



Parents Legal Centres: Helping Families and Children

The Legal Services Society (LSS), the legal aid provider in British Columbia, operates Parents Legal Centres (PLCs) in Vancouver and Surrey — and soon in other locations — to help parents and people standing in for parents facing the possible government removal of children from the family home. The centres take a holistic approach early in the process to help families stay together whenever appropriate.

How it works

The following scenarios illustrate how the PLC helps families stay together. They are typical examples but do not represent all of the ways the PLC assists people.

Scenario 1: An Aboriginal mom of two young children is struggling to comply with a Supervision Order. She's got a follow-up meeting with the social worker and is overwhelmed by stress.

The PLC advocate accompanies the mom to the meeting where she is able to confirm with the social worker the help required to keep the mom on track. The client needs bus tickets to get her kids to and from appointments and, in particular, to an appointment with a speech pathologist for one of her children. The mom was pleased the advocate also requested a food voucher, so she could buy a birthday cake for her child.

Without the emotional support of the advocate, it is difficult for parents to meet the requirements of the Supervision Orders, and keep the children at home.

→ *A key factor in the success of the PLC is the work of the advocate/paralegal at meetings with social workers.*

Scenario 2: A mother expecting her first child has addiction issues and the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) has concerns. Although the mother has been compliant with sobriety plans for the last two months, she has no fixed address, no partner and no local family support.

The mother is at the Fir Square Clinic of BC Women's Hospital in Vancouver, which the PLC lawyer regularly visits. The lawyer gives the mother legal advice about her rights and obligations, and supports her, along with the PLC's advocate, during meetings with the MCFD social worker, where they address the protection concerns, and how the mother can get assistance with housing, income and parenting.

Shortly after the child is born, further meetings result in a Safety Plan that allows the mother to keep her child while she gets the supports she needs to follow through on the plan.

→ *The PLC engages early in collaborative processes, leading to better results that keep families together and don't require going to court.*



Benefits for families

With a team that engages with eligible parents at an early stage, the PLC model is an innovative way of helping families with child protection matters. The centre supports parents to resolve not only their legal matter but also the underlying non-legal issues, such as housing or addictions, which often lead to protection concerns in the first place. PLC services include:

- Support by a team of lawyer and advocate
- Information and advice on options for resolving child protection issues as early as possible
- Legal advice and representation at collaborative processes such as mediation, family case planning conferences and other meetings
- Information and support throughout the process
- Legal advice and representation at uncontested hearings
- Assistance connecting to other services, including counselling and housing

PLC services are available to people who meet LSS's financial eligibility guidelines. They assist families prior to and during their involvement with the Ministry of Children and Family Development or Delegated Aboriginal Agency.

Background

The Parents Legal Centre (PLC) began as an LSS pilot project with funding from the BC Ministry of Justice (now Ministry of Attorney General). It opened in 2015 at the civil provincial courthouse in Vancouver, focusing on early, collaborative resolution of child protection issues.

Independent evaluations found that the majority of clients contacting the Vancouver PLC are doing so before court processes and more are starting to contact it when there is a risk of removal rather than when a removal has occurred. The evaluation also found parents are increasingly taking part in collaborative processes; gaining a good understanding of their child protection rights, obligations, and next steps; and many are achieving some type of positive result or resolution of their case.

New locations announced

Early signs of success resulted in continued government funding for the Vancouver centre and additional funding to open the Surrey location in February 2018. Another increase in funding has resulted in planned openings of PLCs in Campbell River, Smithers/Hazelton, Williams Lake, Prince George, Kamloops, Duncan and Victoria in 2018/2019. The timing of each opening is still being determined.

With the exception of Duncan, all locations were recommended in Grand Chief Ed John's 2016 report on Indigenous child welfare in BC. LSS will adapt PLC services to meet community needs and the local cultural context of each location with a focus on helping Indigenous families.

To inquire about services at current locations: Phone the LSS Call Centre at 604-408-2172 or toll free at 1-866-577-2525; the PLC Vancouver at 604-601-6310; or the PLC Surrey at 604-595-4360.