

2020-21

ANNUAL REPORT



**WEST TORONTO COMMUNITY
LEGAL SERVICES**

A message from the Chair of the Board



Jacques Descoteaux

2020/2021 will be remembered by most as the year we learned to live with COVID 19, but in the world of community legal clinics, 2020/2021 was also the year of Legal Aid Ontario's Modernization project. Spurred by the passage of new legislation, the Legal Aid Services Act, 2020 (LASA 2020), proclaimed on October 18, 2021, LAO initiated a review and redrafting of the foundational documents that set out the relationship between LAO and the legal clinics which deliver poverty law services in the province.

LASA 2020 differs from its predecessor legislation in that it establishes a broad framework for the delivery of Legal Aid services, including legal clinics, but leaves the specifics to the government. So LAO needed developed and formalized a set of new rules to regulate the provision of Legal Aid services and new individual service agreements with clinics.

Throughout the 2020/2021 year, LAO and the clinic system, represented by the Association of Community Legal Clinics of Ontario (ACLCO), engaged in consultation on the content of these new foundational documents.

At the start of the consultation process, we, and most clinics in Ontario, had concerns about LAO's vision of the new relationship between clinics and their funder. The clinics have a long history in Ontario. Some were founded half a century ago. Throughout this time, clinics have always believed that we have a partnership with our major funder. Each party brings something of value to the relationship: LAO brings funding and centralized supports and the clinics bring their

expertise and their connection to the community. Together we provide low income people across the province with meaningful access to poverty law services.

Unfortunately, it initially appeared that this focus on partnership might not be shared by LAO. This seemed to be reflected in their proposal which included, among other concerns, very short funding terms and the ability for LAO to defund clinics with little notice to the local community.

I am now happy to report that after the year of consultation, LAO has implemented significant changes to the Rules and service agreements in response to our feedback. The documents now better reflect a modernization that preserves our historic partnership. We have agreed to three year funding terms with 18 months notice to be provided if a clinic will lose funding. There is a better appeal process should funding be reduced. There is a stated mutual commitment to equity and anti-oppression and to the importance of community engagement and systemic work in addition to individual cases.

Of course, not everything is there that clinics might have wanted in an ideal world. But certainly, the new foundational documents will allow clinics in Ontario to continue to function and thrive well into the future. With LASA 2020 proclaimed on October 18, 2021, we anticipate that the relationship with our funder will continue to be a productive one allowing LAO and the clinics to work effectively together to meet poverty law needs across the province.

A message from the Executive Director



Elisabeth Bruckmann

In 2020/2021, WTCLS reached the end of its previous strategic plan. We achieved many of the goals we set for ourselves three years ago and our Board and Staff were ready to re-group to start planning for the future.

In the early months of 2021, we engaged in a series of Board and staff planning sessions to revisit our Vision, Mission, and Values Statements and build a new Strategic Plan for the next three years. We identified new strategic priorities and developed strategies and actions to guide us going forward.

There is a lot to work on, but a couple of key elements are worth noting; the first is that we have a set goal to center anti-racism and anti-oppression in our work at the clinic. We established an Anti-Racism Anti-Oppression (ARAO) Committee to start the process of proactively addressing these issues at the clinic. In the first year, we developed a new ARAO policy and began to review our other policies with an anti-racism lens. We reviewed the Statistics Canada information on the catchment area to better understand the changing makeup of the communities we serve. We started collecting race-based statistics during our intake process to allow us to assess whether we are reaching all the groups who need our help. We reviewed the recommendations of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation to determine how we could advance reconciliation with Indigenous People. We made a good start on the Committee's workplan, but we have a long way to go. I look forward to providing updates on this going forward.

Another key element of the new Strategic Plan is addressing how technology impacts our clients' access to justice. The COVID19 pandemic required all tribunals and courts to move online and it now seems that few, if any of these will be returning to in person hearings in the future. For lower income people, the need for technology to participate in these online hearings presents a major barrier to accessing the justice system. Many of our clients do not have a phone, let alone a computer and access to the internet. Even with access, this new hearing environment is intimidating and hard to navigate and frequent technical problems can result in a vulnerable person losing their ability to participate. WTCLS is working through how we can best support the low income people in our area to navigate this new face of tribunals and courts in Ontario and how we can advocate for a justice system that is inclusive and accommodating of marginalized groups.

These are just two areas that we will be focusing over the next three years. The full strategic plan is reproduced elsewhere in this Annual Report. Please let me know if you have any questions about the plan or about the steps we will be taking to put it into action. We are all very much looking forward to the years ahead.

