

Legal Aid Ontario

B3: Better Billing Bulletin

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LAO is transforming its service delivery and administration by making greater use of technology and expanding client access points to ensure legal aid help is more easily available to low-income Ontarians across the province.

As part of this transformation, LAO is improving services for lawyers who do legal aid work to make it easier for them to do business with LAO, such as online certificate acknowledgement, billing and status information. These initiatives streamline processes, increase efficiency and promote faster resolutions.

The Lawyer Services and Payments (LSP) Department is undergoing organizational change along with the rest of LAO. When the transformation of LSP is over, new automation processes will lead to faster payment of accounts, different payment and billing choices and a more accessible “regional” team to work with lawyers and process accounts.

Currently, LSP staff are being reoriented along regional lines and retrained, technical systems are being recalibrated and administrative processes reorganized. As a result, while LAO is still paying 70% of the accounts we receive within 21 days, the payment of approximately 30% of accounts, including discretion accounts which require manual review, is delayed.

This is a temporary situation. Delayed payments are not acceptable to LAO and resolving this problem is our top priority. We are actively working on the entire inventory of overdue accounts with priority being given to those lawyers experiencing financial hardship or with the largest number of overdue accounts, and those accounts that are the oldest or have the highest dollar value for individual lawyers and firms. It is not necessary for lawyers to contact LAO to have their accounts paid, whether or not overdue, in the normal course. The majority of overdue accounts will be paid by the end of August. LAO regrets the delays in payment lawyers are experiencing.

Lawyer Service Centre HOTLINE

(416) 979-9934 or 1-866-979-9934

We have set up a HOTLINE through the Lawyer Service Centre. Lawyers can contact the Hotline to inquire as to the status of their account and if experiencing financial hardship due to the delay in payments, request an “expedite” if the account is more than 60 days old.

For an “expedite”, we require a written request briefly outlining your financial hardship and the account you would like expedited. We apologize for the delays.

Please note: when calling from the Greater Toronto Area, you must dial (416)979-9934. The 1-866 number does not accept local calls.

Overdue accounts

Lawyer Services and Payments has identified all the overdue accounts within the system together with the cash value by individual lawyer. We are focusing our efforts on paying lawyers who have the largest number of overdue accounts and the highest dollar value. By these efforts we hope to reduce the financial hardship some lawyers may be experiencing.

What is the nature of the delay?

The delay involves the processing of match exception accounts, i.e., discretion accounts, late billed accounts, private retainer accounts, etc. At present, the majority of discretion accounts being reviewed by staff were received in March. LAO’s service level agreement commits to a 60-day payment period from date of receipt.

Why is this happening and how long will it last?

Payment slow downs have been caused by delays in the implementation of technological solutions which will speed up payments in the near future.

Completion of payment automation is expected in August. Training and re-orientation of staff as a result of restructuring will be completed in July. LAO will meet its service level commitments to lawyers by September. In the meanwhile, 70% of all accounts submitted continue to be paid automatically and the majority of overdue discretion accounts will be processed throughout July and August. Please contact the Lawyer Service Centre Hotline to have accounts more than 60 days old expedited if needed.

Is there any connection between LAO's funding or financial situation and the delays in payments?

No. There is no connection between LAO's funding or financial situation and the slowdown in payments to lawyers. This is an operational issue, not a financial one.

What is being done about the situation?

LAO has implemented the following solutions to address the delay in account payments and reduce financial hardship for lawyers:

1. LAO has created a HOTLINE through the Lawyer Service Centre - (416) 979-9934 or 1-866-979-9934. Lawyers can call for account status and expedites of overdue accounts.
2. Staffing initiatives:
 - Lawyer Payments Manager has been redeployed from operations to fulltime processing of discretion accounts
 - A lawyer has been hired on a short term contract to process GTA discretion accounts (the GTA Region produces 50% of all accounts)
 - A temporary administrative assistant has been hired to support e-fax sorting and distribution
 - A temporary adjuster has been hired
 - Existing staff are working overtime
3. Expediting account payment for lawyers experiencing financial hardship.
4. Contacting lawyers and outlining a plan for addressing delays in the payment of standard certificate matters over tariff max.
5. Ensuring that the certificate bar are regularly informed with details of progress in addressing the backlog.

Effective September, LAO is automating a process that will pay to the tariff maximum accounts submitted over the tariff where the lawyer has not asked for a discretionary increase. This will reduce substantially the accounts inventory and ensure quicker payment.

How has LAO communicated?

LAO has been communicating regularly with the profession and the Ministry of the Attorney General about the backlog. Lawyers have been informed of the delays in payment through the Better Billing Bulletin (B3) e-newsletter that has been both e-mailed and posted on LAO's website, as well as through the Online portal bulletin board.

How will things be better after the transformation of Lawyer Payments is over?

Things will be better in a number of important ways:

1. We are automating the payment of accounts submitted over the tariff max with no discretion request. You will receive quicker payment on these accounts.
2. By automating the payment of some accounts, we will free up more staff time for processing discretion accounts. You will receive quicker payment on discretion accounts.
3. We have added more capacity to the processing of disbursement requests. You will have quicker "turn arounds" on disbursement authorizations.
4. We have created regional lawyer payment teams consisting of a staff lawyer, adjusters, and administrative and payables clerks to work on all your accounts and disbursement requests. You will know who to contact and will deal with the same individuals all the time. Watch for further details in your B3.
5. We now involve your District Area Director in discretion decision-making. You will benefit from the experience and knowledge of local conditions that the District Area Director brings to discretion decision making.
6. We are creating different ways for paying lawyers, including block fees. You will receive quicker payment under certificates covered by block fees.

Questions?

Please let us know if you have questions or if there are topics you'd like to see us cover by contacting the Lawyer Service Centre at pl-lsc@lao.on.ca



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