



LEGAL AID ONTARIO

Indigenous Services Action Plan 2025-2030: Progress report

Updated September 2026

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



LEGAL AID ONTARIO

AIDE JURIDIQUE ONTARIO



Land acknowledgement

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 and to those who have cared for and continue to contribute to the strength of Ontario.

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, the Michi Saagig, and the 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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Indigenous Services Action Plan 2025-2030: Progress Report 2026

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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.

Meet Dakota

Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) provides services to Indigenous clients across Ontario, including those in urban centres, First Nation communities, and rural and remote areas. Services are delivered through the Ontario courts, community-based legal clinics, and specialized courts, such as Indigenous Persons Courts.

Dakota was introduced in 2025 when the LAO's Indigenous Services Department released its 2025 – 2030 Action Plan. This is their story. While fictional, it reflects the experiences and legal issues commonly faced by many Indigenous clients served by LAO. This case study was developed to provide context on the diverse needs of Indigenous clients, the legal challenges they encounter, and the types of services and supports LAO provides.



Dakota is a member of a First Nation located on an island in Northern Ontario. 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 aunts have tried to provide Dakota stability and support but as Dakota got older, it became harder to stay connected to their community and culture.

Dakota struggled at school and did not have many friends. At 18, Dakota met Sam, a 25-year-old from the same community who made his living selling drugs. Dakota and Sam began a

relationship, and three months later Dakota learned they were pregnant. Sam decided they should move to Sudbury, believing there would be more opportunities to make money there. Despite their aunties' pleas, Dakota moved to Sudbury with Sam.

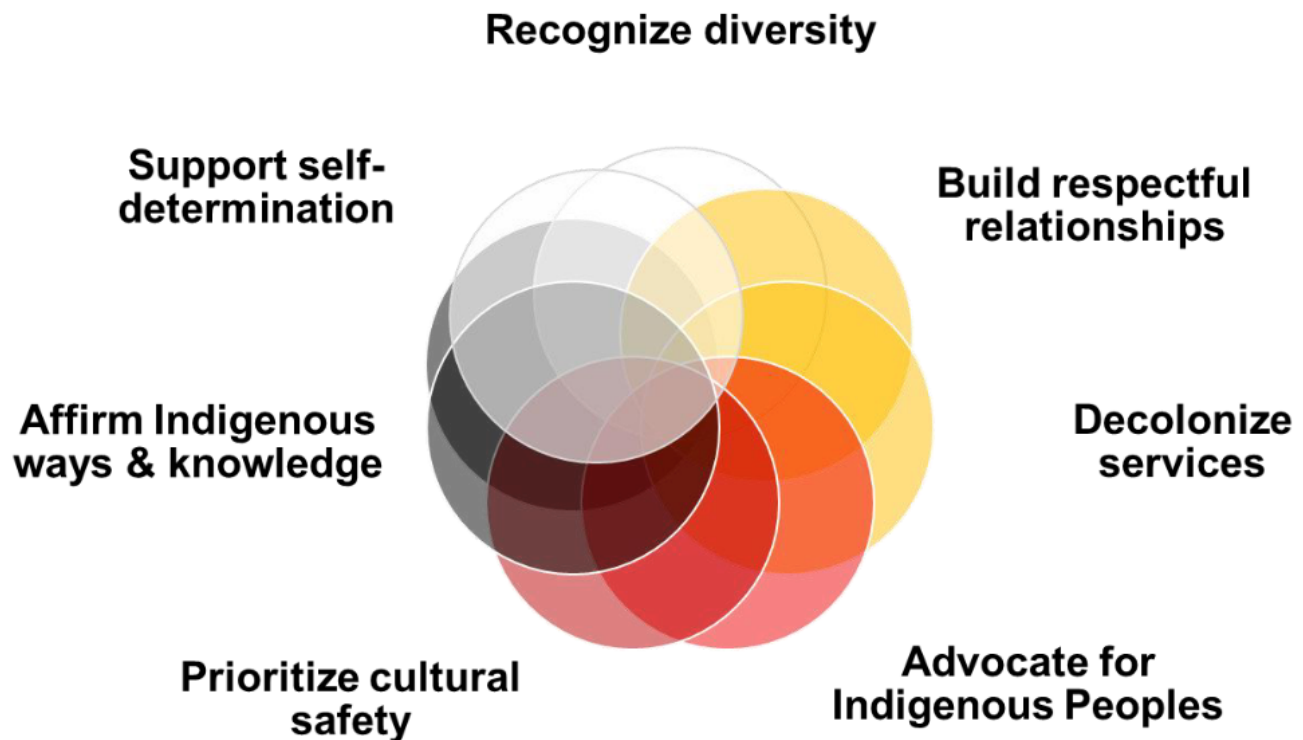
The couple moved in with one of Sam's friends, and Dakota later gave birth to a baby daughter. The stress of caring for a newborn, being separated from family and community supports, financial pressures, and Sam's ongoing substance use placed strain on their relationship. Their arguments became more frequent and more intense.

