



Legal
Services
Society

British Columbia
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Media Release

For immediate release

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Legal Aid Changes Planned for 2010

VANCOUVER – The Legal Services Society, which oversees legal aid throughout the province, will be changing its operations in five communities next year. Effective April 1, 2010, the Society will replace its regional centres in Kamloops, Prince George, Kelowna, Surrey and Victoria with local agents and an expanded, province-wide call centre.

“These changes will reduce our operating costs so that we can put more money into services such as free legal information, advice in courthouses for people who don’t have lawyers, and legal representation in more serious matters,” said Mark Benton, QC, the Society’s executive director.

Local agents are private lawyers in the community who contract with the Legal Services Society to administer legal aid in the area. They offer many of the services currently available through the regional centres including legal aid applications, duty counsel, representation of clients and community liaison. Twenty-two communities around the province are already served by local agents. The Legal Services Society will also be expanding its province-wide call centre in Vancouver for those wanting to apply for legal aid by phone. The Terrace Regional Centre will remain open as part of a program to improve services to Aboriginal British Columbians who have historically experienced additional barriers to accessing the justice system.

The Society’s long-term plan includes a continued emphasis on core legal aid services in family law, immigration law, child protection and criminal law. Civil law advice programs such as LawLINE (the Society’s telephone legal advice service) will be discontinued on March 26, 2010.

These changes, along with a review of staffing at the Vancouver Regional Centre, will result in the reduction of 58 positions.

“I, along with the board of directors, recognize that these changes will have a significant impact on our staff who have provided excellent service to low-income people in their regions, but we see this as needed to sustain and improve the broad range of information, advice and representation services we offer to individual British Columbians,” Benton explained.

The Legal Services Society is an independent organization established by the *Legal Services Society Act* to provide legal aid in BC. The society is funded primarily by the provincial government. It also receives generous support from The Law Foundation and The Notary Foundation.

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BACKGROUNDER

Strategic context

- The Legal Services Society is committed to providing innovative and collaborative legal aid services that enable low-income people to find timely and lasting solutions to their legal problems. The new service delivery model that will start on April 1, 2010 is part of a long-term strategy to concentrate the Society's revenue on its information, advice and representation services.

Legal aid services:

- **Legal information:** Available to anyone through the Society's websites, publications and outreach workers.
- **Legal advice:** Available to financially eligible people through family, criminal and immigration duty counsel.
- **Representation by a lawyer:** Available for financially eligible people with serious family, child protection, criminal, or immigration problems. Ninety-seven per cent of all legal aid cases are handled by private lawyers.

Legal aid funding

- Ninety percent of the Legal Services Society's revenue comes from the provincial government. The remainder comes from The Law Foundation, The Notary Foundation, interest earned on investments, and other miscellaneous sources.
- In 2009/2010, the government allocated an additional \$2 million to the Legal Services Society for major criminal trials. That allocation will not be available in 2010/2011.
- The Society's non-government revenues – which derive from interest earned on lawyer trust accounts, notary trust accounts and the society's own investments – have declined because of low interest rates.

Local agents

- The local agent service delivery model is flexible – contracts can be changed or additional local agents can be added as needed based on service demand and budget.
- The cost of a typical legal aid application through a local agent is approximately 30% to 50% less than a regional centre depending on the region.
- In the last 12 months, local agents handled 27 per cent of all legal aid applications.

Civil law programs

- The civil law advice programs that are being discontinued March 26, 2010 are LawLINE (which provides advice over the phone) and the Community Advocate Support Line (a telephone advice service for community advocates). The Society is also discontinuing the civil law advice service it runs in partnership with the Ministry of Attorney General at the Nanaimo Justice Access Centre with the exception of the aboriginal community legal worker. All other Ministry of Attorney General services at the Nanaimo Justice Access Centre will remain.
- The legal issues covered by the Society's civil law advice programs include debtors' assistance, housing issues, welfare and related matters.

- Civil advice programs have been operating on a year-to-year basis and the Society has been unable to secure ongoing funding.

Communities served by local agents

| | | |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------|
| Abbotsford | Campbell River | Chilliwack |
| Courtenay | Cranbrook | Dawson Creek |
| Duncan | Fort St. James | Fort St. John |
| Hazelton | Nanaimo | Nelson |
| North Vancouver | Penticton | Port Alberni |
| Quesnel | Richmond | Salmon Arm |
| Smithers | Vernon | Vanderhoof |
| Williams Lake | | |

Communities served by regional centres

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|---|---------------|
| Kamloops | Kelowna |
| Victoria | Surrey |
| Vancouver (Port Coquitlam satellite office) | Prince George |
| Terrace (Prince Rupert satellite office) | |