



LEGAL AID ONTARIO
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SLASS REVIEWS
ROLL-UP REPORT
ABRIDGED

QUALITY SERVICE OFFICE
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INTRODUCTION

Student Legal Aid Services Societies (SLASS) are Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) funded, university-based legal aid providers engaged in the dual role of clinical legal education and delivery of legal aid services to low income Ontarians.

In 2001, the SLASS quality initiative was launched. The initiative involved consultation with the six SLASS and within LAO, and the development of a Quality Review Tool that established five SLASS quality dimensions as well as criteria and indicators. The review tool was used to conduct reviews of each SLASS.

The five broad quality dimensions contained in the SLASS review tool include:

1. Accountability and Management
2. Program Planning and Evaluation
3. Supervision
4. Client Relations
5. Delivery of Legal Services

The review tool was used as a checklist by QSO staff during SLASS site visits, and then as a template for preparing a quality report that includes commendations to validate a SLASS's strengths and recommendations where improvements are needed.

A. SYSTEM-WIDE FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Quality Dimension I (QDI) - Accountability & Management

Analysis of Results

The number of recommendations made under QDI flags accountability and management as an area where improvement was needed. The number of recommendations that were not implemented under QDI also raises questions. Implementation is highest under criteria where a SLASS is asked to set up a process (e.g. financial procedures, controls) or adopt a policy (e.g. human resources). By contrast, implementation is lowest under criteria 2 and 4 dealing with performance reviews of staff and the training and orientation of new staff. Some SLASS, in commenting on the reasons for not implementing or only partially implementing recommendations relating to performance reviews and training, indicated the need for additional resources/supports such as human resources management training and funding for staff training.

QDI-Conclusion

SLASS could benefit from examining collectively the area of performance reviews and training and orientation of staff to determine what improvements are needed and how they can be made. (QDI: criteria 2 and 4)

SLASS could benefit from sharing collectively practices regarding the development of co-operative relationships among those responsible for governance and the soliciting of staff and student input. (QDI: criteria 1 and 4)

Quality Dimension II (QDII) - Program Planning & Evaluation

Analysis of Results

SLASS acknowledge the importance of annual planning and evaluation as well as community and student feedback by implementing recommendations under these two criteria. Annual planning, evaluation and feedback need to be established as a critical aspect of SLASS operations and ‘institutionalized’. It is an important aspect of the SLASS accountability framework.

SLASS demonstrate commitment to clients and to quality service by communicating effectively and establishing co-operative relationships.

QDII-Conclusion

SLASS could benefit from collectively examining the area of annual planning, evaluation and client feedback to determine what improvements are needed and how they can be made. (QDII: criteria 1 and 3)

SLASS could benefit from sharing collectively practices for establishing co-operative relationships in the legal aid community and the courts and communicating services effectively to students and community. (QDII: criteria 1 and 2)

Quality Dimension III (QDIII) – Supervision

Analysis of Results

The number of recommendations made under QDIII flags supervision as an area where improvements were needed. SLASS have been responsive to implementing recommendations under QDIII. As training and supervision of students is critical to the functioning of any SLASS, SLASS should monitor and assess standards under QDIII related to student training and supervision. The risk of errors and omissions in a student environment is significant, together with the issue of liability. This risk and liability can be effectively managed and reduced with improved student training and supervision.

Review counsel are committed to being accessible to students.

QDIII-Conclusion

SLASS could benefit from collectively monitoring and assessing student training and supervision and developing best practices. (QDIII: criteria 1 and 3)

SLASS could benefit from sharing collectively practices regarding review counsel accessibility to students. (QDIII: criterion 4)

Quality Dimension IV - Client Relations

Analysis of Results

Some SLASS did not have a client conflict of interest policy or procedure, either manual or electronic. Some SLASS indicated a lack of technological resources to conduct effective electronic client conflict checks, while others found a manual system ineffective and cumbersome. Others suggested that given the nature of practice at a SLASS, conflict checks were unnecessary under criterion 2. As conflict checks are a requirement of the Law Society, and a key criterion under QDIV, SLASS are required to have a policy and procedure and to ensure practice conforms. QSO will follow up with the SLASS regarding conflict of interest checking systems.

Client accessibility remains a challenge for SLASS. Some SLASS indicated a lack of available resources to ensure compliance with accessibility criterion 4 which contains indicators such as 'being as free of physical barriers as possible', 'provision of services in a client's primary language', and 'equipment to allow communications with the deaf'.

