

Legal Aid BC Update

From the desk of Mark Benton, QC
Chief Executive Officer, Legal Services Society



Making the case on Parliament Hill

I was recently invited to Ottawa to be a witness at Parliament's Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, which is examining issues related to access to the justice system. I was asked to talk about legal aid in Canada and to provide observations on indigenous access to justice.

In trying to figure out what to say in 10 minutes I realized how important it was to frame these important and complex issues in the bigger picture of what government chooses to support and why they should. I took the opportunity to reiterate the advice we once gave the BC Ministry of Justice, that our work to improve the justice system for people with low incomes serves to improve the justice system for everyone. I reminded the MPs on the committee that legal aid plans are uniquely positioned to offer advice on justice reform and access to justice because we are independent of government, and we see more facets the justice system than other justice institutions do.

My overall message was that the federal government should be more generous, more deliberate and more strategic in how it funds legal aid. Always aware of how our family services are far below the national average, I made some particular suggestions for national benchmarks and referred to the recent proposal for **national legal aid benchmarks** developed by Canada's legal aid plans in conjunction with the Canadian Bar Association.

A warm welcome for our new board chair



Larry Grant, Celeste Haldane and Carl Point

LSS welcomed Celeste Haldane as its new board chair last month. To mark the occasion of her first meeting in the position, LSS invited two Musqueam elders for a welcoming ceremony. Elder Larry Grant thanked LSS for honouring Celeste (who is from the Sparrow family of the Musqueam First Nation) by appointing her chair. “Her journeying has come a long way from being an undergrad at UBC to becoming a law school graduate then becoming today the chief treaty commissioner and also on the board of governors of the University of British Columbia and now the chair of the Legal Services Society,” he said. “It is really something to see that happen and to be recognized by the Legal Services Society for the value of Indigenous people.”

Celeste said she appreciated the support she had from her community and from the board and staff at LSS. She also said this was an important time for Aboriginal people with “society looking at and reflection upon the place and space for Indigenous people.”

BC feeling the pressure of growing refugee claims

Increases in the number of refugees coming to Canada is having an impact on several legal aid plans, including the Legal Services Society.

LSS saw a 37 percent rise in refugee cases in 2016/17, which shows no signs of slowing down this year. As a result, we are concerned about our ability to provide services to refugee claimants through to the end of 2017/18.

Although federal immigration funding has recently increased, it is not enough to meet the challenge of current circumstances. LSS recently provided a business case for more funding to the Department of Justice, which we hope will result in more money flowing through to us via the provincial government.

Of the refugees that we help, more than half come from Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey, and about one-quarter come from Central and South America.



You have received this message because you are a friend of Legal Aid BC. If you no longer wish to receive this newsletter, you may unsubscribe at any time.