

## Column in the *Vancouver Sun*

Many of you will have seen the front-page column in the November 18, 2008 edition of the *Vancouver Sun* by the paper's legal affairs writer Ian Mulgrew (see <http://www.canada.com/vancouver.sun/index.html>).

Mr. Mulgrew describes the Legal Services Society (LSS) as facing a "perfect storm of increasing costs," caused by an increase in referrals combined with a worsening economy, which is projected to lead to a substantial budget deficit.

LSS has, indeed, experienced a significant increase in the demand for legal aid. The worsening economy will also result in further increases in the demand for our services and in increased pressures on government finances. The LSS board, however, is taking steps to manage these issues. Our board has agreed to amend the restrictions on our surplus funds in order to support emergency family services, immigration services, family duty counsel, and criminal duty counsel in this fiscal year. This will ensure LSS meets its 2008/2009 fiscal targets without reducing the services offered to our clients.

LSS is also considering options for dealing with the situation in future fiscal years. One project that has been identified as needing immediate attention is to develop procedures that will assist LSS with managing the increased volume of applications within existing budgets. To ensure this is given the highest priority, all Legal Aid Renewal projects, with the exception of the Nanaimo Justice Access Centre, the downtown community court, and the telephone triage, will be put on hold. LSS has also introduced a hiring freeze and taken other steps to redirect resources toward service delivery.

The Ministry of Attorney General is well aware of the pressures LSS is facing. I have had several meetings with ministry staff to discuss these issues and more discussions are scheduled. Articles such as Mr. Mulgrew's in the *Vancouver Sun* will go a long way towards increasing public awareness of the importance of the legal aid work you do in providing legal services to low-income people in BC.

While there is no doubt that we are facing a difficult time, LSS has a board and an organization that is exceptionally well-equipped to deal with these challenges. The LSS board next meets on December 19, 2008 and is tentatively scheduled to meet again on February 6, 2009. I expect that any decisions regarding our services will be made at these meetings. In the meantime, our focus will be on managing the resources we have available.

We will keep you advised of key developments through the *Legal Aid Fax*. Thank you for your ongoing commitment.

Mark Benton, QC  
*Executive Director*