One night, an argument about money turned physical. Sam lost his temper and shoved Dakota. When Dakota pushed him away to protect herself, a neighbour heard the disturbance and called the police. Officers arrived and arrested both Sam and Dakota. They were taken to the Sudbury jail, and Dakota was later charged with domestic assault.

Alone, frightened, and far from their community, Dakota was connected to Legal Aid Ontario over the phone.

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

LAO's Indigenous Services guiding principles



- **Recognize diversity:** Acknowledge the varied lived experiences and unique needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in Ontario.
- **Build respectful relationships:** Foster positive, meaningful, and respectful relationships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and organizations.
- **Decolonize services:** Create structures and processes to decolonize LAO's approach to Indigenous services.
- **Advocate for Indigenous Peoples:** Support the interests of Indigenous people, families and communities within LAO's areas of influence.
- **Prioritize cultural safety:** Foster cultural safety in the workplace and throughout our service delivery by actively practising cultural humility and recognizing our shared responsibilities to one another.
- **Affirm Indigenous Ways and Knowledge:** Deliver services to Indigenous clients in a manner that respects and affirms Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and living.
- **Support self-determination:** Encourage and support the self-determination of Indigenous communities across Ontario.

The Indigenous Services Department

The Indigenous Services Department (ISD) aims to oversee and offer expert guidance in the coordination, development and delivery of services offered to Indigenous clients and communities in Ontario by LAO and its service providers.

ISD aims to support LAO's strategy to create:

Culturally appropriate,
effective services to
Indigenous clients in
Ontario

Innovative Indigenous
policies and
programming for the
delivery of legal aid
services

Collaborative work with
First Nations, Métis,
and Inuit legal service
providers and other
justice sector contacts

Build strong
relationships with First
Nations, Métis, and
Inuit communities and
service providers

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 plan is grounded in the Indigenous Services guiding principles, and aligned with LAO’s mandate, vision and mission. 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.

Focus areas of the Indigenous Services Action Plan

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



Measuring progress

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.

As part of our commitment to excellence, transparency and continuous improvement, LAO is currently developing an internal dashboard to continuously evaluate key progress indicators relating to each of the strategic initiatives. We are committed to learning and improving. These measures will show what is working and what still needs attention.

The next sections highlight activities and accomplishments that meaningfully advance each of the strategic initiatives.

Strategic initiatives

Client-centred services

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.

In 2025-26, LAO has

- Launched a two-year initiative to educate lawyers and law students on *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families*, with support from the Law Foundation of Ontario. This project will strengthen LAO's ability to respond to the unique needs of Indigenous families while providing high-quality, culturally informed legal services in Indigenous child protection matters.
- Developed an Indigenous Bail Resource for duty counsel and criminal lawyers.
- Increased communication, collaboration and reporting with LAO-funded Indigenous Legal Services Organizations.
- Supported a review of resources and requirements for LAO's Gladue Roster for duty counsel and criminal lawyers.
- Collaborated with local court committees on the implementation of Indigenous Peoples Courts in Windsor, Chatham, Brantford, Hamilton and Brampton.
- Connected with Indigenous justice coordinators across the province to support their work within the clinic law system.
- Collaborated with Districts across the province on building meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities, clients and court support staff. Ensuring that our staff and lawyers work in a culturally appropriate manner with Indigenous people across the province.



