

**THE HONOURABLE LOUIS SEBERT
MINISTER OF JUSTICE**

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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 by making family law duty counsel services available to assist people representing themselves in court. Today, I would like to provide an update on how this government is meeting and exceeding that commitment with an initiative to assist residents involved in civil or family justice matters.

As Members are aware, the Legal Aid Commission piloted an initiative to provide basic legal advice on civil matters. The Outreach lawyer held weekly clinics in Yellowknife and delivered service clinics in 19 communities. Residents did not have to make an application, nor meet a financial means test for this service. 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, was eligible for a limited consultation. This service proved to be very successful. It became clear that there was a greater need than could be addressed in the 15 hours per week available under the pilot project.

Based on this success, the Legal Aid Commission has launched a full-time Outreach Legal Aid Clinic. This new Clinic now offers free confidential legal advice for up to three hours on any single legal issue through a staff court worker and an outreach lawyer. Additionally, for the first time, staff will 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 at no cost and do not require a formal application.

In Yellowknife, the Outreach Legal Aid lawyer holds three weekly clinics: one for child protection issues, one for family law, and one general clinic for other civil matters. Each clinic operates on a first come, first serve basis. Clients can also make appointments at other times depending on their circumstances.

In-person clinics will be held in other NWT communities on a regular basis, or if need be, phone appointments may be arranged. 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.

Throughout Canada and here in the Northwest Territories, courts have seen an increasing number of people representing themselves in both civil and family courts. Unfortunately, self-represented litigants face barriers, and many do not receive equitable access to justice. Many of these people are interacting with the justice system for the first time, and it is not surprising that they experience difficulties stemming from a lack of understanding of potential remedies or court processes.

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 will allow the Outreach lawyer to attend as duty counsel for appearances on family matters in the Territorial and Supreme Courts. By providing expanded hours, and a dedicated court worker and Outreach lawyer, the Legal Aid Commission is helping clients to access legal advice and referrals more quickly through the new Outreach Legal Aid Clinic.

Through this expansion we expect that the number of court appearances required to complete a case is going to be reduced. 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.

Mr. Speaker, 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.