

Legal Aid BC Update

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



As 2020 quickly approaches, I begin this newsletter by describing some of the latest developments at the Legal Services Society (LSS), and end by recapping some of the year's key highlights. 2019 ended on a positive note as we recently welcomed the Attorney General's significant investment in tariff lawyers. We also celebrated the official opening of the Smithers Parents Legal Centre (PLC) and celebrated five years of service with an open house at the Surrey PLC.

Tariff lawyers get long-awaited rate increase

We were pleased to hear the Attorney General's October announcement of a rate increase for lawyers who do legal aid. Following months of negotiations, the Ministry of Attorney General (MAG) and the Association of Legal Aid Lawyers (ALL) reached a [historic agreement](#) on better tariffs.

We're also glad to see the agreement provides a framework for future tariff rate negotiations and establishes which services would be essential in case of lawyer service withdrawals. As part of the province's legal assistance strategy, the agreement includes a commitment to future consultations between MAG and ALL, with our support, regarding eligibility, scope and the quality of legal aid services.



(l to r): LSS Board Chair Jean Whittow, lawyer Chris Johnson and Attorney General David Eby

New year, new brand

After 40 years as the Legal Services Society, we're changing our name – and the logo we've used for 25 years. Our research found that many people don't know that LSS is the provider of legal aid in BC, and some confuse us with other organizations. Since we've unofficially used the name Legal Aid BC for some time (as the name of this newsletter testifies), it will become official in 2020. Note that because we were created under the *Legal Services Society Act*, for legal purposes only, we'll remain LSS.

Ultimately, we expect that by rebranding as Legal Aid BC and giving our visual identity a much-needed face-lift, people will know where to go to get the legal aid services they need, when and where they need them.

Key highlights of 2019

We moved forward on reconciliation

We announced our new [Reconciliation Action Plan](#) (RAP), which contains concrete, measurable actions to guide us in advancing reconciliation and ensuring that legal aid services better meet the needs of Indigenous peoples in BC.

Our board elected a new chair

Long-time board member Jean P. Whittow, QC, became our new chair, replacing Celeste Haldane, who has remained on the board's executive committee.

Jean is associate counsel with the Vancouver firm Sugden, McFee & Roos LLP, and practises administrative law and professional regulation.



Jean P. Whittow, QC

We introduced new services

We launched new [criminal early resolution services](#) across BC to help people who wouldn't normally qualify for legal aid. Under relaxed eligibility rules, the service improves legal aid for clients and courts by allowing lawyers to help a wider range of people, and it improves justice system efficiencies.

We unveiled the [Family Resolution Centre](#) – a free, confidential, web-based tool on [MyLawBC](#) – that allows separated couples to negotiate important details of their children's care from a professional on their own, or request up to five hours of free assistance mediator qualified under the BC *Family Law Act*.



Immigration legal aid got a boost

We were pleased to hear the [federal government's news](#) announcing a one-time \$1.2 million investment for our immigration and refugee legal aid services, in addition to \$1.9 million in existing 2019/2020 funding.

We completed our Parents Legal Centre expansion

Throughout 2019, we opened more Parents Legal Centres (PLCs) for child protection matters. There are now [10 PLCs across the province](#). Staffed with lawyers, advocates and legal assistants, the centres' focus is to assist Indigenous communities with child protection matters, although anyone eligible can apply for services.

We celebrated our 40th anniversary

Four decades 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. You can read more about these highlights, and other Legal Aid BC news, on [our website](#).

Happy Holidays!

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.