

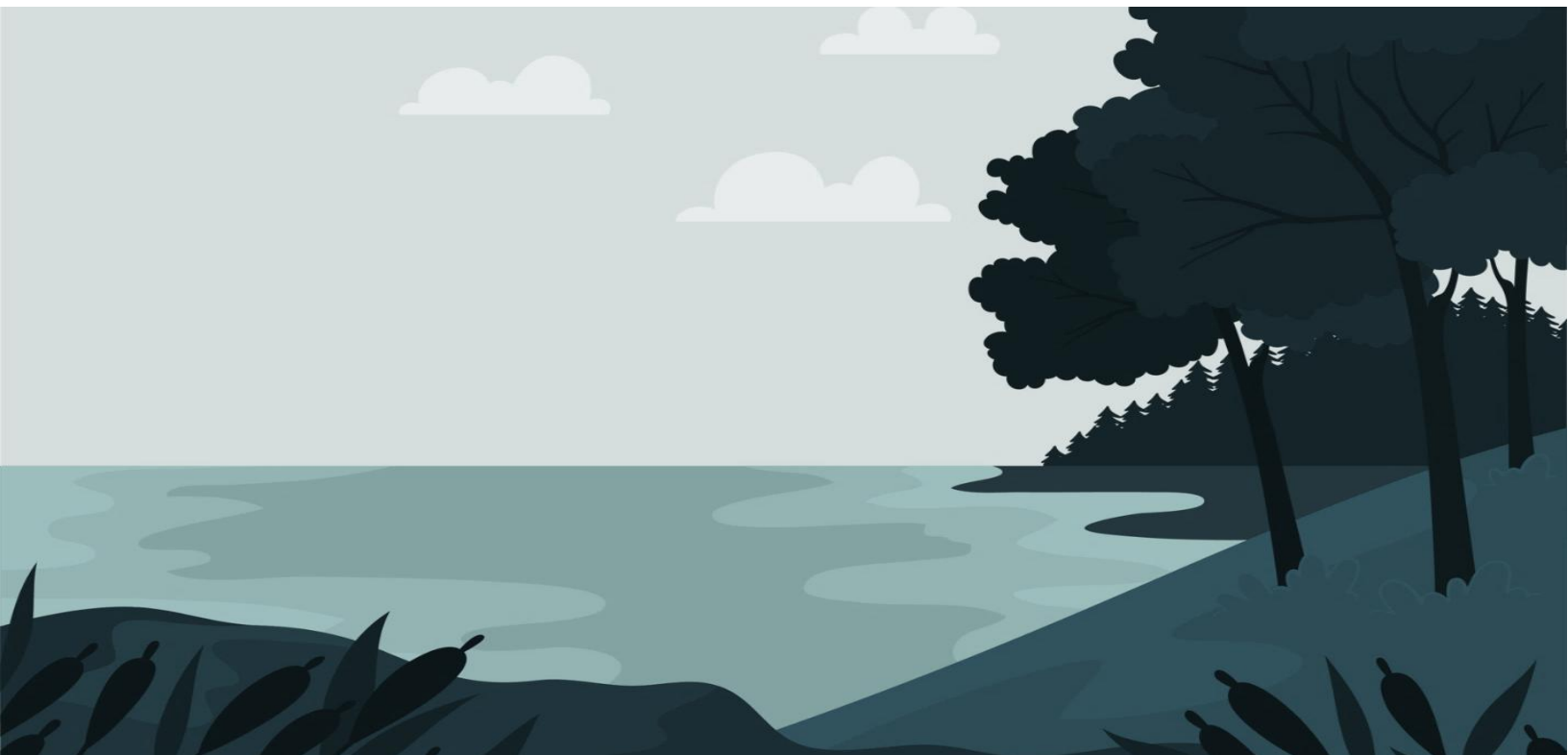


Legal Aid Ontario

2025-2030

Indigenous Services Action Plan

This Action Plan is intended to guide Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) employees and to inform community partners and justice sector participants about the steps being taken to improve legal aid services for First Nations, Inuit and Métis clients.



Land Acknowledgment

Legal Aid Ontario recognizes that our work, and the work of our community partners takes place on traditional Indigenous territories across Ontario. We are thankful to be able to work and live in these territories. We are thankful to the First Nations, Métis and Inuit people who have cared for these territories since time immemorial and who continue to contribute to the strength of Ontario and to all communities across the province.

