

## **Legal Aid cuts will reduce services to injured workers**

TORONTO, June 14, 2019

On June 12<sup>th</sup> Injured Workers Community Legal Clinic was informed that our clinic's budget was reduced by 22% retroactive to April 1st. As one of the "worker focused" specialty clinics in Ontario, we received one of the deeper cuts as LAO implements the Ford government's first round of legal aid funding reduction. Larger cuts have been promised for next year.

While a cut of 22% sounds significant, it is worse than it seems. Because the 22% cut is retroactive to April 1st, it will mean an actual reduction of much more than that to our funding for the remaining fiscal year. The magnitude of this cut means that the clinic will have to reduce staff and services. We are facing a layoff of 40% of staff and even then, there would not be enough savings to absorb the cuts. After 50 years of serving the injured worker community, future services are uncertain.

LAO administrators were explicit that the "worker clinics" had been targeted because of our law reform and community development work. LAO and the Ministry of the Attorney General seem to be taking the position that broader community work is not a client-facing service for real people. This ignores the fact that the clinic is explicitly required by the funding agreement with LAO to provide "legal representation and advice, community development and organising, law reform, and public legal education." Clinics are being punished for doing the job that LAO gave us to do.

Community development and law reform activities resolve large wide spread systemic issues that directly affect the clients we serve and the broader community. Tens of thousands of injured workers have benefited from the work done by worker-focussed legal aid clinics on systemic issues such as chronic pain, chronic mental stress, pension supplements for older workers, clothing allowances, benefit adjustments to keep pace with inflation, preserving the independence and specialized nature of the Appeals Tribunal, and other issues.

LAO took the position in the press that they would be encouraging the three "worker clinics" to discuss how they could cost-share, find back-end savings, or potentially amalgamate. Cuts of this magnitude are not an attempt to find efficiencies and encourage clinics to work together, this is an attempt to close clinics.

The fact is there are no "back-end savings" that will absorb any substantial portion of a cut of this magnitude. Moving to a combined space with other clinics would actually increase expenditures on a per-employee basis, in our case. We share space with a community centre in an older building outside of the downtown core at a much lower cost than what we would pay for a smaller space downtown, not to mention the cost of moving an office and building out new spaces. We have one outdated photocopier and Nortel telephones from the 1980s.

The cuts will reduce direct client service and adversely impact particularly disadvantaged groups. The clients served by the worker focussed clinics are people with disabilities, most of them permanent. Most of our clients struggle with mental health issues and poverty, and many additional barriers including language, race, gender and citizenship status.

We have served our community for 50 years and we will continue as best we can, representing and supporting people with disabilities whose life has been disrupted by workplace injury and illness.

For further inquiries please contact:

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