

Ontario Community Legal Clinics

Addressing the legal needs of low-income people in our communities

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY LEGAL CLINICS?

Community legal clinics work in partnership with their communities to protect and enhance the rights of low-income people and to build a fair and equitable society.

Defining characteristics of community legal clinics include:

- Local control and the setting of service priorities by volunteer community based boards of directors;
- a focus on areas of law most critical to low-income people;
- proactively informing low-income people of their rights;
- going beyond the traditional model of individual legal advice and representation to achieve change that affects the entire low-income community.

HOW DID CLINICS GET STARTED?

Low-income activists first came together in the late 1960s and early 1970s to establish community legal clinics in response to the growing recognition that the unique legal needs of low-income and disadvantaged communities required a more systemic and collective response than traditional case by case representation. This is because the legal needs of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society are very different from those of middle and upper income people whose problems tend to be infrequent and self-contained. By contrast, poor people are constantly involved with bureaucracies and complex laws. Their legal problems are also often inter-connected: if the government cheque doesn't arrive or the employer doesn't pay, the rent doesn't get paid.

Clinics are recognized in the Legal Aid Services Act as an important component of Ontario's legal aid system, working in conjunction with other legal aid service providers such as staff offices, criminal and family duty counsel and private bar lawyers who take legal aid certificates.

HOW DO CLINICS SERVE THEIR COMMUNITIES?

At present, there are 79 community legal clinics funded by Legal Aid Ontario serving low-income people in every geographic area of Ontario.

Clinics serve their communities in a variety of ways including:

- legal representation in courts and tribunals
- legal advice
- public legal education
- law reform activities
- community organizing and development
- self-help kits and materials
- duty counsel
- referrals to other sources of assistance

Community legal clinics provide services in the areas of law that most affect low-income people and disadvantaged communities. Most of their work deals with issues that represent people's most basic needs, for example, a source of

income or a roof over their heads. Clients of legal clinics are disproportionately those living with physical and mental disabilities, single mothers, recent immigrants, people of colour, the elderly, victims of abuse and torture and other historically disadvantaged groups. Clinics provide a welcoming and respectful environment for their clients by recognizing the challenges their clients face very day and working to improve clients' access to clinic services and the legal system.

Services are typically provided within defined geographic areas that might be measured in city blocks or those that encompass thousands of square kilometres. There are legal clinics in cities, rural communities and as far north as James Bay. Some clinics offer services in both English and French and in other languages dominant in their communities. The vast majority of clinics have less than ten staff.

Some clinics provide specialized service to defined linguistic or ethnic groups. Still others focus on issues relevant to particular communities of interest such as people living with disabilities, the elderly, youth and HIV/AIDS communities. A number of clinics focus on specific areas of law such as workers' compensation, the environment, occupational health and safety, housing, income security and prisoners' rights. Some of these clinics serve the entire province. Some legal clinics provide training for law students.

WHY ARE LEGAL CLINICS IMPORTANT?

Each year, legal clinics assist hundreds of thousands of low-income people to assert their rights. Governments recognize the expertise of clinic staff and frequently consult them about laws and policies which most affect poor people. As a result, in partnership with their communities, clinics have won important changes in many of the laws that most affect low-income people.

Due to these efforts, and often through of a combination of approaches such as casework and collective community action, people avoid eviction and get income and benefits they are entitled to. With their basic needs met, low-income people are better able to participate in their communities in ways that benefit all of us. In this way, clinics help to create stronger and healthier communities.

For more information about Ontario community legal clinics and a listing of clinics throughout the province, please visit www.aclco.org or www.legalaid.on.ca

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