Focused on community in challenging times

While virtual work is a reality for many workplaces, WTCLS has maintained a community presence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

STAYING CONNECTED

Virtual meetings allowed in-office staff to stay connected with those of us working from home.



At the beginning of the fiscal year in April 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was in its first wave across Ontario. WTCLS shut down the office to our usual walk-in clients and moved staff to working from home. We told clients they would have to communicate with us by email or phone and our normally bustling reception area went quiet, but not completely quiet.

Even during periods of full lock down, WTCLS continued to have at least one staff person at the office every day to make sure that there was a real person to answer the phone and, if necessary, the front door. People without technology were still able to knock and connect with a human being to explain their situation and see if we could assist them. When absolutely necessary, we had clients in the office with masking, plexiglass, and other measures to keep everyone safe. We are quite proud of the fact that we were able to maintain our connection to our clients and the community during even the most challenging time.

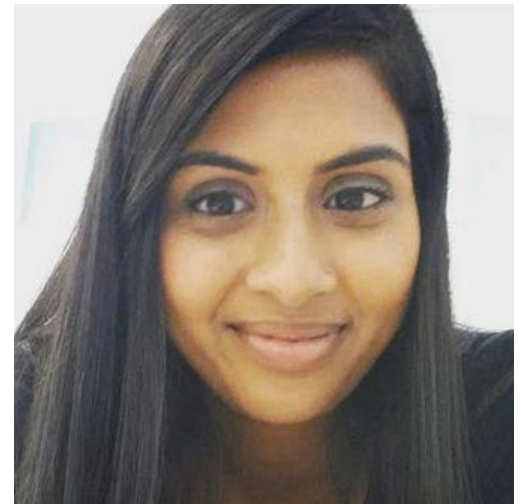
NEW WAY OF GETTING HELP

Register online on our website! www.wtcls.org

In the spring of 2021, staff started the process of getting vaccinated and case numbers in the province came down. Staff are still working partly from home, but on any given day, you will find a group of us in the office. It is nice to see one another again. If you have phone or email, please use that to contact us first, or use our online registration at wtcls.org, if you must come by, please do. For now at least, please keep your mask on!

New faces around the office

2021 saw an influx of new staff at WTCLS. Here are three of the new faces at the clinic, or known faces in new roles!



Nan Padmanathan joined WTCLS as our new housing lawyer in March 2021. A graduate of Newcastle University in the UK and Osgoode Hall Law School here in Toronto, Nan had previously worked with us as a law student. Nan then went on to article at our neighbouring clinic, Parkdale Community Legal Services, where she gained expertise in all areas of poverty law practice. Nan has quickly gained a reputation as a tireless advocate with a record of success in eviction prevention and tenant protection. When Nan isn't representing West Toronto clients, she likes to hike, hang out with her dog Boomi, and sample butter tarts in small towns across Ontario.

Romkey Chowdhury joined WTCLS as a permanent Housing Help worker in 2021. She had done a short term contract with us the previous year and had really impressed us with her hard work and commitment to her clients. Romkey graduated from the University of Toronto in 2018 with a B.A. in Health Studies and Human Geography. She started volunteering as a housing worker assistant in 2010 and has since worked with a range of community service agencies to advance her goal of ensuring that everyone has access to safe and affordable housing. A life-long resident of Scarborough, Romkey loves to spend free time outdoors gardening, taking photograph, and engaging in DIY projects. She is a wonderful addition to the staff at WTCLS.

Zara Margalhaes joined WTCLS in 2017 as a Housing Help worker. For the next four years, she was a valued member of staff supporting community members in their search for new and sustainable housing. Zara also found time to pursue further studies in the part-time Paralegal Program at Seneca College. When we posted a position for a new Community Legal Worker / Paralegal with a focus on housing law, Zara was the obvious choice. She will be graduating from the Paralegal Program in December of 2021 and taking her licensing exam in early 2022. Adding Zara to our legal team has allowed us to increase our capacity to assist the growing number of community members facing threats to their housing. We are thrilled to have her!

