

Legal Aid BC Update

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



We've had another busy summer at LSS: we welcomed the news that the federal government will provide much-needed additional immigration funding this year, we launched the online Family Resolution Centre, and opened Parents Legal Centres in Campbell River, Duncan and Prince George.

You can read about these highlights, and more, below.

Immigration legal aid gets a boost

We were pleased and relieved to hear the [federal government's news](#) in August announcing a one-time investment for our immigration and refugee legal aid services this year. Of the nearly \$27 million dedicated to participating provinces in 2019/2020, about \$1.2 million was committed to BC, topping up existing federal funding of \$1.9 million. The provincial government has also provided \$800,000 in immigration legal aid funding for 2019/2020.

This money will help us support people who are coming to Canada in increasing numbers, often fleeing persecution and other abuses in their home countries. From 2015 to 2018, LSS has seen a 264% increase in refugee claims. We were concerned that we would run out of money for immigration and refugee legal aid before the end of the year, which would force us to shut down services for people seeking asylum. With this injection of funding, we are grateful that we won't have to do that.

Parents Legal Centres officially open in Campbell River, Duncan and Prince George

This summer, we celebrated – along with the local community – the official opening of our new Parents Legal Centres (PLC) in Campbell River and Prince George. The centres focus on helping parents when a child is at risk of being removed from the family home or has been removed by social workers because of safety concerns. By addressing the issues related to the concerns, the centres hope to keep more families together.

We currently run nine [PLCs across the province](#) and will soon offer PLC services at the Terrace Regional Centre.

New service helps separated couples, families

In July, we launched the [Family Resolution Centre](#) on LSS's [MyLawBC](#) – a free, confidential, web-based tool that separated couples can use on their own while negotiating parenting time, vacations and other important details of their children's care. As the first of its kind in Canada, our new service allows parents to request up to five hours of free assistance from a professional mediator qualified under the BC Family Law Act.



Get free online mediation to help
you make a parenting plan

LSS's new online Family Resolution Centre offers parents a way to agree on a plan that's in the best interests of their children while avoiding going to court.

Evaluating MyLawBC

A research company evaluated our popular website [MyLawBC](#) and its associated pathways. The evaluation period ran from September 2017 to the end of January 2019. During this time, data from several sources were collected and analyzed from user surveys, interviews with justice stakeholder representatives and website users, and website traffic.

Findings were used to assess the effectiveness of MyLawBC in reaching target audiences, providing accessible legal resources, helping users resolve their legal issues and improving access to justice. How users are making use of the pathways was also examined.

The evaluation found that people, mostly women, from all regions of BC used the website. A large majority of site visitors (74%) were in the beginning stages of their legal issue, which tells us that MyLawBC is a good first step to getting legal information. The most popular pathways people took on the site were for divorce, separation, and family matters.

Read the [final report](#) to learn more about the evaluation's findings and recommendations.

LSS turns 40

We're celebrating a significant milestone this year at LSS. Forty years ago on July 30, 1979, the [Legal Services Society Act](#) was enacted in the BC legislature, amalgamating two organizations: the Legal Aid Society and the Legal Services Commission.

The idea behind the LSS Act was to consolidate the two organizations' different delivery methods: "to bring the services together under one roof," as the Attorney General of the day, Garde Gardom, put it. The legislation brought together private lawyers, staffed offices, community law offices of lawyers and paralegals, and public legal education agencies. While the merger created many challenges for us to overcome as LSS, it also made us stronger, more resilient and innovative.

Over the decades, we've continued to embrace a client-centred approach that offers an array of services, from information and advice to representation. We look forward to helping British Columbians with their legal needs over the next 40 years and beyond.

Mark Benton, QC
CEO, Legal Services Society

Sent from the traditional unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.



Enjoying some 40th anniversary apples and chocolate with LSS's Manager of Criminal, Immigration and Appeals David Griffiths, left.