

CONNECTING PROJECT PROGRESS REPORT

A. INTRODUCTION

The Law Foundation of Ontario (LFO) is pleased to provide a progress report on its Connecting Project: a group of initiatives aimed at improving the legal information and services available to two groups:

- Linguistic minorities and
- Residents of rural and remote areas.

With the Connecting Project, the LFO has acted as a catalyst for advancing the ideal of a truly accessible justice system by identifying a need, seeking systemic solutions to that need, and bringing together the partners to make those solutions happen.

The LFO is proud of the organizations that it has supported and the exciting and innovative work that they are doing to make a difference in access to justice for linguistic minorities and residents of rural and remote areas.

While implementation of the Connecting Project is ongoing, much has been accomplished and a progress report is warranted. Further updates will be provided as the Connecting Project continues.

In summary, this progress report concludes that the Connecting Project has resulted in:

- The sponsorship of significant research and policy development.
- LFO grant making that develops partnerships and projects to provide solutions to areas of legal need.
- The creation of networks of legal and non-legal organizations.
- The use of innovative methods to reach linguistic minorities and residents of rural and remote areas.
- An increased level of legal information and services to those groups.

B. PROCESS

1. *The Connecting Report*

Grant applications for the Law Foundation's Law and Innovation Fund in 2007 revealed a need to improve access to legal information and services for people who do not speak English and French and people living in rural or remote areas. The LFO decided to engage in a broader dialogue to generate systemic solutions and in February, 2008, it commissioned George

Thomson and Karen Cohl to produce a report which described the need and made recommendations.

Prior to producing the Connecting Report, George Thomson and Karen Cohl conducted research and engaged in consultations. They:

- Conducted an extensive literature review.
- Arranged informal interviews with over 70 individuals from legal, community and government organizations.
- Produced a formal Consultation Guide and received formal written submissions in response.
- Convened three roundtables (in Owen Sound, Thunder Bay and Kingston) to hear a range of regional perspectives.
- Drafted a set of proposals which they tested through attendance at stakeholder events and informal discussions with more than 30 individuals.

The Connecting Report, completed in December 2008, contained demographic information about the legal needs of linguistic minorities and rural and remote residents, presented the viewpoints of knowledgeable organizations and individuals concerning those needs, and synthesized the information.

The Connecting Report recommended that the Law Foundation make a strategic investment in the following six areas:

- Articling Fellowships.
- Connecting Communities consortium to improve the capacity of non-legal community organizations to provide legal information and referrals.
- A Regional Planning model for a designated geographic area.
- Ontario Legal Interpretation Network.
- Videoconferencing pilot projects.
- Evaluating the above initiatives, working to develop a framework for defining access to justice, and establishing a clearinghouse for information about efforts to address access to justice issues.

The Connecting Report has been a valuable resource for those interested in access to justice issues. It has been referenced in over 15 academic papers and reports, including reports prepared by the Canadian Bar Association, the Law Commission of Ontario, Legal Aid Ontario and the National Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters.

2. *Making It Happen*

Once the Connecting Report was received, the LFO had to decide if and how to implement its recommendations. The Connecting Report did not sit on the shelf (the fate of many other reports). Instead, the LFO acted. The implementation of the Connecting Report has been a multi-year process requiring a sustained effort on the part of the LFO.

The LFO actively went out and created the necessary conditions for the Connecting Project's success. This process involved further discussions with stakeholders about the Report's recommendations, fostering willing partners, helping create integrated structures by bringing parties together, and developing criteria telling grantees what would guide the Law Foundation in its assessment of funding proposals. It led to further development and, in some cases, modification of the recommendations contained in the Report.

C. THE INITIATIVES

The following discussion describes the Connecting Project's various initiatives and progress to date.

1. *Connecting Articling Fellowships*

The LFO moved quickly to implement the Connecting Report recommendation that it fund Connecting Articling Fellowships at community legal clinics and LAO area offices where the students would either serve linguistic minorities directly in their own language or serve rural and remote communities. Since the 2010 articling year, it has funded 44 articling positions across the province.

With two years of reports received, the following outcomes have occurred:

- An increased level of legal advice and representation has been provided to both linguistic minorities and rural and remote residents.
- Linguistic minorities served by 19 articling students directly in their own language (e.g. Cantonese, Spanish, Arabic and Tamil) which enhances their understanding of their interaction with the legal system.
- In 2 rural areas, access to legal services has been improved as the clinics have used the articling students to increase the attendances at satellite offices (where the student goes to smaller towns in the region regularly and provides services there).