(L to R): Prof. Gemma Smyth from UWindor and LAO lawyer Jamie Holmes are leading the Bill C92 project.

Outcomes for Dakota:

For Dakota, these initiatives could lead to the following outcomes:

- **Improving consideration of *Gladue* factors at bail and throughout the criminal process.** LAO's development of an Indigenous Bail Resource and review of Gladue roster requirements help lawyers identify and present circumstances such as Dakota's family history, their mother's experience as the child of a Residential School survivor, their separation from community supports, and experiences with poverty and trauma. This information can support more appropriate, fair outcomes.
- **Connecting Dakota to Indigenous-specific supports.** Stronger collaboration with Indigenous Legal Services Organizations, Indigenous justice coordinators, and community partners can help Dakota access culturally appropriate supports, including referrals, advocacy, court support, and connections to Indigenous community services.
- **Ensuring services are responsive to family-related legal issues.** LAO's enhanced training on *An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* and Indigenous child and family services, mean LAO lawyers are better equipped to support Indigenous parents like Dakota if child protection concerns arise following their arrest.
- **Accessing Indigenous Peoples Courts where available.** LAO's work supporting Indigenous Peoples Courts can create opportunities for Dakota's matter to be addressed in a court environment that incorporates Indigenous perspectives, community involvement, and culturally relevant approaches to justice and healing.
- **Building trust in the legal system.** LAO's work in building and strengthening relationships between LAO staff, community legal clinics, Indigenous communities, and court support workers help make services more welcoming and culturally safe. For Dakota, this can mean feeling heard, respected, and understood during a stressful and vulnerable time.

Impact on Dakota

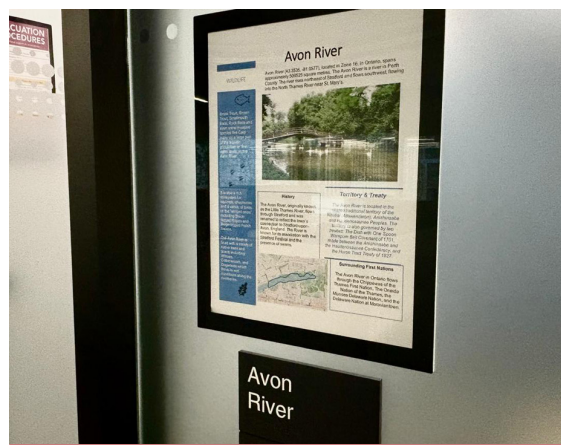
As a result of these client-centred services, Dakota is more likely to receive legal assistance that recognizes the full context of their situation rather than focusing only on the criminal charge. This can lead to more informed legal advocacy, stronger connections to Indigenous supports and services, and justice outcomes that are fair, culturally responsive, and focused on both accountability and healing.

Organizational excellence

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.

In 2025-26, LAO

- Celebrated **water** as its theme for 2025. In September, this was brought that to life by sharing details about the history, territories and life supported by the Ontario waterways that inspired the names of meeting rooms in the provincial office in Toronto.
- Provided 12 dedicated Indigenous-specific training sessions for LAO and clinic staff on a variety of topics such as Land Acknowledgements, the Moose Hide Campaign, and Indigenous self-identification. This included five LSO-accredited hours building lawyers' EDI and professionalism hours.
- Continued mandatory training for all LAO staff through the PATH, which is an Indigenous cultural awareness and education program.
- Created eight dedicated resources for staff on topics such as Indigenous child protection and criminal legal Issues, Indigenous Peoples' courts and self-identification, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2SMMIWG+).
- Launched the ISD Integration Survey to collect direct feedback from LAO staff about their training, collaboration and legal education needs in support of the Action Plan.



The Waterways posters in each meeting room remind us that there is life and history behind each of the meeting room names.



LAO staff gathered on May 16, 2026, to watch the livestream of the Moose Hide Campaign keynote address.

