

**Progress on Access to Justice
Legal Aid Commission Expands Outreach Services**

Mr. Speaker, as a government we have committed in our mandate to improve access to justice for the residents of the NWT. Today, I am pleased to announce an initiative that will assist residents involved in civil or family justice matters.

Members are aware of the Legal Aid Commission's initiative to provide free legal advice through its Outreach lawyer. This service has proven to be very successful. It has been piloted for the last several years and has provided "on the ground" services in 19 communities. Residents accessing the service do not have to make an application and there is no means test. Anyone who would benefit from speaking with a lawyer on issues such as housing, landlord and tenant disputes, disability or employment issues, child protection, or Elder's wills is eligible. With this success, it has become very clear that there is a greater need for this service than could be addressed in the 15 hours per week available under the pilot project.

Today, the Legal Aid Commission is launching a full-time Outreach Legal Aid Clinic. Staff at this new clinic will continue to offer legal advice, but will also provide duty counsel service in family law matters, and coordinate public legal information on behalf of the Legal Aid Commission. Again, these new services are available without the requirement to make a formal application and are at no cost to those using the service. This expansion was made possible by a careful restructuring of resources and an enhancement of the federal funding provided for the Aboriginal Court Work program.

Throughout Canada and here in the Northwest Territories, courts have been seeing an increasing number of people who are “self-representing”, or appearing without legal representation in the civil and family courts. There is a growing understanding that self-represented litigants face barriers, and many do not receive equitable access to justice. People coming before the courts are often experiencing their first interaction with the justice system, and it is not surprising that they experience difficulties stemming from a lack of understanding of potential remedies or court processes.

By providing expanded hours, separate office space and a dedicated court worker and Outreach lawyer, the Legal Aid Commission is helping clients to access summary legal advice and referrals more quickly from the Outreach Legal Aid Clinic. With the introduction of family law duty counsel, residents who attend court for family law matters will receive advice when they need it most.

Much like the duty counsel provided to those criminally charged, this additional service will allow the Outreach lawyer to attend as duty counsel for appearances on family matters in the Territorial and Supreme Courts. We expect that the number of court appearances required to complete a case will be reduced as a result of these changes. In addition, staff will be utilized more efficiently, and technology will be better leveraged under this new model. Finally, better legal education and information for residents will lead to better outcomes for all involved.

While the office will be physically located in the Yellowknife Centre East building, the Outreach program will continue its commitment to all regions of the Northwest Territories. Over the next few months a schedule of regional clinics will be developed in partnership with the communities and the court workers of the Legal Aid Commission.

Mr. Speaker, when a pilot project is a resounding success, it only makes sense to incorporate it into best practices. This initiative not only continues to deliver legal outreach services to our residents, but it also represents a significant step in meeting our commitment to improve access to justice.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.