

SLASS Submission re the LAO Modernization Project

The seven Student Legal Aid Services Society (SLASS) clinics are funded by Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) and they operate out of each of Ontario's seven law schools. All SLASS clinics have a robust history in providing legal services to low-income individuals and families with most being in operation since the early 1970s.

Under the close supervision of lawyers, law students provide legal advice and represent clients whether as credit students, volunteers or paid summer students. SLASS clinics promote access to justice by providing quality legal services to low-income individuals in Ontario while also providing a clinical education that trains future lawyers so that they are committed to promoting access to justice through their practice.

SLASS clinics are in a unique position to expand and adjust services in a relatively short period of time to adapt to fill identified gaps in access to justice. Being situated in the law school allows us to harness the enthusiasm that students have for addressing issues of access to justice while they are learning the practice of law in a hands-on way.

SLASS clinics are accountable to LAO and to their respective universities while the supervising lawyers are all also accountable to the Law Society of Ontario. As educators, SLASS clinics model best practices and, as such, the students and supervising lawyers of the SLASS clinics are proud to produce high quality work for many of the most vulnerable within our communities.

The SLASS programs are:

- Downtown Legal Services (Faculty of Law, University of Toronto);
- Community and Legal Aid Services Program (Osgoode Hall Law School, York University);
- Queen's Law Clinics including the Queen's Elder Law Clinic, the Queen's Family Law Clinic and Queen's Legal Aid (Faculty of Law, Queen's University);
- Community Legal Clinic (Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa);
- Community Legal Services (Faculty of Law, University of Western Ontario);
- Community Legal Aid (Faculty of Law, University of Windsor); and
- Lakehead University Community Legal Services (Faculty of Law, Lakehead University).

SLASS Legal Services

Practice areas vary across the SLASS clinics, but all seven SLASS clinics provide assistance with summary conviction criminal matters and housing law issues. All but Lakehead Legal Services offer family law services. Over and above these common areas, practice areas across the clinics include refugee and immigration law, employment law, elder law, human rights applications, social assistance matters, criminal injuries compensation claims and some civil work.

Community Outreach

In addition to individual client services, all of the SLASS clinics run community outreach and public legal education programs aimed at raising awareness of critical legal rights and responsibilities.

Through training and participation in community legal education, students learn how to develop and deliver presentations using plain language. They also learn how to develop and maintain relationships with community organizations. The SLASS clinics work with their community partners to assess their needs and discuss the topics, the methods of delivery and the appropriate audience for such presentations. There is a tremendous amount of positive feedback from students and community partners demonstrating that these presentations are highly successful and valued by the participants and community partners.

Holistic Support

Many SLASS clients come with multi-dimensional issues, including domestic violence, mental health concerns, homelessness and/or lack of immigration status. In recognition of the complex service needs of our clients, some of the SLASSs have been able to partner with other faculties – social work and nursing – to offer multidisciplinary services. Students from other disciplines are available to provide a wide range of supports to clients including identifying community services and resources that might be helpful and assisting clients in accessing these services. They can also support clients as they move through the legal process by working with them to manage stress and anxiety associated with their legal and non-legal issues.

Student Programs

SLASS clinics offer a rich variety of programs to allow students to apply to the one that best fits their learning objectives and co-curricular requirements. In addition to filling gaps in access to justice by providing direct services to clients in need, these programs challenge students to examine intersections of law and social inequality in a critical way and assist students in developing professional and ethical literacy which is essential to the practice of law.

The value of SLASS programs – for clients, for students and for the broader legal community – continue long after the student's clinical placement ends. Although we do not track these

statistics in any methodical way, anecdotally, we know that many of our SLASS alumni go on to careers working in public interest law, including community legal clinics, as duty counsel and at Legal Aid Ontario. By creating opportunities for law students to get involved in our programs, the funding we receive for these programs provides critical training for the next generation of community lawyers.