Outcomes for Dakota:

For Dakota, these initiatives could lead to the following outcomes:

- **Creating a more culturally safe experience.** Through Indigenous-specific training on topics such as self-identification, Indigenous histories, and reconciliation, LAO staff and lawyers are better equipped to engage with Dakota respectfully and appropriately.
- **Offering better-informed legal services.** Resources and learning help ensure that staff and lawyers understand the broader context of Dakota's experiences and can provide more effective support.
- **Providing more responsive support for interconnected legal issues.** Dakota's situation may involve criminal law, family law, child protection concerns, housing instability, and access to community supports. An organization that has access to specialized Indigenous legal resources is better positioned to identify these overlapping needs and connect Dakota with appropriate services.
- **Creating greater institutional awareness and knowledge of Indigenous realities.** Initiatives that promote Indigenous knowledge, histories, cultures, and connections to the land and water contribute to a workplace culture that values Indigenous perspectives. This helps create an environment where Dakota's identity and community connections are respected rather than overlooked.
- **Focusing on the continuous improvement of services.** The ISD Integration Survey allows staff to identify gaps in knowledge, training, and collaboration. As LAO learns from employees and adapts its programs, clients like Dakota benefit from services that continue to evolve in response to Indigenous needs.

Impact on Dakota

As a result of LAO investing in organizational excellence, Dakota is more likely to encounter staff and lawyers who understand the context behind their circumstances, communicate in a culturally respectful manner, and are equipped with the knowledge and resources needed to provide effective legal assistance. This creates a safer and more supportive experience, helping Dakota build trust in the legal system and access services that address both their immediate legal issue and their broader needs as an Indigenous parent and community member.

Attracting and retaining talent

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

In 2025-26 LAO:

- Created an informal Indigenous employee circle – Maamwi. Indigenous staff had opportunities to meet and get to know one another through drop-in sessions and dedicated cultural and team-building sessions.
- Renewed LAO's Indigenous mentorship program, WAAWIYE, for its third year. LAO Indigenous staff were paired with senior Indigenous staff at LAO and other organizations to strengthen their connection to community, receive career guidance grounded in Indigenous values and culture to build an Indigenous community of practice.
- Attended Indigenous-specific law school networking and employment events at the Bora Laskin Law School at Lakehead University, University of Manitoba, University of Windsor, Osgoode Hall Law School at York University, and the University of Alberta.
- Coached Osgoode Hall law students in the Kawaskimhon National Aboriginal Moot, which is a moot court that incorporates Indigenous legal traditions alongside federal, provincial and international law, and concepts of dispute resolution.
- Introduced an Indigenous Relations Advisor position, dedicated to building relationships and addressing client needs across the province.
- Hired summer and articling students to support Indigenous Services at LAO.



Members of Maamwi, the ISD, LAO's Equity Diversity Inclusion and Belonging Office, and the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres attended a beading activity at Provincial office in September 2025.



The annual Kawaskimhon National Aboriginal Moot was hosted by the University of Windsor in March 2026.

- Formed a meaningful relationship with Windsor Law’s externship program, where students are placed with LAO for a semester to learn about LAO and ISD, and support our work.

Outcomes for Dakota:

For Dakota, these initiatives could lead to the following outcomes:

- **Creating greater access to Indigenous staff and culturally informed service providers.** By recruiting Indigenous law students, articling students, and legal professionals, LAO increases its capacity to provide services that reflect Indigenous perspectives and experiences. This means Dakota may be more likely to receive legal advice by someone who understands the realities of their community, family history, and the challenges they face.
- **Providing higher-quality legal representation.** Mentorship and professional development opportunities help Indigenous staff and lawyers strengthen their skills and leadership abilities. As a result, Dakota benefits from a legal team that is better equipped to advocate for their interests, understand Gladue considerations, and connect them with appropriate supports.
- **Creating a legal workforce grounded in Indigenous legal traditions and perspectives.** LAO’s involvement with initiatives such as the Kawaskimhon National Aboriginal Moot helps future lawyers learn consensus-based approaches to dispute resolution and Indigenous legal traditions and foundations. This contributes to a legal culture that values healing, relationships, and community-based solutions, which may be more responsive to Dakota’s needs.
- **Strengthening Improved community connections.** The Indigenous Relations Advisor position and relationships with law schools and Indigenous networks help LAO strengthen partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations across Ontario. These relationships can create better pathways for Dakota to access culturally relevant resources, supports and referrals.
- **Creating more sustainable Indigenous legal services.** Investing in recruitment, mentorship, and student placements strengthens institutional and organizational knowledge and helps build a network of staff and pathways for future Indigenous legal professionals. This ensures that Indigenous clients like Dakota continue to have access to culturally responsive legal services in the years ahead.

