

GTA LEGAL CLINICS' TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

Monthly Newsletter

February 2014

The Supplementary Report

While the qualitative data report highlighted similarities across themes that emerged in the qualitative data collection, the supplementary report released at the end of January discussed innovative approaches and best practices that clinics use to meet the complex needs of clients. Issues of proximity have been addressed by using satellite locations or offering mobile legal services to clients who are isolated or unable to access the main clinic site. Working within teams or taking group approaches to law has helped to alleviate the pressures on individuals related to high volumes of service demand. And where demand falls outside of the scope of law, some clinics have sought external funding to hire on-site staff in the areas of housing help, social work and mental health. Working with partners (including legal students, volunteers, and pro bono lawyers), and co-locating or amalgamating services, have been some of the other models clinics have adopted in effort to meet complex demands and provide holistic services.

Outreach and community development is one of the essential areas of clinic work that reportedly tends to fall behind urgent case file work. In order to address this, clinics have hired staff through city programs or, where resources allow, have dedicated internal staff to focus on this work.

Clinics also recognize the important role they play in training clinic workers for the future. Most clinics work with students in some way and the Intensive Program in Poverty Law at Parkdale provides a unique experiential learning model. This program's success relies on a direct supportive relationship between students and their teachers. Teachers work closely with students to guide them through the challenges they are facing and ensure a strict limitation on the volume of work to make room for reflection and learning.

These divergent practices among clinics offer "natural experiments" in clinic development that provide insight into best practices and future models.

To read the full Report, go to gtaclinics.ca.

Literature Review

The research phase of the project culminated with the literature review being presented to the Steering Committee this month. The literature was grouped into two areas: elements of effective community clinics, and structures and transitions.

Elements of Effective Clinics

Community clinics in different jurisdictions nationally and abroad use a range of strategies to provide effective legal services to low-income persons with complex needs. Multi-disciplinary approaches offered staff-based clinics that sometimes blurred the lines between legal and non-legal supports, and invariably had strong connections to non-legal service providers to support their clients. Working in close, usually formalized partnership with other community agencies allowed clinics to provide a one-stop holistic approach to client services. Many models integrated their services with volunteers and pro bono legal services. The literature does not recommend replacing a base of paid staff with pro bono lawyers or students but does show them as a useful resource. Authors also point to the success of staffing models that are integrated and team oriented, owing to the fact that they make use of a wide variety of skills and knowledge.

Virtually every commission and review of access to justice stated the importance of community governance in understanding client needs, challenges and barriers to accessing services. Community leadership ensures that clinics are responsive to the changing needs of clients. Board members were found to benefit from training in governance and representative functions. Outreach is also a valuable driver of service priorities, although the pressure of casework consistently strains the commitment to this. Authors repeatedly stressed the importance of avoiding such a trade-off.

Some of the literature explored areas of law offered by clinics and the debate surrounding whether that should be expanded to include family, criminal, and consumer areas of law. Where Duty Council has been valuable, there is concern with the disconnection of that system from other longer-term supports: for instance, the continuity of representation or the ability to forward complex cases on to senior lawyers.

In addition to in-person services, the literature explored the use of different technologies that have been implemented with the intention of increasing access to service. The technology most often debated was the use of a hotline, which some literature found could be helpful in providing brief service and referrals, but only where the operators were familiar with local resources, connected to a broader infrastructure and well trained in various areas of law. Further innovations examined included touch screen kiosks for information, video conferencing for remote access, websites and multilingual videos, as well as the transfer to electronic files.

Structures and Transition

The second component of the literature review looked at pragmatic ways organizations have realigned their services. Some organizations restructure in reaction to economic factors, where some have done so because they have realized they can provide better services by doing some things differently. Successful processes of restructuring rely on open and transparent communication, strong leaders who put the vision of the new entity first, engagement with all stakeholders, and a plan that outlines clearly defined goals, timelines and benchmarks.

Organizations faced various challenges to the restructuring process. Many found that where there are emotional ties, staff members, board members and the community may not support change. Fear of job loss and takeovers can exacerbate the situation. Even where there are well-intentioned agreements, trust between all parties needs to be built. Underestimating the importance of organizational culture, costs, and the complexity of the process can also have negative effects.

The literature stressed lessons learned, which included the importance of stakeholder engagement to building trust, employing a robust communications strategy throughout the process, and listening to and incorporating feedback from all stakeholders into the process.

To read the full Literature Review, go to gtaclinics.ca.

Next Steps

At the next two Steering Committee meetings, committee members will discuss various staffing and service delivery models.

Inter-clinic meetings will also be taking place over the next few weeks, which will include a project presentation and opportunities for questions and discussion.

<i>Tuesday December 10, 2013</i>	Regular Meeting: Wrap up quantitative data discussion
<i>Tuesday January 14, 2014</i>	Regular Meeting: Qualitative Data Report
<i>Monday January 27, 2014</i>	Extra Meeting: Further discussion of qualitative data
Tuesday February 11, 2014	Regular Meeting: Literature Review and models
Monday February 24, 2014	Extra Meeting: Exploration of possible conclusions
Tuesday March 11, 2014	Regular Meeting: Possible recommendations
Saturday March 29, 2014	Full day retreat: Possible recommendations
Tuesday April 8, 2014	Regular meeting: Draft Report
Tuesday April 29, 2014	Extra Meeting: Further Discussion of Draft Report
Tuesday May 13, 2014	Final draft interim report to Steering Committee