

Courthouse Application

On June 3, 2008 the Ontario government announced a new Justice on Target strategy to reduce court delays and appearances by 30 per cent over the next four years. This is the first time the government has set a target for reducing court appearances.

The Justice on Target strategy will reduce the provincial average of days and court appearances needed to complete a criminal case. Also for the first time, criminal court statistics will be available to the public, so that they can follow the strategy's progress and see the impact on courthouses in their local communities.

Legal Aid Ontario is playing a major role in helping reduce court appearances. The first two initiatives implemented as part of the strategy are expansions of programs that have already proven successful in reducing court appearances and delays.

On-site Legal Aid

Currently, on-site applications are accepted by Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) in nine Ontario courthouses. Legal Aid Ontario will be working with the Ministry of the Attorney General to help meet the strategy's target.

Legal Aid is opening application offices in an additional 17 criminal court locations in Ontario in the coming months. When they are open, on-site legal aid offices will operate in 26 courthouses serving almost 80 per cent of criminal legal aid clients province-wide.

In these courthouses, an accused person can apply for legal aid on-site and, if successful, could retain a lawyer more quickly. Getting a lawyer on the case faster can help reduce the number of appearances needed to conduct a case, and allow more cases to move through the system more effectively.

Simplified Online Application Process (SOAP)

To help clients move through the court system faster, LAO introduced a simplified online application process (SOAP). SOAP is a pilot project of a new online application and eligibility process for clients who meet certain criteria.

Using SOAP, LAO staff can help a client apply for a legal aid certificate online and if they are approved, they can print it right away. This service is currently being tested in Legal Aid's area offices and duty counsel offices in the courts.

Eventually, SOAP will be expanded to community service providers, such as shelters and drop-in centres, caseworks and defence lawyers so that they can submit online legal aid applications for clients. SOAP could possibly expand the access points for legal aid services, especially for certain groups of clients already dealing with service providers at convenient locations or in familiar environments.

About 40 per cent of legal aid applicants meet both the financial and legal criteria for certificate coverage because of their financial status and/or the seriousness of their legal matter. Legal eligibility criteria were analyzed to determine which cases usually qualify for the certificate program.

The focus of SOAP is on this group of clearly eligible clients. It opens up the possibility that one day will enable lawyers and service providers to submit certificate applications and start work on a client's case more quickly.

Online Lawyer Acknowledgement (OLA)

Lawyers who do legal aid work now have the ability to acknowledge legal aid certificates online. As soon as the client presents the certificate and it is acknowledged, lawyers can start working and billing on the case by the next day.

How OLA works:

A client indicates to LAO which lawyer they want. The lawyer receives the paper certificate and signs into Legal Aid Online, an online billing program, where they acknowledge the certificate. The certificate is then updated in the system and can be billed against 24 hours later.

Using SOAP, clients receive a Confirmation of Legal Aid Eligibility instead of a certificate. Lawyers access the Online Lawyer Acknowledgement (OLA) portal by entering the intake number listed on the client's Confirmation of Legal Aid Eligibility form to acknowledge and print the legal aid certificate.