

Legal Aid BC Update

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



Keeping clients and staff safe, preparing for a new year

It's been about nine months since the BC government declared a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we've all been experiencing our unique challenges during this unprecedented time. While it has also been challenging for Legal Aid BC (LABC), we've adapted many of the ways we deliver services to British Columbians. LABC did a good job at riding out the first wave of this crisis, and we continue to be committed to ensuring that client services remain available and relevant despite the challenges we're all facing during the second wave.

Delivering services during the pandemic

We're continuing to provide legal aid services mostly over the phone. We're getting a lot of calls, indicating that people need legal help. The total number of legal aid applications so far this year is down to 80% of what we saw last year at this time, due to court closures and moving to Call Centre-only intake. The number of applications has been steadily increasing, however, and in November, the total was slightly higher than last year during the same month.

In July, we carefully began reopening some in-person services. Some Parents Legal Centre lawyers, Aboriginal Community Legal Workers and advocates resumed in-person services at external worksites, such as courts, on a location-by-location basis. These employees have been referring to LABC's external worksite checklist to ensure their workplaces are safe. Our 10 Parents Legal Centres around the province are helping people in-person when they can, and by appointment only.

In-person services are on hold for now at the Vancouver Regional Centre. We've implemented a voluntary, partial return to office, but most of our staff members continue to work from home. Our local agent offices offer phone/email services across BC, but have no firm plans to physically reopen yet.

As for our community partners, 16 of 26 are offering in-person services while the remainder continue to provide remote services.

In addition, we've developed some new online resources to support British Columbians during the pandemic. This includes step-by-step [guides](#) on the [Family Law in BC website](#) to help people better understand legal processes.



Plexiglass dividers are in place in PLC boardrooms across BC, as shown here at the Campbell River PLC.

We have a dedicated [coronavirus updates page](#) with information on how COVID-19 is affecting family law in BC, including delivery of services and accessing the courts. Our [coronavirus FAQs page](#) offers frequently asked questions and answers related to COVID-19.

[MyLawBC](#) continues to provide residents across the province with free resources to help them address common legal problems. The site includes help via a [Dialogue Tool](#), an online negotiation platform that allows separated couples to write a separation agreement, and the [Family Resolution Centre](#), an online mediation tool to help separating couples create a parenting plan.

Expanded family services introduced

We recently expanded our family law services for a trial period to cover clients who need help with family law issues, except divorce, in Provincial or Supreme Court. With courts unable to accommodate as many cases due to the pandemic, we're assisting people to resolve their legal matters out of court.

The expanded scope means more people can get a lawyer's help to prepare for mediation or negotiation to settle some or all of their legal issues, and only the ones that cannot be resolved go before a judge.

Reaching out

Our Community Dialogues project was a strategic priority for LABC in 2019/20. The dialogues, which took place between June 2019 and June 2020, included in-person focus groups across BC, online discussion boards, and in-depth interviews with clients and community workers. More than 260 people shared their views on service needs, barriers and gaps, and possible solutions to improve access to services in their communities. For more information, read the project's [final report](#).

Collaborative relationships

We were pleased and honoured to sign a [memorandum of understanding \(MOU\) with the BC Métis Federation \(BCMF\)](#) on November 18, 2020, to support the coordination of supportive justice services for Métis people across the province. The MOU establishes a process for relationship building between LABC and BCMF. It also defines a framework to determine mutual priorities and interests for justice services for Métis people, and how to best support each other's mandates.



(l to r): BCMF President Keith Henry, BCMF Treasurer Betty Fisher and me shortly after signing the MOU during a virtual ceremony on November 18, 2020.

On December 17, 2020, we also signed an [MOU with the Native Courtworker and Counselling Association of BC](#) to support its mission of providing culturally appropriate justice and health-related services according to the needs of the province's as LSS, it also made us stronger, more resilient and innovative.

Moving forward

A lot changed in 2020 and, as our most recent [Everyday Legal Needs Survey](#) demonstrates, COVID-19 has led to an increase in legal problems and has made many legal issues more problematic for people. LABC continues to develop the plans needed to excel in the delivery of services in this new environment.

We'll also be examining our business processes over the next few months. Many of the practices and processes that we used pre-pandemic will need to evolve to meet our changed circumstances. The review will provide us with an opportunity to think pro-actively and beyond COVID-19 as we modernize the way we provide services and work as an organization.

As we end 2020 and prepare for a new year, I wish you and yours a safe, healthy and prosperous holiday season.

Happy holidays,

Mark Benton, QC
CEO, Legal Aid BC

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