Service Coordination

The SLASS clinics serve as an overlay to the general service and speciality clinics across Ontario. This structure allows us the flexibility to shift our service areas to bring gaps in the legal aid system. For example, in our criminal practices, we serve low-income people charged with summary conviction offences who will not qualify for a certificate because the crown is not seeking imprisonment. Nevertheless, a criminal conviction can have a serious and lifelong impact on a person's ability to secure employment, volunteer in their community, travel, etc. The SLASS clinics are able to step in and fill this significant gap in access to justice.

Similarly, SLASS clinics are providing Family Law services to clients who would qualify financially for services but who do not usually qualify substantively – such as for applications for child support and motions to change for any form of relief including custody, access and support. The SLASS clinic services give parents with low income a means with which to address matters that have a direct impact on their ability to provide for their children and to participate in their children's lives.

In some regions, due to over-whelming demand, general service clinics have restricted their housing law practices to eviction defence only. In these areas, the SLASS clinics as the only resource for tenants seeking to bring tenant applications around maintenance issues, illegal charges, harassment issues, etc.

Reflected in these service coordination efforts are creative means of actively bringing available services to the community members who need them most in the places where they need them most. For example, law students at the Community Legal Clinic at the University of Ottawa regularly attend at the Criminal Court to conduct intake interviews for eligible clients at the courthouse working on referrals from Criminal Duty Counsel and they do so on the morning that the client is scheduled for a remand appearance. As well, a student is made available at the courthouse each weekday morning to conduct these intake interviews. The Clinic notes that due to the strength of the relationship with Criminal Duty Counsel and the effectiveness of the communication between the two agencies, the majority of these cases become full representation files.

Similarly, at Queen's there are students attending Family Court during the Family Law Information Centre (FLIC) Advice Counsel hours. Those students are in place to conduct intake interviews in cases where Family Law Duty Counsel have identified for the client that their services, while not qualifying for a certificate, are suited to the work of the Queen's Family Law Clinic which is a division of the Queen's SLASS.

The ID clinic at the CLASP clinic is a perfect example of a clinic addressing gaps in the system. In June 2017, a representative from the Ministry of Community Services contacted CLASP explaining how difficult it is for clients to obtain government ID to allow them to apply for services. It was pointed out that while there were services that assisted with this, most of them were located in downtown Toronto. Within four months of this request, CLASP was able to partner with pro bono students to launch a clinic to help the most vulnerable obtain identification.

Lakehead Legal Services, the newest SLASS, works closely with the Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic in Thunder Bay. They consult with them on a regular basis to ensure the LLS is filling gaps in services and meeting the needs of the community. They also partner for PLEs, ID services and some legal services in the outlying district. They also have close connections with local social service agencies and health centres - giving and receiving referrals through these networks.

As the list above - which is far from exhaustive - demonstrates, the SLASS clinics are all deeply connected in their communities - with other legal aid service providers and with community agencies.

Cost Efficiencies

SLASS clinics are housed in university buildings and as such, do not pay rent or utilities. This is a huge cost saving to the legal aid system. The universities also cover many other costs such as administrative and maintenance costs relating to the clinics including IT and human resources supports.

With law students handling most all of the front-line work of the files for unpaid academic credit, SLASS clinics are cost efficient. Students also handle some of the administrative work that would normally be handled by paid staff in a community clinic or a law firm.

Furthermore, law students receive an appreciation of the struggles faced by low income Ontarians. Some decide to work in the legal aid system and others volunteer or provide pro bono services during their law school careers.

Finally, SLASS clinics cooperate with other community clinics to ensure there is no duplication of services, and that appropriate areas of service are provided.

We provide you with this summary so as to highlight for you the importance of the work of the Student Legal Aid Services Societies that operates as a small but foundational element of the overall Legal Aid system and with the hope that there will be continued acknowledgement of this in the ongoing Legal Aid Ontario Modernisation Project.

September 6, 2019