Impact on Dakota

As a result of these efforts, Dakota is more likely to receive support from lawyers and staff who understand the broader context of their experiences, communicate in a culturally respectful way, and are committed to providing high-quality legal services to Indigenous clients. Building institutional knowledge and strengthening the organization's connections to and with Indigenous staff and community can help clients like Dakota feel safer, more understood and more confident when navigating the legal system.

Community and justice sector engagement

For LAO, this means having Indigenous Services play 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.

In 2025-26, LAO

- Renewed their service agreement with Nokiwin Tribal Council to ensure members of the Nokiwin Tribal Council communities are assisted with their legal aid applications in a culturally appropriate way.
- Renewed its service agreement with Aboriginal Legal Services to support poverty law, criminal, and child protection law services for Indigenous clients across the GTA. The renewal included additional funding to support expanded child protection legal services.
- Continued to fund and partner with Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services to ensure legal aid services in Northern Ontario are accessible.
- Continued to fund and partner with the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres Community Justice program.
- Focused on Northern justice initiatives, specifically staffing Restorative Justice courts and the Kenora Justice Centre.
- Attended Ontario Court of Justice Case Management Forums across Ontario to advance and elevate Indigenous services within the justice system.



LAO Staff (L to R): Rebecca Hammond, Fallon Melander and Lisa Bernstein visiting Pikangikum First Nation to discuss legal aid supports.

- Attended meetings in several First Nation communities and with, Indigenous organizations to support local needs in partnership with district offices.
- Partnered with Windsor Law to conduct a survey of child protection roster lawyers to collect feedback on learning materials and methods focused on the newest federal legislation.
- Conducted a survey with Indigenous community partners, including ILSOs, to assess their views of ISD as a collaborator and ways to improve.



LAO staff (L to R): Andreas Asmus, Justice McCabe, Aileen Page, Fallon Melander and Lisa Bernstein, visiting the Timmins-Temiskaming Community Legal Clinic.

Outcomes for Dakota:

For Dakota, these initiatives could lead to the following outcomes:

- **Improving access to culturally appropriate legal services.** Through service agreements with Indigenous Legal Services Organizations and Indigenous community partners, Dakota is more likely to be connected with legal services that understand Indigenous cultures, traditions, and community realities. This can help Dakota feel more supported and less isolated while navigating the legal system.
- **Creating better support for interconnected legal issues.** Dakota's legal needs may extend beyond the criminal charge to include child protection concerns, housing challenges, financial instability, and access to social supports. Partnerships with organizations such as Aboriginal Legal Services help ensure that clients receive more holistic support across multiple legal and non-legal issues.
- **Strengthening connections to Indigenous community resources.** By working directly with First Nations, Indigenous organizations, and the Métis Nation of Ontario, LAO strengthens referral pathways between legal services and community-based supports. This can help Dakota access programs, cultural supports, parenting resources, and community connections that may contribute to their stability and well-being.
- **Creating more responsive child and family services.** Renewed funding and enhanced child protection services mean that if concerns arise regarding Dakota's daughter, there are lawyers and organizations better equipped to provide culturally informed legal advice and advocacy that recognizes the importance of keeping Indigenous children connected to their families, communities, and cultures.

