



May 28, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL: doug.downey@pc.ola.org

Hon. Doug Downey
Attorney General
McMurtry-Scott Building, 11th Floor
720 Bay St
Toronto, ON M7A 2S9

Dear Mr. Downey,

I am reaching out to you on behalf of the Mississauga Community Legal Clinic to draw your attention to the importance of access to justice for the people of Mississauga and the province as a whole. We are also seeking your party's commitment that, if elected to form government, you will commit to no-cuts on the provincial budgetary allocations for access to justice, particularly legal aid funding.

Our clinic has been serving the City of Mississauga since 1978. Mississauga is Canada's sixth largest city and the third largest city in Ontario, and there is a deep need for legal services for our growing population. We serve the most vulnerable on issues that are most critical to them, including affordable and secure housing, income security, human rights, disability programs, workers' rights, and immigration. Our work is aimed at ensuring that people with low incomes are able to meet their most basic needs, giving them the ability to live healthy lives, in dignity, as active members of society. These essential supports in turn result in improved health, improved opportunities for children to succeed in school and for adults to participate in the labour market and the economy.

Community legal clinics across Ontario operate within modest budgets with little bureaucracy. We are non-profit organizations, governed by volunteer boards of directors drawn from our local communities. Clinic lawyers, paralegals and community legal workers appear in courts and tribunals on behalf of clients every day. Virtually every clinic staff person interacts directly with clinic clients.

Clinics are directly accountable to Legal Aid Ontario for the public funds they receive and report to LAO regularly about their finances, the people served, and types of services provided.

Current Challenges Facing Legal Clinics

Ontario's legal aid system is underfunded and isn't able to provide the level of service that the Mississauga community, and the entire province of Ontario, needs. An investment of funds is needed to allow clinics to serve more clients, to support lawyers who provide legal aid services, and to modernize LAO. Because the qualifying threshold is set so low, very few people qualify for legal aid services. A 2014 planned increase would have raised the eligibility level to match the Low Income Measure. If it had been implemented, it would have doubled the number of Ontarians eligible for legal aid services, from one million to two million. There is increasing demand for our services – Ontario's population is increasing, and we've seen throughout the

pandemic that there is growing need in certain areas of law. This is especially true in certain communities that are currently underserved, such as Indigenous and racialized Ontarians.

These communities are disproportionately poor, disproportionately incarcerated and disproportionately involved in the justice system. We need to ensure that access to justice is viewed through an anti-oppression, anti-racism lens in order to improve the outcomes of many legal aid clients.

A Call to Action on Legal Aid

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of all Ontarians in some way, but the past two years have added more challenges for residents living at or below the poverty line. The cuts to Legal Aid Ontario in 2019 aggravated the situation and community legal clinics were forced to function with fewer financial and human resources in 2020 and 2021. The province's financial commitment to Legal Aid Ontario should be increased from its current level of \$350M to \$480M annually to support desperately needed investments in legal aid. The sustainability of the legal aid system is the underlying goal of this request.

Studies show that with every dollar spent on legal aid services, an average of \$12 is saved in other areas of government spending, such as health, incarceration, services for the homeless and services provided because of family breakdowns.

The work that community legal clinics do to help low-income people secure access to our justice system is not only an issue of justice. Clinic services that reduce poverty have a significant positive impact on the health, vitality and economic return of local communities.

Through a commitment to no-cuts on Legal Aid and a willingness to increase the budget for access to justice issues, your political party has the opportunity to send a positive message to millions of Ontarians looking beyond the pandemic and requiring support. This pledge and funding will provide stability to the current clinic system, would enable Legal Aid Ontario to reassess its eligibility cutoff, provide desperately needed upgrades to IT equipment and software and reinstate the training programs for clinic workers that were lost because of the cuts.

A strong society provides access to justice to its members. We ask that you consider all the benefits that our legal aid system provides to the people of Mississauga and the people of Ontario.

Yours truly,

MISSISSAUGA COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES



Nishat Kazmi
Board Member
on Behalf of the Board of Directors