

# Legal Aid BC Update

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



## The future of LSS justice innovation projects

Five LSS pilot projects are reaching the end of their provincial funding, leaving us with the possibility of closing the services in March 2017 without more money. LSS has submitted business cases to the Ministry of Justice & Attorney General for four of them: Expanded Criminal and Expanded Family Duty Counsel, the Parents Legal Centre (PLC), and Expanded Family LawLINE. The Mediation Referral project, while having good resolution rates, didn't get the client numbers necessary to make the service worth continuing.

Recent **evaluations** of the pilot projects were positive. The Expanded Criminal Duty Counsel project in Port Coquitlam, which focusses on maintaining file continuity for clients, resolved a high percentage of cases before a trial date was set. Clients had a high level of satisfaction with family duty counsel in Victoria (see item below) and the province-wide phone service, Family LawLINE. The PLC focusses on early intervention and collaborative processes, which are proving to be effective in helping to keep children with their families.

## A family duty counsel story

Family duty counsel provide essential LSS services, which got even better when we piloted an expanded version at the Justice Access Centre in Victoria. With three years of funding from the Ministry of Justice & Attorney General, expanded duty counsel were able to spend more time with clients on an appointment basis, and clients got to see the same lawyer throughout the resolution of their case, which doesn't necessarily happen with regular duty counsel.

For a sense of what the Expanded Duty Counsel pilot project does, **read this blog from lawyer Susan Loney** about a client she helped to empower in the face of several obstacles.

LSS has asked the Ministry to extend funding for the service, which ends in March 2017.



Family lawyers Wendy Zimmerman (l) and Susan Loney (r)

## Areas of greatest need

The areas of greatest need for legal aid funding was the focus of my submission to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services held in Kamloops in September. In addition to continued funding for the innovative projects described above, an

## Wired justice

I had the pleasure of joining my colleague LSS Director Sherry MacLennan at the Wired Justice conference in Toronto recently. The event was the first to talk about the use of emerging technologies for transforming A2J and expanding legal aid. Sherry demonstrated

area of great need is for more family law services. Current levels are not sufficient to provide clients with lawyers for spousal support, asset division, divorce or child custody, all of which promote family security and financial stability.

Another area of greatest need is an increase to the tariff rates we pay lawyers to help our clients. These have remained unchanged since 2006 and are not comparable to the rates paid by government for similar services, and lag behind many other provinces.

I also put to the committee that those of us in the justice system need to listen to and collaborate with indigenous people to develop services that address historic wrongs. We also need inexpensive processes for resolving less serious summary and administrative offences, and to start looking at the justice system from a user's point of view, which could lead to innovations like opening courts for weekends and evenings or onsite daycare.

some of the interactive tools on the **MyLawBC website**, which individuals can use to do things like make their own wills or separation agreements.



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