

Ontario Community Legal Clinics

Who We Are

Ontario's community legal clinics serve individuals and families in communities across Ontario.

Funded by Legal Aid Ontario, 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, including housing, income security, education, health care, disability programs, workers' rights, victim's assistance, and environmental issues.

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.

By The Numbers

There are 71 community clinics in Ontario, operating on a budget of approximately \$90 million.

- ◆ In 2021, community clinics across Ontario provided detailed legal advice and representation at courts or tribunals to over 100,000 people:
- ◆ Carried out 75,000 public legal education, community development and law reform projects and initiatives.

"It is widely acknowledged that community legal clinics are best suited to deliver "poverty law" services. This conclusion has been confirmed by numerous independent studies on this subject."

– Report of the Ontario Legal Aid Review (The McCamus Report), 1997

"Legal Aid, and in particular community law, is perhaps the single most important mechanism we have to make the equal rights dream a reality."

– Former Ontario Chief Justice, R. Roy McMurtry

"The most advanced justice system in the world is a failure if it does not provide justice to the people it is meant to serve. Access to justice is therefore critical. Unfortunately, many Canadian men and women find themselves unable, mainly for financial reasons, to access the Canadian justice system."

– Former Chief Justice, Beverley McLachlin

The Benefits of Community Legal Clinics for Ontario

- ◆ 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, Legal Aid Ontario; 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 Legal Aid'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.