Legal Aid Ontario would like to acknowledge with gratitude the original stewards of the lands on which our Toronto offices are located. As residents and employees in the traditional and treaty territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, Michi Saagig, Anishnabeg, we also acknowledge this area has been home to the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and their ancestors. We commit to understanding the history of this area, acknowledging inherent and treaty rights, and we are here with humility as colleagues, learners and allies.

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Introducing the Indigenous Services Action Plan

This Action Plan outlines Legal Aid Ontario's five-year strategy to improve legal services for Indigenous clients across Ontario. Grounded in respect, equity and cultural safety, the plan identifies four strategic focus areas and related initiatives that align with LAO's broader strategic goals and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. It is intended for both internal staff and external justice participants who work with or serve Indigenous communities.

A message from Fallon Melander, Associate Vice President, Indigenous Services



THE JOURNEY TOWARD A MORE HOLISTIC AND STRATEGIC APPROACH TO LEGAL SERVICES FOR INDIGENOUS CLIENTS

Just over a year ago, Legal Aid Ontario established the **Indigenous Services Department (ISD)**, as part of its dedication to improving legal aid services to First Nations, Inuit and Métis clients. Indigenous clients are at the heart of the ISD's work. Through this Action Plan, LAO reaffirms its commitment to Indigenous communities.

Over the past several months, we have taken time to listen, reflect, and thoughtfully consider the path ahead. From the [Relationships First, Business Later, Part I](#) report released in 2021, to [A Time for Action: Indigenous Services at LAO](#), released in 2024, we know there is still work to do.

Clients are at the centre of everything LAO does. This Action Plan puts Indigenous clients at the centre of our work. LAO has developed a comprehensive, organization-wide Action Plan to further its commitment to advancing reconciliation and to ensuring that its services are effectively aligned with the needs and priorities of Indigenous clients and communities. The plan calls on everyone at LAO to play an essential role in meeting our goals. We commit to moving forward in a meaningful way.

As you move through the Action Plan, you will meet a fictional client, whom we have named Dakota. Dakota and their journey have been developed based on the reality of numerous Indigenous clients who are caught in the justice system, due to colonial harms, systemic racism, socioeconomic inequality and the lack of culturally appropriate supports. As we first meet Dakota, we see them struggling and unfortunately ending up entangled in the justice system, alone and scared. Our hope is that when a person like Dakota ends up becoming a legal aid client, they are supported, provided culturally

appropriate service and representation, and ultimately receiving the help they need. This Action Plan sets out that path forward for clients like Dakota.

The creation of the ISD presents a unique opportunity to reimagine how LAO engages with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit clients, communities, and service providers, while transforming the delivery of legal aid services to Indigenous communities throughout Ontario. It offers the potential of greater capacity, resources and focus for Indigenous legal issues at LAO.

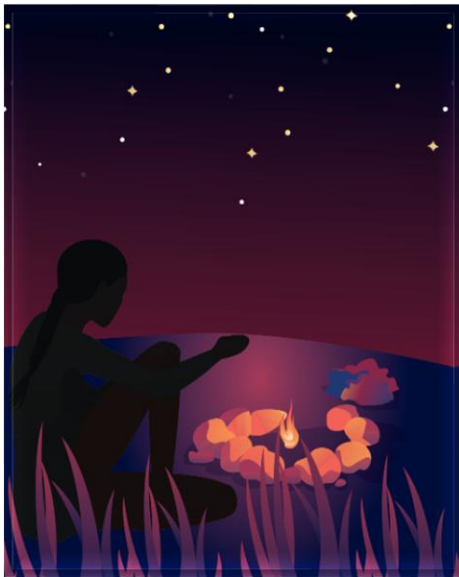
Our vision is to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities together to ensure everyone has access to fair, culturally respectful legal aid services and to create lasting change through collective action. With renewed purpose, we are committed to supporting Indigenous communities and ensuring that every client is treated with dignity, fairness and respect. We invite our clients, Indigenous communities and justice partners to engage with the ISD as we build this future together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Fallon Melander". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fallon Melander
Associate Vice President, Indigenous Services

Meet Dakota

Dakota is a member of Wiikwemkoong First Nation. Their father, who is non-Indigenous, left the family shortly after Dakota was born. Their mom, the daughter of a Residential School survivor, has struggled with addiction for as long as Dakota can remember. Dakota's Aunties have tried to provide Dakota stability and support but as Dakota got older, it became harder to stay connected.



