



Community Advocacy & Legal Centre

MEDIA RELEASE

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Supreme Court of Canada Justice concerned about access to justice speaks in Belleville

Belleville/May 31, 2013 - Canadians may pride themselves on their legal system. However, many of those who work within it have serious concerns about access to justice. An event in Belleville on May 30 saw one of the biggest players in the access to justice movement, known informally as "A2J," address the local legal community.

Justice Thomas Cromwell, of the Supreme Court of Canada, chairs the National Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters along with Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin. The committee was convened as a result of concerns that the legal system is at risk of losing the public's faith unless barriers to access to justice, especially for civil matters, are removed.

His trip to Belleville included a visit to the Community Advocacy & Legal Centre (CALC) prior to an address to a special forum organized by CALC and the Hastings County Law Association (HCLA).



In his address to the gathering, Cromwell emphasized the hard work that will be required to make meaningful change in the system. He referred to Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. "That speech did not start with 'I have a plan,'" said Cromwell. He added, "We have many challenges but also commitment."

Cromwell provided a specific definition of access to justice but also noted, "Sometimes it means transportation or child care. Defining access to justice will force us to start with some appropriate goals."

"Is there a widespread belief that there's an urgent need for change?" asked Cromwell, adding that without an understanding that change is needed, change will be more difficult.

Cromwell reminded the group to "think globally but act locally" and congratulated them on their commitment to the cause.

Michele Leering is the Executive Director of CALC and one of the organizers of the forum. "There's a growing concern that the legal needs of low- and moderate-income Canadians are

not being met. We felt bringing together local lawyers, judges and court staff to talk about these issues with Justice Cromwell would provide an excellent opportunity to come up with creative and innovative local solutions,” says Leering.

HCLA President Pieter Kort noted, "It was a pleasure for us to co-host this event and to have the benefit of Justice Cromwell's counsel. The members of our local bar are always looking for ways to improve access to the legal services we provide to our community."

Leering commented following Cromwell's speech, "The most important thing is that we're having this conversation. I'm very impressed by the opportunities locally." She outlined some of the work being done and ended by saying, "I applaud you all for the things you are doing."

Local activity related to Access to Justice includes the following projects:

- Creating a roster of local lawyers who will speak on legal topics to high school students, service providers, and at special public library workshops
- Developing tip sheets for clients on what to take to your family or estates lawyer to reduce your legal costs
- Starting a pilot project with pro bono lawyers providing free wills and powers of attorney to eligible low-income, disabled or aged clients
- Working with small urban and rural library staff who want to use the internet to find credible legal information and make accurate referrals for legal help
- Providing free legal information through columns in local newspapers

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The Community Advocacy and Legal Centre is a community legal clinic funded by Legal Aid Ontario. Clinic staff cannot give legal information or advice in criminal, family or real estate matters. The clinic was founded in 1980 and serves low income residents of Hastings, Prince Edward and Lennox & Addington counties. The clinic's main office is in Belleville, with satellite locations in Amherstview, Trenton, Picton, Napanee, Bancroft and Madoc.