QDIV-Conclusions

SLASS could benefit from exploring collectively solutions to the development of an effective conflict of interest policy and procedure as well as to ensuring greater client accessibility. (QDIV: criteria 2 and 4)

SLASS could benefit from sharing collectively practices regarding effective intake systems. (QDIV: criterion 1)

Quality Dimension V - Delivery of Legal Services

Analysis of Results

SLASS were responsive to implementing recommendations under QDV. SLASS also received the most commendations under this quality dimension dealing with the delivery of legal services. The review and monitoring of file management practices is a daily process. Given the active involvement of ever changing students with client files, and the importance of file management to legal education, SLASS should monitor and assess file management practices on a continuous basis.

Some SLASS did not have a tickler system that conformed to Law Society requirements. As with conflict of interest checks, some SLASS indicated a lack of technological resources to establish an effective, efficient tickler system, while others found a manual tickler system that conformed to Law Society requirements ineffective and cumbersome. A SLASS tickler system needs to conform to Law Society requirements, and criterion 7 under QDV. QSO will follow up with the SLASS regarding tickler systems.

QDV-Conclusions

SLASS could benefit from monitoring and assessing file management practices on a continuous basis and exploring collectively solutions for ensuring compliance of SLASS tickler systems with Law Society requirements. (QDV: criteria 2, 3, 6, 7)

SLASS could benefit from collectively sharing practices regarding service delivery, including well documented timely service, organized case-files, and professional communications. (QDV: criteria 1, 2, 8, 9)

B. IMPLICATIONS FOR SLASS AND LAO

The conclusion of the SLASS baseline reviews marks a transition point. SLASS have implemented many of the recommendations made during the reviews. With processes and policies established, it is hoped that periodic internal reviews built into SLASS practices will ensure continued adherence to quality standards. Self-evaluation and self-reporting by SLASS will lead to empowerment and ownership for quality. QSO will begin a process similar to clinics and develop a self-assessment tool that SLASS can use. In addition, the launch of SLASS client service measures last year provides another vehicle for monitoring and improving the delivery of legal services to SLASS clients by SLASS themselves.

LAO and SLASS need to work collectively where possible and appropriate to address any quality dimensions that remain weak, particularly in areas where recommendations were not implemented. In addition, SLASS received many commendations. There is a wealth of knowledge, information and best practices each SLASS possesses that from LAO’s perspective could be shared more readily to arrive at effective solutions to common challenges. LAO will continue to do its part to support SLASS in areas where needed.

Areas where on-going work is needed include:

<p>QDI – Cr. 2, 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Performance reviews <input type="checkbox"/> Training and orientation of staff 	<p>QDII – Cr. 1, 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Annual planning, evaluation <input type="checkbox"/> Client feedback
<p>QDIII – Cr. 1, 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Student training <input type="checkbox"/> Student supervision 	<p>QDIV – Cr. 2, 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict of interest procedure <input type="checkbox"/> Client accessibility
<p style="text-align: center;">QDV – Cr. 2, 3, 6, 7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> File management practices <input type="checkbox"/> Tickler system 	

Areas where practices exist that need to be shared with others in the system include:

<p>QDI – Cr. 1, 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-operative relationships among governance parties <input type="checkbox"/> Solicitation of staff and student input 	<p>QDII – Cr. 1, 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Co-operative relationships with other legal aid providers and partners <input type="checkbox"/> Communication of services to students and community
<p>QDIII – Cr. 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Accessibility of review counsel to students 	<p>QDIV – Cr. 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Effective intake system
<p style="text-align: center;">QDV – Cr. 1, 2, 8, 9</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Timely, well-documented service <input type="checkbox"/> Well organized files, detailed dockets <input type="checkbox"/> Conscientious students <input type="checkbox"/> Timely, professional client communications 	

C. CONCLUSION

Overall, the SLASS are committed to providing high quality cost effective and efficient services and meet many of the criteria and indicators contained within the review tool. Moreover, under each of the five quality dimensions, SLASS received commendations. As with all organizations, there is room for improvement, particularly under the quality dimensions and criteria identified above. Where recommendations were not implemented, SLASS identified inadequate resources as a primary cause. QSO will follow up with SLASS on areas of critical importance where implementation was low. LAO will continue to work with the SLASS to ensure quality standards are maintained and enhanced, and encourage the SLASS to work collectively drawing on the wealth of resources and practices within the system to find creative solutions to challenges.