Dakota struggled at school and did not have very many friends. At 18, Dakota met Sam, a 25-year old from the same community who makes his living selling fentanyl. Dakota and Sam start seeing each other and three months into their relationship, Dakota realizes that they are pregnant. Sam decides they should move to Sudbury where he believes there will be more opportunity to make money. Despite their Aunties' pleas, Dakota moves to Sudbury with Sam.

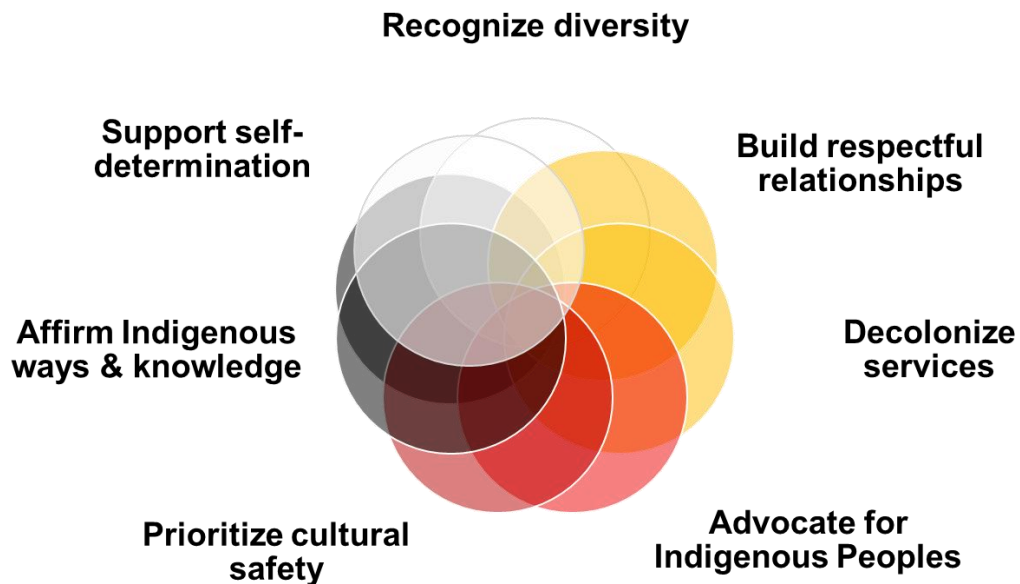
They move in with one of Sam's friends. The stress of the pregnancy, leaving their community support, and Sam's ongoing substance use have intensified their arguments.

One night, an argument about money turns physical. Sam loses his temper and shoves Dakota. A neighbour phones the police who arrest both Sam and Dakota. Police take both to the Sudbury jail and later charge Dakota with domestic assault.

Alone and scared, Dakota is connected to Legal Aid Ontario over the phone.

“My name is Dakota and I need your help.”

LAO's Indigenous Services guiding principles



The ISD is focused on:

- **leading the development and execution of LAO's strategy** to provide culturally appropriate, effective services to Indigenous clients in Ontario;
- **developing innovative Indigenous policies and programs** for the delivery of legal aid services;
- **working collaboratively with Indigenous legal service providers** and justice sector participants to ensure the highest quality of legal services for all First Nations, Inuit and Métis clients;
- **strengthening LAO's relationships with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities** and service providers by continually promoting respect, trust, transparency, accountability and communication.

2024-2025 accomplishments

Since the establishment of the ISD, significant strides have been made. This Action Plan builds on those successes.

- The department established its vision, mandate, budget and strategies.
- Oversight of Indigenous legal services organizations was transferred to the ISD.
- ISD negotiated a new three-year service agreement with Nishnawbe Aski Legal Services Corporation.
- ISD also negotiated a one-year service agreement with Aboriginal Legal Services.
- LAO launched Maamwi, an informal Indigenous staff network.
- LAO launched the second cohort of the Waawiye mentorship program in January 2025.
- ISD fully integrated the work of the Aboriginal Justice Strategy into its structure.
- Staff developed learning resources for Indigenous days of significance in collaboration with the EDIB office.
- ISD developed internal and external communication for information sharing, including the publication of this report.
- New online content was created about the ISD for LAO's internal site, The Source.
- ISD built meaningful partnerships with every division within LAO.
- The department supported the development of a legal aid approach to Indigenous child protection under the federal act.
- Staff mapped current Indigenous partners and identified future opportunities for collaboration.
- The department designed and delivered training on Indigenous communities and their legal needs.

