for Renfrew County, the Attorney General, the LAO Board, the Premier and all Renfrew County municipalities.

Background Information for Resolution

Ontario's community legal clinics serve individuals and families in communities across Ontario. Funded by Legal Aid Ontario ("LAO"), through modest capped budgets, they offer a broad range of legal services to address the basic legal needs of low-income Ontarians.

Community clinics serve the most vulnerable Ontarians on issues that are most critical to them. The work that clinics do is aimed at ensuring that people with low incomes are able to meet their most basic needs, which in turn gives them the ability to live with health and dignity as active members of their communities. Most clinics serve geographic communities, while a handful of clinics serve specific communities such as the elderly or the disabled. Clinics are rooted in the communities they serve, using their limited resources to provide the services that are most needed by that community, and working closely with other local agencies to ensure that clients are well-served.

There are 72 community clinics in Ontario, operating on a budget of approximately \$80 million. In 2017, community clinics across Ontario provided services to over 240,000 people: clinics represented 21,289 people at courts or tribunals, gave 171,172 people detailed advice and assistance, and carried out 6,974 public legal education, community development, and law reform projects and initiatives.

Clinics are store-front offices located in the community they serve, with minimal administration and no bureaucracy, enabling them to be flexible and client-oriented. Clinic work is client-centered, with some clients receiving full representation, while others may receive summary advice or self-help assistance, depending on their circumstances.

Client surveys indicate tremendously high satisfaction with the work done by clinics. Clinics provide access to justice to hundreds of thousands of low income Ontarians every year, in a cost-effective manner. Community clinics operate on capped budgets, providing cost certainty to government. Clinics are accountable to their funder, LAO – they submit annual funding applications, quarterly statistical and financial reports, and undergo periodic quality service reviews/audits.

International research shows that investing in community legal clinics reduces costs to the legal system and across multiple government programs by keeping people housed and able to live independently and participate in their communities. Studies in the United States identify a return to government of approximately \$5 for every dollar invested.

Clinics work to understand and respond to individual and community needs. Clinics use lawyers, non-lawyers, public education initiatives and other delivery systems in order to deliver services cost-effectively. Clinics follow LAO's eligibility guidelines, but have the flexibility to provide some services to those that don't financially qualify.

Clinics prioritize client and community needs and attempt to meet them strategically, making efficient use of scarce resources. Clinics develop linkages to non-legal service providers such as health care, housing help and employment supports, sometimes co-locating in service hubs, ensuring that their clients receive “wrap-around” services.

Clinics are identified by numerous independent reviews as the best way to provide community law services to low-income communities/individuals. As an essential local resource, they are accountable to our communities. As part of their transparency, they report on activities and outcomes annually.

The Renfrew County Legal Clinic successfully obtain over 1.5 million dollars for our clients in a 12 month period in the areas of Canada Pension Plan Disability, Ontario Disability Support Program, Housing, Human Rights, Workplace Safety and Insurance Board and Criminal Injuries Compensation Board. This money is spent locally. As result of our work, Ontario Works and ODSP recovers benefits they have paid to clients putting money directly back into the municipalities and the provincial coffers.

Between October 29, 2017 and October 29, 2018, we opened 226 new files. We had over 309 files open. In the same period, we provided 950 Advice and Brief Services and 336 Referrals. In addition, we provided Senior’s Law services.

The Renfrew County Legal Clinic is a small clinic with a dedicated team of skilled staff who serve Renfrew County and work with partnering clinics to not only provide the highest quality of legal services, but to stretch our limited funding to promote access to justice for low-income people of Renfrew County with the aim of promoting a just society.