

Legal Aid Ontario settlement conferences: A valuable dispute resolution process in family law

For over 30 years, Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) settlement conferences have offered an effective and accessible alternative to court for family law matters across Ontario. These conferences assist parties in reaching voluntary settlements, facilitated by an impartial and experienced professional, outside of the court process.

Eligibility and participation

To participate in an LAO settlement conference, at least one party must qualify for legal aid, and both parties must be represented by counsel during the conference.

Facilitators and process

Conferences are led by skilled family lawyers trained in negotiation and conflict resolution. Most sessions are conducted virtually, removing geographic barriers and ensuring availability across all regions of the province. Scheduling is straightforward: counsel submits a request via [Legal Aid Online](#), and LAO staff will then coordinate a mutually agreeable time and next steps. See below for more information on how to request a conference.

Key benefits



No cost to participants, making settlement accessible¹.



Available at any stage of a matter, without requiring a court proceeding.



All family law issues may be addressed, without restrictions.



Scheduling is flexible and timely, helping expedite resolution.



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¹ Preparation time and attendance at an LAO settlement conference is billable under the LAO tariff. For more information, counsel may refer to the Tariff and Billing Handbook.

Domestic violence and safety considerations

Facilitators are trained to recognize and respond to issues of domestic violence, power imbalances, and high-conflict dynamics. At the start of each conference, participants are advised that the process may be ended at any time if safety becomes a concern.

Counsel play a vital role in screening for appropriateness and are encouraged to advise LAO if the process is unsuitable for a given case.

LAO will not schedule a conference where court-imposed restrictions prohibit participation (e.g., bail conditions or no-contact orders).

Confidentiality and voluntariness

LAO settlement conferences are strictly confidential. Facilitators do not produce reports for court, nor do they become witnesses in legal proceedings. Any notes or correspondence in the process are for discussion purposes only and may not be disclosed in court without written consent from both counsel and the facilitator. Parties and counsel sign a confidentiality agreement at the outset of the process.

If parties reach a settlement, the facilitator will provide a summary of the agreement in principle on a without prejudice basis. Counsel may then prepare Minutes of Settlement or a Consent Order based on that summary, ensuring that all final decisions are made with the benefit of legal advice.

How to request an LAO settlement conference

To initiate an LAO settlement conference, counsel should submit a written request via [Legal Aid Online](#), attaching it to the relevant active certificate. Please include the names of the parties, counsel for each party, and the location of the matter (e.g., court location or region, if known). LAO staff will then coordinate scheduling and next steps.



If you require support using Legal Aid Online, please contact the Lawyer Service Centre (LSC) at 416-979-9934 or toll-free at 1-866-979-9934. The LSC is available Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

We encourage members of the bench and bar to promote and utilize LAO settlement conferences, when appropriate, as a practical, equitable, and client-centred dispute resolution process.