

Legal Aid BC Update

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Provincial budget speech and what it means for legal aid

The Legal Services Society heard good news in BC Finance Minister Mike de Jong's **budget speech** in February. Pilot projects that we have been running for the past three years will be able to continue for another three years with \$2 million per year in provincial funding. It was also announced that there will be funding to expand those projects elsewhere, including a new Parents Legal Centre in Surrey, with another \$2.8 million per year for three years.

The Parents Legal Centre was specifically recommended by **Grand Chief Ed John in his report on Indigenous welfare in BC**, which found value in the model's culturally appropriate approach to assisting families facing the possible removal of their children by government. The other justice innovation projects include expanded versions of our successful criminal and family duty counsel programs and Family LawLINE.

Of course, a budget speech in an election year is dependent on the government staying in power, but the announcement indicates to us that these projects are working to improve access to justice in the province.

Why we do what we do

LSS Board Chair Suzette Narbonne is a lawyer who knows first hand how important legal aid is to her clients. In some cases, it can change their lives. When she recently spoke to the Law Society of BC benchers, Suzette described the real-life story of "Jackie" — and how helping Jackie resolve her legal issues empowered her client to move on with her life. It also suggests the constraints of providing family law assistance when funding is limited for anything outside our constitutional obligation to provide criminal and child protection law services. The story is on the **LSS website**.



In her benchers speech, Suzette also congratulated the Law Society for promoting Aboriginal cultural competency for lawyers and for the work of its Legal Aid Task Force. The full **Law Society benchers speech is here**.

What lawyers who do legal aid are telling us

There was both good and bad news in a recent survey of lawyers who take legal aid contracts. Not surprisingly, the survey indicated that lawyers continue to remain dissatisfied with the fees we pay them (tariff rates), which has an effect on their feelings of being valued by LSS.

The ratings for feeling valued have declined among family lawyers in particular: in 2013, 46% of family lawyers agreed LSS values their services, in 2016 only 38% do. Tariff rates remain a concern to LSS and we are looking for solutions without taking the money out of services.

Lawyers also identified some service areas that need improvement. Overall satisfaction with the support they receive for contract and contract change processes went down to 50% from 75% in 2013. The survey also indicated that only 45% of respondents agree that contract change authorization decisions are made in a timely manner.

Overall case management satisfaction has also decreased since 2013. A key area of improvement identified in the survey report was for more logical explanations of case management decisions.

The good news

However, LSS staff and local agent performance ratings – already high -- improved over the last satisfaction survey three years ago. Of lawyers who responded, 94% agreed that staff were courteous, 82% said staff were knowledgeable, and 71% of lawyers agreed that they answered their inquiries in a timely manner. Similarly, for local agents (who provide legal aid services around the province), 94% of lawyers agreed they were courteous, 81% agreed were knowledgeable, and 81% agreed local agents provided timely answers.

Nearly 40% (422) of lawyers who had taken a legal aid referral or billed LSS in the previous year responded to the survey, which was carried out in October and November 2016 by Sentis. For more, read the **2016 Tariff Lawyer Survey report**.



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