

**Legal Aid Ontario's
Racialized Communities
Strategy Action Plan
update for 2026**



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Overview

The 2026 Racialized Communities Strategy Action Plan update outlines Legal Aid Ontario's (LAO's) continued progress toward reducing systemic barriers and improving service equity for Black and racialized clients.

Over the past year, LAO has advanced its commitment by strengthening equity-driven decision-making, improving access to services for racialized clients, and expanding programs that promote fair outcomes across the justice system.

Some key developments featured in this year's update include:

- **Expanded financial eligibility:** LAO [increased financial thresholds](#) for criminal and duty counsel services, allowing more people to qualify for legal aid.
- **A new staff program to expand family law services:** LAO's new [Family Senior Counsel Program](#) offers specialized representation in family and child protection matters and improves access to skilled lawyers through both in-person and virtual services. The program has also developed a new centralized tracking tool to record referral sources and key client data.
- **Strengthened language access:** LAO raised interpreter compensation and continued collecting lawyer language-capacity data for future inclusion in client-facing tools.
- **Expanded community partnerships:** LAO supported new restorative justice initiatives and increased outreach to newcomers and incarcerated women through collaborations with community agencies in Kitchener.

Objectives of LAO's Racialized Communities Strategy Action Plan

The 17 objectives of the Racialized Communities Strategy and LAO's progress towards achieving them are outlined below.

To work toward reducing barriers for racialized clients accessing LAO's services, LAO committed to:

1. **Developing a tool to help LAO make sure that our decisions do not unfairly affect racialized people**

LAO uses a comprehensive equity analysis system that incorporates Indigenous and racial equity impact assessments into all decision-making processes. These assessments evaluate potential impacts on Indigenous people, racialized individuals, persons with disabilities, and others facing systemic barriers.

In 2025, LAO applied this assessment tool to the [increase of financial eligibility thresholds](#) for duty counsel and criminal certificate services, a major organizational initiative.

2. **Making sure that racialized people are proportionately represented among LAO's clients**

Data collection continues to be a priority at LAO. Collecting information about the race of our clients helps LAO identify and address potential barriers to accessing services that some communities may face. This information also helps LAO improve how it delivers services and create the types of programs that specific racialized groups need.

LAO also developed a centralized referral tracking tool to capture referral sources and key client information such as Indigenous identity and equity-deserving group membership. This tool supports accountability and drives continuous improvement.

LAO continues to offer training to staff and LAO-funded community legal clinics on the importance of collecting data on race, as well as how to do so.

LAO's Criminal Senior Counsel Program includes race as one of the primary criteria for deciding if an individual is eligible for legal services delivered through the program. Many clients also have unmet legal needs, including situations where they

qualify for a legal aid certificate but are unable to find or keep a lawyer. The program is working on ways to improve the acceptance rate of certificates LAO issues.

3. Finding out why clients are not using their child protection certificates, and working to fix the problem

LAO has continued to explore ways to address certificate utilization.

The organization has created a new program that gives clients greater access to lawyers who specialize in family law and child protection services. The [Family Senior Counsel Program](#) ensures that people who cannot find a lawyer through the traditional certificate system, including members of Black and racialized communities, have access to a skilled lawyer throughout their proceedings. This level of expertise helps reduce the issues that arise and contributes to greater stability in high-impact family and child protection matters.

LAO has also continued making enhancements to its "[Find a Lawyer](#)" tool to improve client access to roster lawyers who provide child protection services.

4. Translating information about LAO into more languages and making this information available to everyone

LAO has a department dedicated to improving language access to our services and communications.

LAO has several key publications in [multiple languages](#) to help clients understand their rights and available services. LAO is now developing additional information about its services in the most-needed client languages. The information will be made available in a dedicated, easy-to-find area on LAO's website, and shared with front-line staff, interpreters, and clients.

5. Making it easier for clients to access interpreters

Clients have access to free interpretation in more than 300 languages when they call LAO. Interpretation is also available for LAO's in-person services, and at LAO-funded community legal clinics. LAO continues to work closely with its staff and with the interpretation services provider to make sure that access to interpreters is as seamless, efficient, and effective as possible.

LAO's website includes a [message in multiple languages](#) about the availability of free interpretation for legal aid services.

The cost of interpretation services is covered on LAO certificates.

6. Helping clients more easily find out if lawyers can provide services in different languages

From 2024 to 2025, LAO collected information about roster lawyers' capacity to provide legal aid services in multiple languages. LAO is now working to make this information more easily available to clients in the "[Find A Lawyer](#)" tool.

In 2025, LAO continued to [increase the compensation paid to roster lawyers](#) to provide additional hours when the client requires an interpreter.

To enhance LAO's services to racialized communities, LAO is committed to:

7. Working to make sure that the percentage of racialized people working in all levels of LAO is at least equal to the percentage of racialized people among low-income Ontarians

In spring 2025, LAO administered its second inclusion, diversity, equity and anti-racism survey. The survey was completed by 75 per cent of staff, nine per cent higher than in 2020.

The survey results showed that LAO staff reflects the diversity of Ontario's population throughout all staff, with more Black and Indigenous people working at LAO than in the general population. In addition, most staff are aware that LAO has equity and inclusion programming and agree that LAO promotes a work environment free from discrimination and harassment. LAO continues to take steps to strengthen diversity and inclusion in recruitment and retention practices, including working to provide managers with tools to support cross-cultural awareness and communication.

LAO strives for its board, and the boards of LAO-funded community legal clinics, to reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. This commitment has been included in LAO's rules.

LAO is developing an inclusion, diversity and equity survey for its roster lawyers. The survey will help LAO better understand the demographics of LAO's roster and their ability to provide services in other languages.

