

JANE FINCH COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES: THE IMPORTANCE OF ITS BEING

The words Jane Finch conjures up a location in which violence is pervasive. In this summer of 2019 there were five victims of gun violence at 404 Driftwood Ave on August 9, 2019, three persons were shot at the Yorkgate Mall on August 10 and again one boy had to be taken to the hospital for the treatment of bullet wounds he suffered at the Jane and Driftwood on August 12, 2019.

These incidents have occurred within the geographic confines of our Jane Finch Community Legal services. Our parameters are Steeles Avenue in the North, Falstaff Avenue /400/401 in the South, Keele Street in the East and the Humber River in the West. We operate from a main office at 1315 Finch Avenue West and from a satellite office on Toronto Community Housing premises at 20 Falstaff Avenue. It was within the precincts of that satellite office that a sixteen year old boy was gunned down in the building of 30 Falstaff Avenue. I was present when his body was removed from the scene by the Coroner on August 1, 2019.

These killings are often the result of gang and criminal activity by racialized youth in an effort to improve their destitute condition. With a population of approximately 138,000 the Jane Finch area is densely populated by low income families and new and settled immigrants, many of whom are visible minorities. Other features of the community are high unemployment or underemployment, few high school graduates an overrepresentation of single parent families and a high proportion of youth and children.

Low cost rental accommodation is the reason for the attraction to the area. 51% of the population live in rented dwellings and 45% of the households in rental housing spend over 30% of their income on rent. It has one of the highest concentrations of social housing anywhere in Canada. The Toronto Community Housing Corporation is the landlord for many of the tenants who occupy sprawling residential complexes where there are little or no recreational facilities. Many of the apartments are old and have fallen into a state of disrepair.

Parents find it difficult to compete in the labour force for employment due to low education and poor language fluency. Those who do find work are limited to very low paying jobs. It is almost an insurmountable hurdle for single parents to provide for the dietary needs of their children so that they may function at school and attempt to complete their education. Poverty and broken homes are the proverbial contributors to crime and violence which aggravate the daily problems of the residents.

It is within this context that the Clinic has sought over the years to assuage the suffering of the residents within its community and it has been successful in doing so by being the focal point in giving access to justice to those in need. All of these efforts contribute significantly to the provision of a stable environment for the healthy nurturing of individuals and families. The precarious living of the residents of the Jane Finch community is so volatile that without the active involvement of the Clinic in their lives crime may become more widespread not only in the community but may spread to neighbouring affluent areas as well.

It is, therefore, in the interest of all that Jane Finch Community Legal Services continue to remain rooted in the community as a local independent organization and not be part of a centralized integrated system. It has been able to successfully run an efficient client-focused legal operation. It is mindful of the changing face of poverty and has consciously made its staff and management culturally and racially diverse to avoid subjecting clients to differential or discriminatory treatment. Some staff and legal workers are multilingual.

The Clinic is open five days a week and extends its hours of operation on Mondays and Wednesdays to accommodate the working poor. An emergency legal worker is available every day to assist clients. For clients needing services outside its ambit the Clinic has made successful efforts to provide for their holistic needs by referring them to the private bar for extra legal matters and to our local partners to address their other social needs.

The Clinic will continue to deliver its services in a cost effective manner if it is allowed to maintain its existence as a local organization because it has always been fiscally prudent in spending public funds. It has returned a surplus at the end of every budgetary year and has passed the scrutiny of quarterly and annual audits. It has abided by and complied with the client reporting adumbrated under the CIMS.

Despite this successful hitherto performance of the Clinic it is not averse to change which will strengthen its independent local presence in the community be it in the form of suggestions for better management, clinic practice, clinic reporting, quality supports and the better use of technology.

Noland Merrick, Executive Director

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