



MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Local community legal clinic shocked by provincial budget cuts to legal aid

The Board of Directors and staff of the Community Advocacy & Legal Centre (CALC) were shocked by the news that the provincial government has cut Legal Aid Ontario's (LAO) funding by \$133 million (30% - 35%) back to April 1, 2019. "This unprecedented and undeserved funding cut will hurt people who come to us. We help the most vulnerable in our community with their problems with income, housing, employment, consumer contracts, debt problems, and human rights. We were already reeling from the news that victims of crime will see their pain and suffering awards frozen at \$5,000 when the average award we recover is more than \$20,000, and by the threatened regressive changes to provincial disability pensions," says Michele Leering, CALC's Executive Director. She notes that people who have family law problems or have been charged with a crime will also have a hard time getting legal help because LAO pays local lawyers or employs Duty Counsel to assist with these kind of problems.

Local resident Peter Kerr, Chairperson of CALC's Board, noted, "CALC has provided high quality and high volume legal help to people living on a low-income in Hastings, Prince Edward and Lennox & Addington Counties for almost 40 years. Cuts to our community legal clinic's funding will be devastating for the low-income community that rely on us."

"We still do not know how much our funding will be cut – but we are making contingency plans for service cuts," observed Leering. She notes that the research shows that poor people experience disproportionately more legal problems than others do, and that problems occur in clusters. "One legal problem (family breakdown, disability, loss of job, or housing crisis) can lead to a downward spiral of legal troubles from which it is very difficult to recover. As a result, any cuts to services funded by LAO will have a devastating impact on the lives of low- and moderate-income Ontarians who depend on these services."

"We believe these cuts must be based on a misunderstanding of how the work we do benefits the whole community – and a lack of appreciation for our multi-faceted approach to problem-solving, our innovative approaches, and the impact of our pro-active work with clients, the public and local organizations on improving the health and well-being of individuals as well as the quality of life in our community for everyone," says Leering.

For further information about the contents of this press release, please call Michele Leering, Executive Director, at 613-966-8686, ext 27 or Toll Free at 1-877-966-8686, ext 27.

Kerr and Leering recently met with local MPP, Minister Todd Smith, who promised to speak to the Ministry of the Attorney-General. Leering states, “We were already very concerned about many other cuts that will tear at our community’s infrastructure and our quality of life. The cumulative impact of these cuts will be devastating – to income security programs, victims of crime, indigenous affairs, public health, libraries, to name a few. These cuts will all have a disproportionate impact on the people we serve.”

Leering notes that the preventative work they do is not well understood because it is unusual. “We also play a large role in improving legal literacy – through legal information sessions and resources, training for health care providers and frontline service providers, our newsletter, social media, and our state-of-the-art [website](#). Our innovative work was recently recognized by the Law Foundation of Ontario. We have been chosen to lead several “health justice” initiatives with province-wide impact. We have created local ground-breaking justice & health partnerships – working with doctors and other health professionals to intervene early and prevent patients’ legal problems before they spiral out of control. All of this important work is threatened by the cuts.”

Former Board Chairperson Neil Burrell notes that, “Over three decades CALC has played a leadership role in this community on issues of domestic violence, hunger and poverty, the plight of injured and unemployed workers, and homelessness and the lack of affordable housing. CALC staff have always been proactive problem-solvers seeking to build a healthy community. They have worked hard to support a strong collaborative community response to the challenges that face people who have few resources – initiatives like the Task Force on Hunger, Partnership Against Poverty, the Affordable Housing Action Network, and more recently, the Poverty Roundtable.” Leering observed that severe cuts to CALC’s operational and personnel budget will mean that much of this work must be curtailed.

Although the threat of cuts has loomed for a month Leering stated, “We have not wanted to unduly alarm existing clients who are already living with tremendous amounts of trauma and stress, and we do not want to discourage people who need to come for help when they need us the most. But the situation is dire.” Kerr is urging people who have benefited from CALC’s legal help or who support their work contact their local MPP to explain how CALC’s work helps them and to ask for the cuts to be reversed.

The Community Advocacy & Legal Centre (CALC) is a non-profit community legal clinic principally funded by Legal Aid Ontario. The clinic was founded in 1980 and provides poverty law services to low income residents of Hastings, Prince Edward and Lennox & Addington counties. The clinic’s main office is in Belleville, with satellite locations in Amherstview, Bancroft, Madoc, Marmora, Napanee, Picton, Trenton, Tweed and Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. For more information, visit CALC’s website at www.communitylegalcentre.ca.

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Community Advocacy & Legal Centre
158 George Street, Belleville, ON K8N 3H2
www.communitylegalcentre.ca