8. Supporting clinics and other service providers to better respond to the needs of low-income racialized people in Ontario

LAO has strengthened its support for LAO-funded community legal clinics through comprehensive training programs on race-based data collection and anti-bias practices.

LAO is funding an inter-clinic project focused on anti-racism and anti-oppression in the clinic system.

The Test Case Program has successfully supported clinic clients in precedent-setting cases that address fundamental issues affecting racialized communities.

LAO has established effective partnerships with service providers across Ontario, creating clear channels of communication to address systemic barriers.

9. Translating information about what clients should expect of LAO lawyers (into multiple languages)

LAO has translated several key [publications](#) into multiple languages, ensuring that clients understand their rights and available services. A dedicated department oversees the translation of informational materials.

10. Working to make sure that LAO regularly receives positive feedback from clients about things like how easy it is to find a lawyer and the quality of services

LAO has recently amended its client survey to allow respondents to provide their demographic information. LAO is working to increase the response rate from individuals belonging to historically marginalized communities, including members of Black and racialized communities.

LAO consistently updates its list of lawyers who accept legal aid work by location and area of law. LAO regularly reviews the quality of service provided by roster members, with the goal of supporting high-quality service for clients. Throughout 2025, LAO made several enhancements to its roster management processes, including refinements to the "[Find a Lawyer](#)" tool.

11. Revising LAO's processes so things like job interviews, performance reviews, and lawyer application forms contain questions about racial justice

In 2025, equity considerations were part of LAO's new [Family Senior Counsel Program](#) development and its recruitment and hiring practices. Interview questions and selection criteria focus on candidates with proven experience supporting Black and racialized communities through a social justice and equity lens.

12. Regularly providing all legal aid lawyers with training on racial justice

LAO has continued to provide staff with regular mandatory training on racial justice. Topics include:

- Micro-aggression
- Unconscious bias
- Anti-racism

LAO LAW hosts a racialized communities strategy page with case law, legal resources and other information to assist legal aid lawyers (roster and staff lawyers) in representing racialized clients.

In 2025 LAO hosted more than 25 training sessions that focused on key areas of law, cultural awareness and trauma-informed lawyer practices. Some of the more substantive training that was delivered to criminal, family and immigration lawyers included content about racial justice, Impact of Race and Culture Assessment (IRCA) reports, intersecting needs of victims and survivors of domestic violence, and ethical issues and responsibilities.

All training sessions continue to be recorded and made available to roster lawyers on LAO LAW.

To combat systemic racism in the justice system, LAO has committed to:

13. Working to make sure that LAO rewards lawyers who achieve positive results for clients and does not reward lawyers who do not

LAO continues to ensure roster lawyers are working in the best interest of legal aid clients.

In 2025, LAO introduced [coverage for conferences](#) under section 19 of the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*, to recognize the time and expertise roster lawyers dedicate to supporting youth in these proceedings.

LAO also delivered training for roster members to improve administrative processes, including the requirements for submitting completed [Basis of Claim \(BOC\) forms](#) to LAO to include additional instructions and troubleshooting tips, improving the process to [request translation coverage](#) and updating [billing tutorials](#) so that lawyers spend less time on administrative tasks and can focus on client service.

14. Regularly providing lawyers with training and information about how to challenge racism in the justice system

LAO hosted, in partnership with the African Nova Scotian Justice Institute (ANSJI) and the Sentencing and Parole Project (SPP), introductory training on the topic of Impact of Race and Culture Assessments (IRCAs).

The webinar explored the structure, content, and evolving use of IRCAs also known as Enhanced Pre-Sentencing Reports (EPSRs) in Ontario. Topics covered included:

- What IRCAs are and how to use them effectively;
- How to find the right expert for your client;
- What should and should not be included in EPSR/IRCA reports;
- LAO's eligibility requirements and application processes for these reports.

LAO has continued its collaboration with the Governments of Canada and Ontario to provide IRCAs to Black and racialized criminally accused. From January to December 2025, LAO authorized 149 IRCAs.

15. Checking to see if lawyers are making arguments about race (e.g. racial profiling and Charter-based arguments), where appropriate

LAO continues its progress in supporting race-based legal arguments. Since 2020/21, the organization has authorized over 500 IRCAs for Black and racialized accused, leading to more equitable sentencing outcomes. These assessments have influenced court decisions toward rehabilitation-focused sentences and shorter periods of incarceration.

LAO staff and roster lawyers regularly make arguments about the impact of systemic racism in the justice system in immigration and refugee matters, and in judicial reviews in the Federal Court.

16. Support community development projects that are about issues that impact racialized communities

LAO is collaborating with clinics and other community agencies to help racialized communities. LAO:

- Offers family summary legal advice weekly at the Rexdale Community Legal Clinic in Toronto;
- Provides services to individuals in Grand Valley Institution for Women, many of

whom are members of Indigenous and racialized communities;

- Has coordinated with Reception House in Kitchener to share information with newcomers to Canada about legal aid services;
- Is working with Community Justice Initiatives in Kitchener to develop a referral system that offers clients restorative justice options outside of the criminal justice system.

17. Work to make sure that there are no differences between the legal outcomes for LAO's racialized clients and LAO white clients

LAO is continuing to refine and expand its institutional duty counsel services at correctional facilities to help racialized clients in custody.

Conclusion

LAO's continued efforts to address barriers and strengthen equity for Black and racialized clients have resulted in more consistent service delivery, clearer routes for accessing support, and stronger relationships with community partners. These developments reinforce the foundation needed for sustained improvement in access, client experience, and overall service quality for diverse communities in Ontario.



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