- **Creating services shaped by Indigenous voices.** Surveys and consultations with Indigenous community partners allow LAO to hear directly from the organizations serving Indigenous people. This feedback helps improve services, so they better reflect the experiences and needs of clients like Dakota.
- **Creating a justice system that better understands Indigenous realities.** Collaboration with community partners, Indigenous organizations, legal service providers, and law schools helps build knowledge and awareness across the justice sector. As a result, the professionals Dakota encounters are more likely to understand the systemic barriers, historical impacts, and cultural considerations that may be relevant to their case.

Impact on Dakota

As a result of LAO's community and justice sector engagement, Dakota can benefit from a network of coordinated supports rather than navigating the legal system alone. They are more likely to be connected to culturally relevant legal services, community resources, and Indigenous organizations that understand their circumstances and can help address both their immediate legal challenges and longer-term needs as an Indigenous parent and community member.

Looking ahead

Launch of Access to Justice and Legal Aid Ontario Service course at the Bora Laskin Faculty of Law, Lakehead University

September 2026

Grounded in LAO's statutory mandate and public service mission, students in this new course will explore how legal aid services are delivered across Ontario. Particular attention will be paid to LAO's Indigenous Services Department (ISD), the first dedicated Indigenous services department within a Canadian legal aid plan. Students will examine how legal service delivery can support reconciliation through relationship-based approaches that prioritize respect, reciprocity, cultural safety, and collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Launch of Hamilton Indigenous Person's Court

September 2026

The Hamilton Indigenous Person's Court is a collaboration between the Indigenous Communities and the Ontario Court of Justice with the goal of addressing the profound overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system. The court aims to provide a more culturally relevant, restorative, holistic and supportive approach to justice, with a focus on healing and rehabilitation along with accountability and responsibility.

Legal Education and Indigenous Child Protection Under the Act Conference

October 29 - 30, 2026

Just Relations, Shared Responsibility is a collaborative project between the University of Windsor Faculty of Law and LAO, specifically ISD. A conference will be held in Thunder Bay to bring together legal aid plans and legal academics from across Canada to address the changing legal landscape in child protection law under the federal act.



The logo for the Just Relations, Shared Responsibility project was designed by Oji-Cree artist, Jessica Cook.

Launch of ISD learning and development opportunities through lunch and learn sessions

Bi-monthly throughout 2026-27

Grounded in LAO's commitment to Indigenous clients and communities, ISD has launched a series of lunch and learn sessions, many accredited for CPD hours for staff and lawyers throughout the organization. These events offer a unique opportunity for the organization to better engage in emerging areas of law that intersect with Indigenous clients and community's needs.

Launch of Hamilton Child Protection Healing Conference (IHC)

January 2027

Hamilton's Indigenous Child Protection Healing Conference (IHC) places Indigenous children, families, Elders/Knowledge Keepers/Knowledge Sharers, culture, and community at the heart of decision-making in child protection matters. It creates a collaborative process that bridges Indigenous communities, child welfare agencies, legal professionals, and the courts. The IHC process has been proudly supported by the ISD and other LAO staff in Hamilton from the beginning. The anticipated launch date is January 2027.



The Hamilton Indigenous Healing Conference planning committee, including two ISD staff.

Expansion of Restorative Justice and Indigenous Peoples' Courts

LAO will continue to support the expansion of Indigenous Peoples' courts, restorative justice courts, and justice centres by fostering partnerships, and improving access to culturally responsive, community-based justice services for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis clients.

Meet the team



Fallon Melander
Associate Vice President



Rebecca Hammond
Policy Counsel



Saga Williams
Special Advisor



Jamie Holmes
Policy counsel



Nawalka Geeshy Meegwun
(also known as Lyndon George)
Indigenous Relations Advisor



Marierose Talla
Indigenous Programs Advisor

With special thanks to the following for their contributions over the year:

- Kristen Jeavons, Indigenous Relations Advisor (currently on maternity leave)
- Dounia Nakkoubi, Indigenous Programs Advisor (currently on maternity leave)
- Hannah Johnson, Articling Student 2025-26
- Jigme Tsering, Debwewin Summer Student, 2025
- Zara Azad, Debwewin Summer Student, 2026



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