- The Fellowships have increased the outreach and public legal education provided specifically to linguistic minorities or to vulnerable populations in rural areas (agricultural workers, the Deaf, lumber workers).
- Articling students have been asked to continue working for the LAO or clinics and so, for some, the Fellowships have provided a successful bridge to a public interest career.
- Articling students, either through being asked back by LAO or clinics or through the contacts developed with the local bar, have continued to practise in their Articling Fellowship location which has increased legal representation available in some rural/remote areas.

2. *Connecting Communities*

The Connecting Report recommended that a Connecting Communities consortium of legal and non-legal organizations be formed to improve the capacity of community organizations to provide basic legal information and referral to their clients. The LFO has funded Connecting Communities with seven projects to date.

The Connecting Communities initiative has the following elements:

- A Secretariat, housed within Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO), which supports the work of the initiative.
- An Advisory Committee made of front-line service providers (both legal and non-legal) actively involved in public legal education. Members include Access Alliance Multicultural Health Centre, COSTI, Council for Agencies Serving South Asians, OCASI and the Hispanic Development Council.
- A series of Connecting Communities projects aimed at serving linguistic minorities and rural and remote residents.
- The PLE Learning Exchange which is a network of community based organizations in Ontario involved in public legal education that share their experience and learn from others through an interactive website and occasional forums. More than 70 people from across the province participated in the May 2012 Symposium.

Connecting Communities does outreach into the community to solicit projects that will increase access to justice for linguistic minorities and rural and remote residents, works with organizations in developing projects, reviews project proposals, recommends projects to the LFO for funding and is actively involved in the evaluation of funded projects.

The 11 Connecting Communities projects funded to date include training:

- Front-line workers in the housing and settlement sectors who provide services to linguistic minorities on housing rights.
- Rural and remote community organizations on consumer protection issues.
- Those who work with aboriginal youth in remote areas in and around Thunder Bay on youth criminal law, education law and human rights.
- Settlement workers on tenants' rights.
- Front-line staff of agencies serving Chinese-speaking clients on employment law and immigration law.
- English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and support staff on immigration and human rights issues including the refugee determination process.
- Individuals who work with transgender parents on family law.
- Settlement workers and community service providers located at a Community Service Hub on family law as it relates to victims of domestic violence.
- Workers at Welcome Centres, designed to provide one stop service for immigrants, on social assistance issues affecting newcomers.
- Those who work with the Hispanic community on the legal aspects of the child welfare system.

Connecting Communities has had the following successful results:

- A network of legal and non-legal organizations focussed on the needs of the target communities formed through a variety of methods including the Advisory Committee, the Public Legal Education Network and the requirement that projects have a partnership of three or more legal and community organizations.
- The network helps avoid duplication, builds on the strength of existing organizations, marshals expertise in the development and review of projects, engages a large number of community organizations and shares experiences through the Advisory Committee and the Public Legal Education Network.
- Projects focussed on linguistic minorities through training settlement organizations, tailoring content to issues faced by a specific linguistic minority, providing multilingual materials, conducting cultural competency training, and leveraging the contacts of ethno-cultural umbrella organizations.
- Projects focussed on rural and remote residents through conducting workshops in rural and remote communities, working with local organizations to identify legal needs, using online training methods, and building on partnerships in communities that had been candidates for the Connecting Region.
- Improved capacity of front-line workers to serve the target communities.

- Innovative training methods including videoconferencing, webinars, social networking, cultural competency training, training community leaders and English as Second Language teachers to penetrate target populations and intensive training of small number of front line workers so they can act as continued resources to their own organizations and to other organizations within their ethno-cultural network.
- Priority subject area training, as identified in the Connecting Report, including consumer rights, housing, family law, employment, criminal justice, human rights, immigration and refugee status.
- Expanded geographical service with 10 of the 11 projects involving areas outside the City of Toronto and 5 serving rural and remote residents.
- A Public Legal Education Network which responds, in part, to the Connecting Report's recommendation for a clearinghouse about efforts to address access to justice issues.