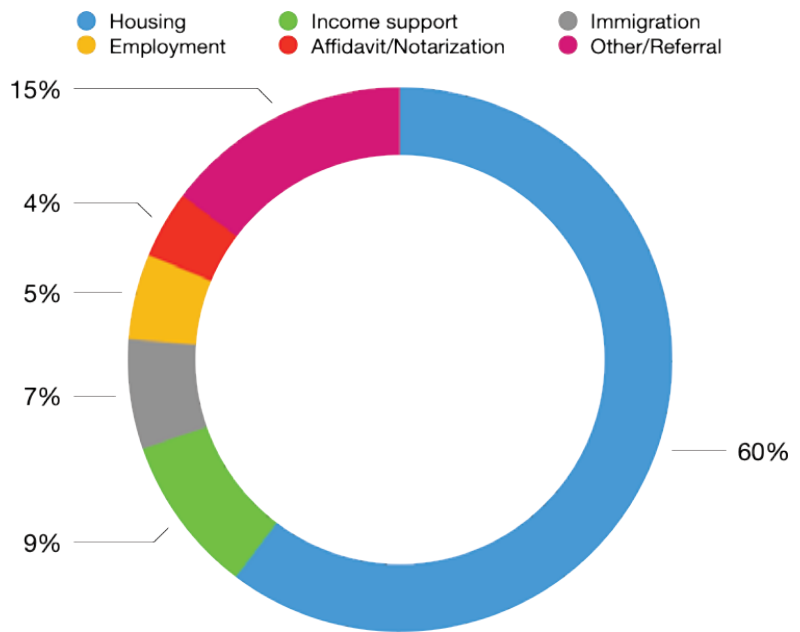
Our year in legal services

COVID-19 led to a sudden shift in the types of issues we saw in the community

Legal casework in the fiscal year was hard to predict as the pandemic changed people’s circumstances, tribunals were functioning at different volumes, and government supports and regulations shifted. Overall there was no change in the number of people contacting us for legal help. We opened fewer cases however because many people who were calling us were out of area. They were just trying to find a clinic that was picking up the phone! Our case numbers went down overall, but not as much as it seems. The way we are counting our work shifted a bit as we kept working on many cases opened the year before. What is more notable is the change in area of law. Housing law is now almost two thirds of our work. We responded to this shift by bringing on a new community legal worker who will soon be a licensed paralegal. We will continue to monitor the demand for our services so that we can always respond to community needs.

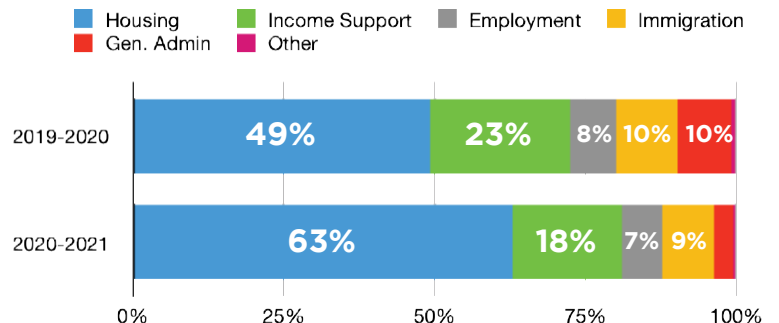
REASONS FOR CONTACTING US

By percentage, these are the reasons why people reach out to WTCLS for help.



WHAT BECOMES A CASE?

With the strains of COVID, the proportion of our legal casework related to Housing increased to over 60% of all cases, far higher than the previous fiscal year.



Our year in Housing Help

The housing help team adapted to a sudden shift in how they help clients

Our Housing Help Program weathered the challenges of the COVID-19 very well. We have missed the time spent at our community partner locations in the past year, but we continued to provide housing help services to low income people using phone, email and online virtual platforms, helping our clients navigate the challenging Toronto rental housing market, and maintain access to subsidized and specialized housing.

In early 2021, Access to Housing (formerly Housing Connections) introduced Rent Café, a new online system for its workers and community partners. All Housing Workers received additional training to learn to navigate the new system so that they can support low income people looking for RGI units.

Also in the summer of 2021, a new applicant portal named MyAccessstoHousingTO was launched to allow households to apply for, or manage, new or existing applications for subsidized housing themselves. The portal requires applicants to register for an online account, after which they have access to their housing application, can update their information, and revise their housing selections. While this new applicant portal brings many benefits to users who are able to use computers or smartphones and have access to these devices, it is hard for low income people who may not have these things. We have started to see a huge influx of people requiring assistance to complete these registrations to MyAccesssto HousingTO. We anticipate some long hours ahead, but we hope that this new system will make it easier for applicants to monitor their progress in the long wait for an subsidised unit in the City.



