

THE GTA LEGAL CLINICS' TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

Community legal clinics across the GTA have been working together for the past year to find ways to better provide legal services to people living on low incomes. Clinics are faced with a situation where:

- legal clinics currently are too small to have any resiliency in staffing: when someone is sick, goes on leave, or just takes vacation, there are service impacts;
- we do not have the ability to respond to emerging issues and emergency situations;
- we have had to make difficult choices about what services to offer; and
- we struggle to maintain basic services, without the capacity to develop new, innovative projects.

Every clinic was encouraged to participate, and every clinic had a vote on the Steering Committee, which was comprised of Board and staff representatives from each of the clinics involved. Read more about the process here: www.gtaclinics.ca/the-process. The Terms of Reference used by the Steering Committee to guide its decision-making is available here: <http://bit.ly/gtaToR>. Minutes from each meeting of the Steering Committee are also available here: <http://bit.ly/gtaSCmins>.

The Vision for Transformation

In the end we agreed that we needed to create a new model of legal services that:

- **puts more services on the front lines:** our proposal would increase service delivery staffing (direct client service and community/systemic work) by 18%;
- **increases community outreach and engagement:** our proposed model doubles the number of community development workers and ensures they spend their time in the community;
- **supports staff better:** our proposed model ensures backup for all staff positions, organizes staff in area of law teams, and has flexibility to re-deploy staff for more sustainable service and to react to emerging issues;
- **offers more consistent support to the people who need legal services:** we are proposing an agreement on core services to be available consistently across the GTA;
- **aligns resources with the people who need them:** our proposal will allocate resources to the places where people have the greatest need;
- **is more efficient:** our clinics will use teams, case management processes and specialization to ensure that the right person is doing the task;
- **faster and better service:** our clinics will employ dedicated advice staff;
- **ensures efficiencies aren't just cost cutting measures but real service improvements;** The Project won a firm commitment from LAO that all savings would be reinvested into improving services in the GTA;
- **ensures people receive holistic supports:** the proposal links clinics to other community partners more effectively by using dedicated community development workers to develop and maintain partnerships;
- **improves access:** the proposal creates more access points in partnership with community agencies; and
- **maintains community control:** community based boards will continue to set strategic directions for the new clinics.

Read more about the model development and its results here: www.gtaclinics.ca/the-model.

Recommendations

The Steering Committee is recommending a new model for GTA legal clinics that:

- **sets out principles** for the clinics that will improve access and outreach;
- **makes clinics larger** (about 33 staff) so staff can work in teams, do more community development work, and have sufficient resiliency in staffing to adapt to leaves and emerging issues;
- **creates five new, larger clinics** in the GTA – one in York Region, one in Peel Region, and three in Toronto; and
- **reallocates staff according to where the low-income households are**, in response to the growth of poverty in the 905 region.

How we got there

Research

The project used data from the 2006 and 2010 censuses, 2010 Tax Filer data and service data from clinics to help identify the people needing legal services, where they live and the legal issues they face. In that way we were able to make practical client-centred plans about how to accommodate them. The results of our analysis were mapped out and are available here: www.gtaclinics.ca/maps.

Next we looked at the best ways to serve our clients. We examined the experiences of local and international legal clinics and service providers; we explored their ideas and then defined a set of best practices to be used as a guide for a model community legal clinic. Please see: <http://bit.ly/gtalitreview>.

Consultation

To better understand how clinics worked we interviewed key members of the legal clinic community including executive directors, front line staff members, board members, clients and community leaders. We used dozens of focus groups and individual interviews. We noted the experiences they shared, and their views on needed changes for the system to flourish and what aspects of the system needed to stay the same. Similar themes were highlighted in the Qualitative Data Summary Report that is available at: <http://bit.ly/gtaqual1>. The Supplementary Qualitative Data Report, which discussed innovative approaches and best practices that clinics use to meet the complex needs of clients, is available here: <http://bit.ly/gtaqual2>.

Developing a Model

Once the research and consultation phases of the project were completed, the Steering Committee began developing a new model to deliver poverty law services. It examined best practices, gaps, where clinics were effective and where changes were required. The Steering Committee then created and committed to a set of 30 Principles that would guide the development of a new model. A list of those principles is available here: <http://bit.ly/gta30P>.

The next step for the Steering Committee was to take the principles and consider how their application might transform GTA legal clinic system: what would a transformed clinic structure look like, what would appropriate catchment areas be, and what would a fair allocation of resources throughout the GTA look like?

Moving Forward

We recognize that engaging everyone in a vibrant discussion on the model is the only way to successfully transform our legal clinics in a way that better serves the people who rely on them. We hope you will participate in deciding on the vision for the GTA legal clinics by providing your input: <http://www.gtaclinics.ca/your-input.html>.