Many of the Connecting Communities projects are multi-year. Only the first project involving training on housing rights for front-line workers in the housing and settlement sectors has been completed. This project's outcomes include:

- webinars which trained 47 individuals from 23 organizations.
- workshops which trained 139 individuals from 66 different organizations.
- staff who are in a much better position to assist their clients with legal issues, share information with their colleagues and use their training in their work (as indicated in immediate post training survey and a follow up survey months after the training was completed).
- positive first time partnership between ACTO, CERA and COSTI which has led them to work on other projects together.

3. *Connecting Ottawa*

In response to the Connecting Report's recommendation for the creation of a Regional Planning Model, the LFO provided seed funding to three regions to develop a governance model. The LFO ultimately chose Connecting Ottawa as the model to implement.

Connecting Ottawa is a network of 42 organizations including 17 community service agencies, 10 agencies serving immigrants, 9 organizations providing legal services, 5 agencies serving people with disabilities and 1 agency providing interpretation and translation services working together to improve access to legal information and services for linguistic minorities in Ottawa. It supports people at every stage of the legal continuum: recognizing that they have a legal problem and understanding how the law might help them; getting information to understand

the problem; obtaining referrals and summary advice and connecting with a lawyer or other legal professional for advice and representation.

Connecting Ottawa developed a governance structure consisting of a lead organization (South Ottawa Community Legal Services), an Advisory Committee (comprised of approximately 10 organizations) which is the key decision maker, and a Secretariat (a staff person who supports the work of Connecting Ottawa).

Connecting Ottawa is a three year project with the following main activities:

- Improving assessment, information and referral activities through training front line organizations and working with 211 Ontario (Ottawa) to improve its capacity to make legal referrals.
- Creating and maintaining the Connecting Ottawa website.
- Creating a pool of volunteers as system navigators.
- Using a social worker and lawyer to serve network organizations through a variety of tools including the use of mobile technology, case consultations and information and outreach.
- Providing interpretation services for the disabled (i.e. sign language interpretation).

The LFO has now received the first interim report from Connecting Ottawa and there has been significant progress on the indicated activities.

4. Connecting Legal Interpretation

After consultation with stakeholders, the LFO determined that the Connecting Report's recommendations concerning a Legal Interpretation Network needed review and development. The LFO retained George Thomson and Karen Cohl to convene two separate meetings. The first centered on the issue of sign language interpretation and the second on other forms of language interpretation. Attendees at the meetings included Legal Aid Ontario, community legal clinics, the Canadian Hearing Society, government representatives and interpreter organizations, among others. The meetings identified priority areas and the LFO invited applications on the basis of those areas.

Connecting Legal Interpretation initiatives have had the following outcomes:

- The development of a training program for sign language interpreters who provide services for Deaf women who are victims of domestic violence; as an outgrowth of this project, the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic received funding from the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration to provide domestic violence training to sign language interpreters in London, Ottawa and Toronto.

- Training of Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) front line staff on basis legal information and referrals.
- Training of three community clinics to increase their cultural competence so they could better serve Deaf clients.
- Providing sign language interpretation services to three community legal clinics either through videoconferencing technology or in person services; Funding the Ontario Network of Language Interpreter Services (ONLIS) to develop online interpreter training on working in the legal sector and online training for lawyers and paralegals working with interpreters.

D. CONCLUSION

Through the Connecting Project, the LFO has acted as a catalyst for improving access to justice for linguistic minorities and rural and remote residents, supported research that identifies areas of legal need, and then implemented solutions that address that need.

The Connecting Project has demonstrated that governance structures that involve a network of organizations (such as Connecting Communities or Connecting Ottawa) may work when:

- governance structures, with defined roles and responsibilities for lead organizations, Advisory Committees, staff and project partners, are established at the outset.
- the lead organization has a good reputation among community and legal organizations and a consensual approach to decision making.
- Secretariat staff chosen to support the work have strong leadership skills and expertise in community development.
- The funder is willing to be flexible in expectations as governance structures evolve.

Network governance structures have the potential to find active and engaged partners, produce co-operative decision making, provide expertise in developing and approving projects, and share lessons learned. The most fully implemented initiatives (Connecting Articling Fellowships and Connecting Communities) have improved the landscape for linguistic minorities and rural and remote residents. As these multi-year initiatives, along with Connecting Ottawa and Connecting Legal Interpretation, continue to unfold, review of the progress achieved will continue.