2021 marked a very significant milestone at WTCLS. It was the 20th year of **Helle Hulgaard**'s employment at the clinic! Helle is one of our incredible community legal workers (CLW). She has seen the West Toronto community change over many years and the impact of poverty on the marginalized people we serve. With a background in social services, Helle made connections with partner agencies across our catchment area, working on community initiatives and delivering public legal education sessions far and wide. Helle is also a major force in our casework delivery. With an incredible knowledge of social assistance and Toronto Community Housing policies, she is well placed to assist many of our clients who have been suddenly cut off benefits, denied a benefit, or seen their subsidized rents go up. There has been a lot of change at the clinic over the years, but Helle has been our rock throughout. She is right at the heart of WTCLS and we would not be the same organization without her. Congratulations to Helle on 20 years!

Audited Financials for 2020-2021



Kam Mangat

Despite the challenges that COVID presented, West Toronto Community Legal Services continued to provide services and help individuals within their catchment. WTCLS continues to move forward on adjusting to the new normal with operations almost back to pre-COVID levels. The finance committee plays the critical role of ensuring the finances of the organization are carefully managed so that the clinic can meet its financial obligations and continue to provide service to the community. The finance committee also welcomed a new member, Lakshmi Raju, and we are sad to see Jacques Descoteaux step down as he approaches his term limit. On behalf of the committee, I want to thank Jacques for his many years of dedicated services.

We are grateful to our primary funders, Legal Aid Ontario, which funds our legal service delivery, and the City of Toronto, which funds our Housing Help department. Additional funds this year were provided by the federal government's temporary wage subsidy, as well as additional project funds provided by the Government of Canada through the Canadian Red Cross.

The purpose of our annual external audit is for the auditor to express an opinion on the truth and fairness of an organization's financial statements. An external audit provides an independent third party assessment of the financial statement, and ensures accountability

of management performance, as well as a reasonable basis for our members and the public to rely on the financial statements.

The audit of the finances of WTCLS for 2010-2021 was performed by the accounting firm Chaplin & Co. The auditor verifies that the accounting records and policies are in order to ensure the financial statements are accurate, complete, and in adherence with generally accepted accounting principles.

I would like to thank the auditors, Chaplin & Co. for their services this year.

West Toronto Community Legal Services Inc.

Summarized Annual Financial Statements

Report of the Independent Auditor's on the Summarized Financial Statements

To the Board of Directors of
West Toronto Community Legal Services Inc.

Opinion

The accompanying summarized financial statements, which comprise the summarized statement of financial position as at March 31, 2021, the summarized statement of operations and changes in fund balances and summarized statement of cash flows for the year then ended, and related notes are derived from the audited financial statements of West Toronto Community Legal Services Inc. for the year ended March 31, 2021.

In our opinion, the summarized financial statements are a fair summary of the audited financial statements on the basis described in Note 1.

Summary Financial Statements

The summarized financial statements do not contain all the disclosures required by Canadian accounting standards for not-for-profit organizations. Reading these summarized financial statements, therefore, is not a substitute for reading the audited financial statements and the auditor's report thereon.

The Audited Financial Statements and our Report Thereon

We expressed an unmodified audit opinion on the audited financial statements in our report dated August 9, 2021.

Management's Responsibility for the Summarized Financial Statements

Management is responsible for the preparation of the summary financial statements on the basis described in Note 1.

Auditor's Responsibility

Our responsibility is to express an opinion on whether the summarized financial statements are a fair summary of the audited financial statements based on our procedures, which were conducted in accordance with Canadian Auditing Standards (CAS) 810, Engagements to Report on Summary Financial Statements.

Chaplin & Co., Chartered Accountants
Licensed Public Accountants
Toronto, Canada
August 9, 2021

Note 1

The information selected by management for presentation in the Summarized Annual Financial Statements has been identified as being the most pertinent and useful financial data for inclusion in the West Toronto Community Legal Services Inc's annual report.

Summarized Statement of Financial Position

As at March 31, 2021

| | <u>2021</u> | <u>2020</u> |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Current assets | \$ 92,688 | \$ 77,533 |
| Capital assets | 118,797 | 168,681 |
| Total assets | <u>\$ 211,485</u> | <u>\$ 246,214</u> |
| Liabilities | \$ 179,077 | \$ 201,346 |
| Fund balances | 32,408 | 44,868 |
| Liabilities and Fund balances | <u>\$ 211,485</u> | <u>\$ 246,214</u> |

Summarized Statement of Operations and Changes in Fund Balances

Year ended March 31, 2021

| | <u>2021</u> | <u>2020</u> |
|--|------------------|------------------|
| Total revenues | \$ 1,250,955 | \$ 1,147,242 |
| Total expenses | <u>1,263,303</u> | <u>1,177,373</u> |
| Excess of expenses over revenue | (12,348) | (30,131) |
| Fund balances, beginning of year | 44,868 | 74,999 |
| Repayment of LAO Funds | <u>(112)</u> | <u>-</u> |
| Fund balances, end of year | <u>\$ 32,408</u> | <u>\$ 44,868</u> |

