

# ONTARIO COMMUNITY LEGAL CLINICS

## PROVINCIAL STRATEGIC PLAN

### 2013-2017

#### INTRODUCTION

Ontario's community legal clinics are instrumental in providing access to justice for low-income and disadvantaged persons in Ontario.

Clinics enable people to meet basic and fundamental needs: a source of income, a roof over their heads, human rights, access to health care, education, workers' rights and more. Clinic lawyers and legal workers provide an array of services including case work and representation, community development, public legal education and law reform for systemic solutions. A defining feature and strength of the clinic model is that clinics are responsive and accountable to the communities they serve.

*Clinics are experts in "poverty law". This includes a range of services in areas of law that affect or have a differential impact upon low-income individuals and communities.*

The clinic system has grown and matured over the years. There are now 60 geographic clinics across the province, 17 specialty clinics, a provincial association, and inter-clinic working groups. Together clinics represent a shared commitment to the delivery of equitable and accessible poverty law services across Ontario. Clinics are proud of the progress we have made, working individually and collectively in the interests of our client communities, and in close partnership with other community and justice sector organizations.

"The most transformative part of the plan is for all of us to think provincially as well as locally."  
(Participant at provincial meeting of clinics, Nov/12)

We now need to build on this by working more concertedly as a system. Experience has shown that by working collectively, clinics are better able to address challenges posed by high poverty rates and the racialization of poverty, demographic shifts in the client population, changes in law and policy, limited resources, and the distances to cover in rural and remote communities. Working more as a clinic system will also strengthen our ability to respond to increased expectations

to demonstrate the effectiveness of our work and accountability for the expenditure of public funds.

Clinics also need to work closely with Legal Aid Ontario, the agency that funds clinics and has statutory responsibility for Ontario’s legal aid system. Together we must find ways to implement a shared vision for poverty law in Ontario while respecting our different roles. It is also imperative that we continue to work in close collaboration with clients and our community and justice partners.

“We feel very strongly that those who experience poverty have the best insights into how it can be eradicated and into the solutions they require as individuals and members of community to address the deprivation and exclusion they experience due to their socio-economic status and other grounds of vulnerability.”  
(Clinic submission, Oct/12)

The Ministry of the Attorney General has challenged Ontario’s community legal clinics and other legal aid service providers to transform their services to enhance access to justice for people living in poverty. This first-ever Provincial Strategic Plan for Ontario’s community legal clinics is the vehicle for clinics to rise to this challenge.

## **VISION**

**Poverty reduction and enhanced access to justice in Ontario through a diverse and dynamic system of community-based and client-focused legal clinics**

## **GUIDING PRINCIPLE FOR PROVINCIAL STRATEGIC PLANNING**

**Clinics work together as a system to make best use of our collective strengths to better serve and empower our clients while maintaining accountability to our individual communities.**

## **VALUES**

- **Client-driven poverty law services**
- **Representative governing boards of directors**
- **Trained, experienced, valued staff**
- **Transparency and open communication among clinics**
- **Collaborative decision making**
- **Close collaboration with community and justice sector partners**
- **Dignity, respect and a culture that does not stigmatize**
- **Independence from government**
- **Accountability and responsiveness to the communities we serve**
- **Providing a voice for marginalized communities**
- **Commitment to equity and social justice**

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The following four strategic priorities are of equal importance and are not in priority order.

### 1. Expand Client Access to Poverty Law Services

**We will collaborate to expand client and community access to poverty law services to address challenges such as changing demographics and the racialization of poverty, evolving service needs, and limited resources.**

To achieve this, we will:

- Develop improved methods of assessing the changing needs of clients and communities to support planning, priority-setting and resource allocation at both clinic and system levels
- Explore new and emerging technologies that will complement but not replace local delivery of poverty law services, help to address the barrier of distance, and enable information and tools to be shared among clinics
- Promote collaboration by clinics across catchment areas and actively pursue methods of working together (including clinic mergers or co-location where appropriate) to improve client service
- Support the creation of regional pilot projects that incorporate the above activities and make the best use of clinic expertise across the region

### 2. Enhance Capacity for Systemic Work

**We will strengthen our capacity to do preventive and systemic poverty law work – including community development, law reform, test cases, and public legal education – to achieve the greatest positive impact for our client communities.**

To achieve this we will:

- Affirm and support law reform, community development, public legal education and systemic casework as an essential part of the work of all clinics
- Reinforce and expand the role of specialty clinics and provincial clinic networks working in partnership with local clinics and other networks to coordinate and prioritize test cases and systemic work
- Build additional links with administrative law tribunals and other justice system organizations to improve access to justice for our client population without compromising clinic independence
- Develop, with Legal Aid Ontario, methods of recognizing the importance and evaluating the impact of the different types of preventive and systemic work

### 3. Strengthen Community Connections

**We will increase clinic accountability to the clients and communities we serve and pursue a range of ways for clinics to be an integral part of community efforts to meet the needs of persons living in poverty.**

To achieve this we will:

- Continue to build trusting, creative and collaborative partnerships with clients and community agencies to ensure more coordinated, holistic responses
- Work with community organizations to identify priorities and to implement community development and law reform initiatives
- Develop tools and resources to recruit and build boards that reflect the people we serve and strengthen accountability

“The ability of legal clinics to develop relationships of trust with our clients and to support their empowerment and civic engagement to build a more just society is such a profound strength of the system” (Clinic submission Oct/12)

## 4. Enhance System-Wide Coordination and Support

**We will strengthen our capacity for provincial coordination and support to enable clinics collectively to provide the highest quality service and to ensure the clinic system is accountable for the services it provides with public funds.**

To achieve this we will:

- Provide central leadership and coordination – including training, research, best practices, policy development, needs assessment, evaluation, and technology – with defined roles for the ACLCO, inter-clinic groups, specialty clinics, and other centres of expertise within the clinic system
- Design tools for individual clinics and the system as a whole to evaluate success and to make ongoing improvements
- Strengthen inter-clinic communication and improve our ability to identify, assess and share information about best practices to improve service to clients
- Work with Legal Aid Ontario on issues of importance to clinics and the broader system of legal aid, including role clarification and methods of funding that support innovation, efficiency and high quality service
- Identify administrative efficiencies and cost savings across the system to reinvest in enhanced poverty law services
- Develop provincial strategies to recruit and support clinic staff and to attract our future poverty law practitioners
- Review and refine the Strategic Plan from time to time to ensure that it remains a “living document” that will help clinics and the system as whole to achieve the best results for clients and communities

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Association of Community Legal Clinics of Ontario (ACLCO)  
L'Association des Cliniques Juridiques Communautaires de L'Ontario (ACJCO)