

Thank you for your kind introduction....

As you all know, Legal Aid Ontario has been the subject of a number of media articles and the Ontario Ombudsman recently announced a review of Legal Aid Ontario's administration of special cases. We welcome the review and we see this as an opportunity to address a number of strategic questions in an alternative forum that will strengthen access to justice for low-income people and the wider justice system.

That being said, I am happy to be here today to have been asked to share with you a mini-Legal Aid Ontario State of the Union.

I would like to begin by reminding you of the important role the private bar plays in access to justice in Ontario. LASA recognizes the private bar as the foundation for the provision of legal aid services. Without you and your membership, thousand of low-income people would not have access to valuable assistance when their homes, families, livelihoods, or freedoms are in jeopardy.

I would like to take this opportunity to talk to you about legal aid services in Ontario and the strides Legal Aid Ontario is taking to expand services and maximize resource for low-income people.

In 1996, the Provincial Government asked me to lead a team of law professors and researchers in conducting a comprehensive review of legal aid services in Ontario. From this review a report, titled "A Blueprint for Publicly Funded Legal Services", was released in September 1997.

The report made 92 recommendations including establishing an independent provincial body to govern legal aid.

Building on the results from the review, in 1998 the Government Ontario enacted the *Legal Aid Services Act*, which renewed and strengthened the province's commitment to legal aid and established Legal Aid Ontario as an independent publicly funded and publicly accountable non-profit corporation.

Today, Legal Aid Ontario provides assistance to hundreds of thousands of people through a network of 51 area offices in 48 communities across the province and 80 community legal clinics, including 17 specialty clinics. In addition we provide services through a number of programs including in-house legal services, duty counsel, student legal services, and the legal aid certificate program, which gives low-income people access to legal representation from a pool of thousands of private lawyers, such as yourselves, who undertake legal aid work.

Since its inception, Legal Aid Ontario has grown and evolved to meet the immense challenge of ensuring low-income people have access to fair and equitable justice, which is their right in a free and democratic society such as ours. However, even bigger changes lie ahead as Legal Aid Ontario positions itself to be as effective as possible in the face of a rapidly changing environment, which is creating vast opportunities and challenges for all public institutions.

Moving forward LAO needs to ensure that the appropriate tools and mechanisms are in place to respond to a changing environment and continue to support the justice system.

Whether it is through the Duty Counsel Program, community legal clinics and student legal aid societies, or the legal aid certificates program, all of our services play an important role in the administration of justice in Ontario.

Earlier this year, the Ontario Legislature approved an additional \$51 million dollars over three years for Legal Aid Ontario. This new funding demonstrates the value the people of Ontario hold for a fair and equitable justice system and the trust they have placed in us to ensure that every dollar is spent effectively and efficiently.

Respecting this trust, we have established a goal – or Value Agenda – for ourselves to match the amount of our 2010 budgetary base increase of \$19 million through program and administrative efficiencies over the next five years. In other words, we are committing that by 2012, our internally-generated improvements will create an additional \$19 million of legal aid value, matching the government's \$19 million increase to our base funding for 2010. This target represents an annual savings of approximately 1% of our current budget.

In so doing, we will ensure that the savings we generate are re-invested in two key areas: More service to clients and modernizing Legal Aid Ontario as an institution.

It is an ambitious goal, but it is doable.

To ensure we achieve this significant increase in legal aid impact, we have adopted a management strategy to govern the next five years of LAO's development. Our new strategy is driven by five key management principles that will be applied at every level of our operation.

They are:

Innovation: we will establish an even more vigorous corporate culture that allows ideas to come forward and embraces new approaches to solving problems.

Measurement: we will create and implement modern tools to measure LAO's performance, identify our successes, and inform our decisions.

Prioritization: we will establish inclusive and accountable processes and criteria for making clear and principled decisions on LAO's priorities and the allocation of resources.

Accountability: we will ensure that clear, sound management and financial accountability systems are in place throughout LAO so there is no doubt as to where the responsibility lies for taking action and making decisions at all levels; and we will ensure that the legislation governing LAO and setting out its precise roles and functions will be scrupulously followed.

Co-ordination: we will give full expression to our legislated mandate to maximize impact for clients by improving the coordination of legal aid services and ensuring that LAO is managed to ensure synergy among all of its programming and administrative functions.

I am pleased to say, that we are already seeing positive results from our new management strategy.

We have implemented a new corporate reporting structure within the organization that is set up across four geographic regions in Ontario. This new organizational design allow us to be more responsive to the needs of clients and staff by improving the co-ordination of services and fully engaging local stakeholders in our programs.

In keeping with our value agenda, we have already identified areas where we can generate savings. We recently negotiated a lease for new office space close to the Eaton Centre in downtown Toronto that will generate almost \$900,000 in

annual savings. In addition to the savings, the move will help facilitate co-ordination of services and resources by co-locating the Legal Aid Ontario Provincial Office, Toronto Area Office, and the Family Law and Refugee Law Offices on a single floor at the new location.

Let me just remind you that these savings will all be reinvested in expanding services for clients and ensuring LAO remains a modern and efficient organization.

The Ontario government's recent infusion of \$51 million in new funding to LAO over three years is a significant investment. This new funding provides LAO with the stability to make long-term strategic planning decisions. We are now implementing a combination of short and long-term strategies to meet the evolving and diversified needs of our clients and the justice system in Ontario including:

- Increasing the legal aid tariff rate paid to private bar lawyers to ensure that there will be a steady stream of legal aid service providers for our clients.
- Re-examining LAO's financial eligibility criteria to determine the appropriate poverty benchmarks against which to assess LAO clients, and to develop a new simplified test that balances simplicity with fairness to individual applicants.
- Strengthening family law services by increasing the number of family certificates issued annually by 750. In addition, Legal Aid Ontario has allocated one time funding for a pool of 500 'reserve' family certificates to deal with fluctuations in demand for family law services over the next three years.

- Boosting funding for **Big Cases** to ensure adequate resources are available to provide legal coverage for these types of cases without jeopardizing other legal aid services.
- Expand the community legal clinic system by providing funding for the South Asian Community Legal Clinic.
- Strengthening poverty law services with increased funding for clinic salaries and operating costs and improving French language services.
- Developing an organizational wide strategy for improving Aboriginal services, including working the Ministry of the Attorney General to ensure a high level of coordination between LAO and the Ministry of The Attorney Generals' Aboriginal strategies.

As I am sure you will all agree, access to justice is the cornerstone of a democratic society. As you have heard LAO is by no-means a static organization, but rather a dynamic and evolving one that is poised to address both known and unknown challenges and to continue to fulfill its role as a partner in the justice system and fulfill its mandate of administering a cost effective and efficient system of providing legal services for low-income people in Ontario.

Thank you.