Summarized Statement of Cash Flows

Year ended March 31, 2021

| | <u>2021</u> | <u>2020</u> |
|---|------------------|------------------|
| Cash flows used in Operating activities | \$ (5,112) | \$ (20,616) |
| Decrease in cash | <u>(5,112)</u> | <u>(20,616)</u> |
| Cash, beginning of year | <u>49,937</u> | <u>70,553</u> |
| Cash, end of year | <u>\$ 44,825</u> | <u>\$ 49,937</u> |

These summarized financial statements do not reflect the substantial value of services contributed by volunteers.

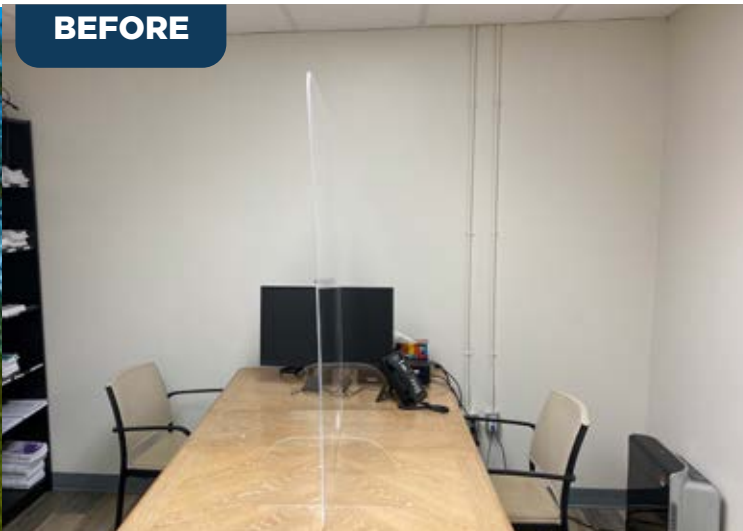
An office refresh thanks to community artists

Along with upgrades to our office to ensure the safety of visitors and staff, visitors to our office will now be treated to some amazing photography



We brightened up our office this year with some more framed work from local photographers. We extend our thanks to David Miller, C. Bau, Akib Uddin, and Micheal Monastyrskyj for providing us with permission to print and hang their work. Our office is not only a calmer place to work, but a better environment for our clients who are navigating a stressful time in their lives.

BEFORE



AFTER



A huge thank you to our staff and volunteers

Board

Mark Anthony
Jacques Descoteaux
Tyler Hargreaves
Kam Mangat
Christina McIntyre
Lakshmi Raju
Sandra Rosier
Caroline Shultz
Sarah Skinner

Committee Volunteer

Sharon Anderson

Clinic Director

Elisabeth Brückmann

Director of Administration

Rob Routh

Legal Team

Francesca Allodi-Ross
Jacky Chiu
Moira Daly
Helle Hulgaard
Kathryn Lynch
Zara Magalhaes
Nan Padmanathan
Victoria Peter
Elysha Roeper
Farida Salim
Danika So

Administration

Elisabeth Valenti-Sorbara
Maggie Szlimak

Housing Help Supervisor

Morena Carranza

Housing Help Workers

Romkey Chowdhury
Yodit Wendim

Case Managers

Travis Major
Ariel Weber

Student Caseworkers

Lindsay Correia
Tiffany Dang
Shanika Gordon
Joshua Hearn
Thien Hoang
Julia Kennedy

Our strategic priorities for 2021-2023

1. Increase access to high quality legal and housing help services

- Continue to provide effective and responsive legal supports and housing help services
- Support community members to access and navigate an increasingly technological environment
- Integrate an anti-racism and anti-oppression framework into the organization and its services

2. Engage and connect with the community

- Increase our presence within a web of resources and community services
- Support community initiatives that promote systemic change
- Educate the community about housing and poverty law issues

3. Strengthen our organizational resilience and capacity

- Continue to develop and improve teams at all levels
- Improve practices, systems, infrastructure, and technology
- Promote the importance of investing in broader housing and legal rights work



**WEST TORONTO COMMUNITY
LEGAL SERVICES**

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LEGAL AID ONTARIO
AIDE JURIDIQUE ONTARIO



West Toronto Community Legal Services is funded by Legal Aid Ontario.
West Toronto Housing Help Services is funded by the City of Toronto.
Additional COVID-19 support provided by the Government of Canada
through the Canadian Red Cross.