LAO's Indigenous Services Strategic Five-Year Action Plan

LAO's Indigenous Services Action Plan supports the goals of LAO's broader strategic plan: to create paths to strengthen our organization, innovate service delivery, and empower our clients by providing the services they need to navigate the legal system with dignity and fairness. The Action Plan is grounded in the ISD's guiding principles, and aligned with LAO's mandate, vision, and mission, and it contributes to the implementation of several Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action related to justice, including Calls 1, 27, 30, 31, 38, 47, 57 and 80.

Each focus area is associated with multiple initiatives, many of which originate from the report [*Relationships First, Business Later, Part I*](#). Embedding these initiatives across the organization, with clear accountabilities and progress measures, will be the key to success. These efforts will help LAO deliver more responsive, holistic services to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit clients across Ontario.

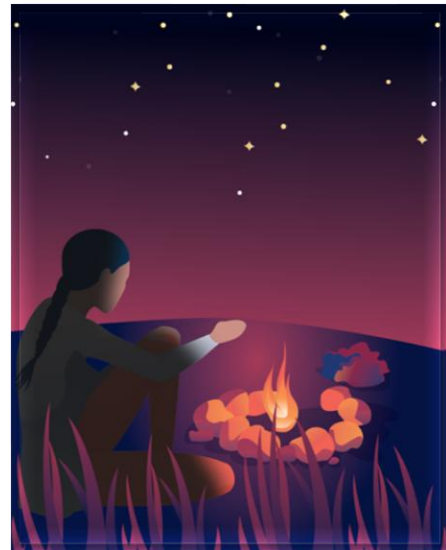
Strategic initiatives

Client-centred services

We will put First Nations, Inuit and Métis clients at the centre of everything we do to provide culturally informed and accessible services, and improve justice outcomes.

For LAO, this means providing culturally informed and accessible services to Indigenous clients to foster trust in legal aid services and support better justice outcomes.

- Creating a communication and outreach strategy focused on Indigenous clients and communities
- Developing approaches by area of law to better serve Indigenous clients
- Improving the quality of services provided to Indigenous clients
- Streamlining internal processes to ensure greater responsiveness and efficiency
- Supporting Indigenous-led and community-based justice initiatives



For clients like Dakota, it means:

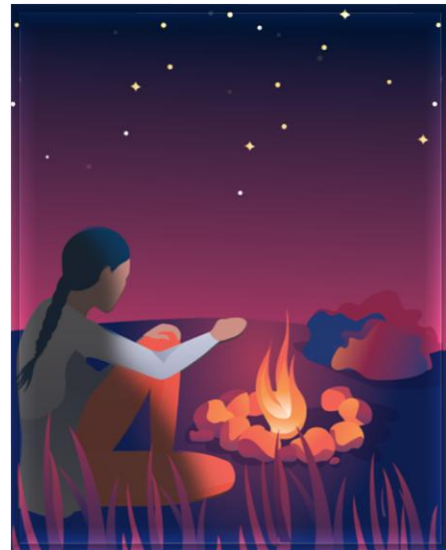
- **Easier access to information**, available options and processes to access legal aid services and connect with community justice programs
- **Working with high quality and culturally competent lawyers** trained to effectively advocate for Indigenous clients
- **Feeling seen, heard and valued** as an Indigenous person with unique circumstances, needs and traditions

Organizational excellence

We will create structures and processes that are responsive to Indigenous needs to ensure cultural safety in the workplace and through the delivery of legal services.

For LAO, this means creating structures and processes that are responsive to Indigenous needs to ensure cultural safety in the workplace and through the delivery of legal services.

- Developing a strategic approach and coordination framework to identify Indigenous initiatives and enhance reporting across LAO
- Providing comprehensive and ongoing Indigenous focused training and resources
- Increasing access to information and language services for Indigenous clients



For clients like Dakota, it means:

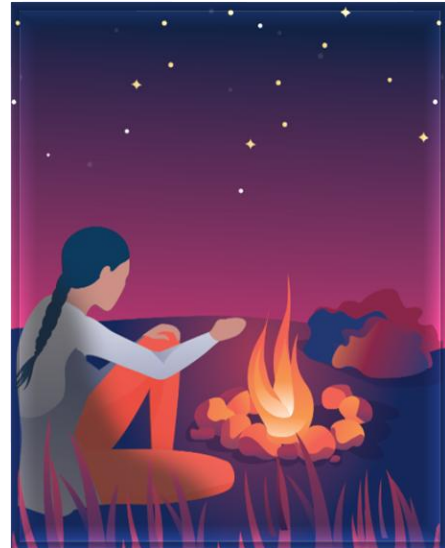
- **Having more trust in Legal Aid Ontario** and confidence in the delivery of holistic and trauma-informed services
- **Receiving services tailored to their legal and cultural needs**, which leads to more just and fair outcomes
- **Feeling acknowledged, respected and empowered**

Attract and retain talent

We will provide staff and service providers with the supports they need to provide high-quality legal services to Indigenous clients.

