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**Suzette Narbonne, LSS Board Chair, the Legal Services Society  
Speech for the Surrey Parents Legal Centre Announcement, March 27, 2017**

Thank you, Madame Minister Anton and Madame Minister Cadieux.

It is great to be here at the announcement of continued funding for legal aid justice innovation projects and, in particular, the expansion of the Parents Legal Centre to Surrey.

I'd like to thank the Attorney General and the Ministry of Justice for its generous funding.

It demonstrates your support for legal aid services that bring value to communities by bringing about earlier resolutions for legal matters, often without having to go to court.

I am going to focus my remarks on the new funding announced today, which permits the expansion of the Parents Legal Centre model to Surrey.

We were pleased that Grand Chief Ed John endorsed the Parents Legal Centre in his report on child welfare in BC. We are, in fact, looking at ways we can incorporate more of his recommendations into legal aid services.

For Indigenous families, the Parents Legal Centre provides culturally sensitive services that can sometimes help keep children with their parents.

For all families, it focusses on early resolutions to situations where a child has been removed, or is at risk of being removed, from the family home.

By avoiding lengthy court processes, there are justice systems savings too.

It will give everyone here a sense of the value the Parents Legal Centre will bring to Surrey if I give you some examples.

## ***Speaking Notes***

The centre in Vancouver has two lawyers and an advocate. The advocate helps parents with underlying non-legal matters, which if taken care of, can help families stay together.

One client at the Vancouver location was the mother of a toddler. The Ministry of Children and Family Development had received reports of domestic violence in her home at the hands of the father, and was investigating the safety of the child.

The violence was escalating, so the Ministry's social worker told the mother she had to leave the home with the child.

The mother, however, had nowhere to go. She came to the Parents Legal Centre in tears.

The centre's advocate was able to find her a transition house within two hours ... Eventually, the client was able to return to the family home with assurances that the father would stay away.

If the mother hadn't got the help when she did, the Ministry would have removed her child, causing trauma to the family. Or it might have gone another way: the Ministry could have gone to court to get an order that would keep the child at home under supervision ... but that route often begins a lengthy and expensive court process.

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The Parents Legal Centre's advocate can also be a big help in other ways, like at meetings between parents and social workers .... When parents are under a lot of stress and can be confused about the requirements of a Supervision Order.

When you don't understand what's happening, it makes it that much harder to follow an order.

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I'll just tell you about one other client. In this case, it was the quick action of the centre's lawyer that kept the child with her mother.

## ***Speaking Notes***

The Ministry thought the mother had breached a Supervision Order, so her child was removed.

When the Parents Legal Centre's lawyer heard about it, she quickly arranged a Family Case Planning Conference for the next morning, before court started.

Everyone involved attends those meetings: the parents, social worker, the Ministry's counsel, and a facilitator.

Our lawyer brought the circumstances of the family to light – circumstances that are not always obvious.

The Ministry's counsel agreed to return the child to her family *that day* under a new Supervision Order that addressed the issues that led to the removal.

If the Parents Legal Centre didn't exist, however, there would have been a delay in the court proceedings while the parent applied for a legal aid lawyer to represent her in court.

Most likely, the child would not have been returned to the parent that day.

This means the child might have been in a foster home for another week or two ...causing trauma, upset and disruption to the parent and child.

Those are a few examples that I hope highlight the great value that the Parents Legal Centre will bring here to Surrey.

Thank you for your time.