For LAO, this means creating a strategy to attract, retain and support staff and service providers in delivering high-quality, culturally responsive legal services to Indigenous clients.

- Attracting diverse and culturally intelligent professionals, committed to serving Indigenous communities
- Fostering a supportive and inclusive work environment that encourages long-term commitment and high-quality services
- Promoting Indigenous staff well-being by prioritizing cultural safety and connection



For clients like Dakota, it means:

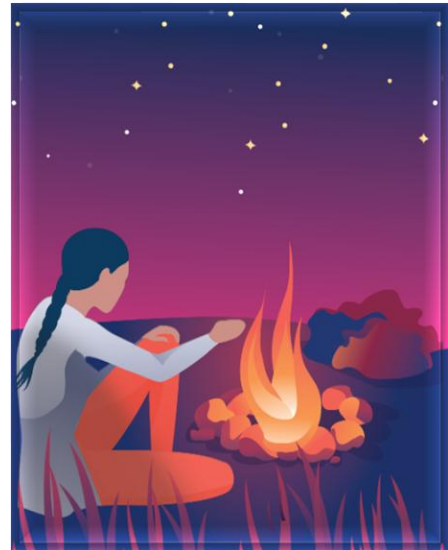
- Interacting with **Indigenous legal aid employees who are culturally intelligent and respectful** of their identity and legal needs
- **Working with lawyers who go beyond** the minimum requirements and are committed to providing excellent representation
- **Avoiding the unnecessary need to relive and recount their lived experiences** and unique histories, particularly in relation to well-documented facts

Community and justice sector engagement

We will partner with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and organizations, as well as justice sector participants, to improve the coordination and effectiveness of services.

For LAO, this means having Indigenous Services playing a lead role in justice sector modernization and improving the coordination and effectiveness of services through partnerships with Indigenous communities, organizations, and justice sector participants

- Strengthening relationships with Indigenous communities and organizations to ensure legal aid services meet their needs
- Collaborating with Indigenous communities to co-develop service delivery models
- Establishing an advisory council with Indigenous representation to guide strategy and feedback
- Improving communication and co-ordination between LAO and justice participants to address the over-representation of Indigenous clients



For clients like Dakota, it means:

- **A culturally appropriate legal aid system** that incorporates advice and ways of knowing from First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities into its strategies
- Having **trust that LAO is committed to driving meaningful change for Indigenous clients** through collaboration with other justice sector participants
- The **opportunity to provide feedback and comments to LAO** through Indigenous communities and organizations.

Measuring progress

We will develop metrics, track progress and report outcomes.

As part of our commitment to excellence, transparency and continuous improvement, LAO will track and communicate the progress we make against this plan and continuously evaluate the following measures. We are committed to learning and improving. These measures will show what is working and what still needs attention.

Client-centred services:

1. Client journey and satisfaction
2. Number of Indigenous clients served and their outcomes
3. Contact centre experience

Organizational excellence:

1. Budget allocated to direct client services
2. Indigenous focused training and resources
3. Enterprise Risk

Attract and retain talent:

1. Retention and engagement of Indigenous staff
2. Roster engagement
3. Equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging

Community and justice sector engagement:

1. Effectiveness of agreements with Indigenous Legal Services Organizations (ILSOs)
2. Relationships with ILSOs and community participants
3. Communication and co-ordination between LAO and justice participants



Dakota's mind turns to a time when they felt lost and alone. Dakota sits by the water, surrounded by their Aunties. Their daughter is close by, excitedly watching Uncle skipping rocks. Dakota knows the road ahead still holds challenges, but they feel empowered to move forward. With a clear path ahead and the knowledge of where to turn for support, they embrace the journey with renewed strength.



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Legal Aid Ontario receives financial assistance from the Government of Ontario, the Law Foundation of Ontario, and the Government of Canada.

Ce document est disponible en français.

June 2025