

# **GTA Legal Clinics' Transformation Project**

*An Open Letter to the Community Interested in Clinic Law Services in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)*

The GTA Legal Clinics' Transformation Project has released its Vision Report: a report that spells out how geographically based community legal clinics in the GTA can be reorganized to provide more and better services to our client community. The Vision we are articulating was developed over the past 16 months involving extensive research, wide spread consultation with all stakeholders, and much discussion by the Project's Steering Committee (which was made up of representatives from each of the participating clinics). This report reflects the decisions made through consensus by the GTA legal clinics' representatives in a lengthy and transparent process. The Executive Summary of the Report is attached. You can go to our website: [www.gtaclinics.ca](http://www.gtaclinics.ca) to read or download the full report as well as much more information about this Project.

Before we begin developing a plan to implement this Vision (a process that itself will involve more extensive consultation) we are looking for a formal commitment from clinics that this Vision is a shared Vision. Over the coming months we expect to meet again with clinic board members and clinic staff members; attend the town hall meetings being planned; and meet with other interested parties to discuss the Vision and to consider suggestions for changes.

Concern has been expressed in some corners that our Vision is out of line with what community legal clinics have historically been; that we are changing local community based services responsive to local needs into bureaucratic mega-offices that will be out of touch with the community; and that our changes will result in job losses.

Many in the clinic system, inside and outside of the GTA, will be surprised at the suggestion that clinics can only serve small local neighbourhoods to truly understand their community's needs or have a Board of Directors that can represent their catchment area. They have been meeting these challenges for many years. The truth is that only a handful of the downtown Toronto clinics have small catchment areas; most clinics' catchment areas are sprawling territories that are not easy to access, with very diverse populations that nevertheless have very similar legal needs. Yet no one will say that these clinics have failed to effectively reach out to their clients and their communities; have failed to understand what their clients need; have failed to recruit good Board members who are strong and passionate advocates for their community and for their clinic; or have left parts of their community without a voice. We have also observed that it is the large clinics, such as Hamilton and Parkdale, which are more able to engage in community development work.

The participants in this Project are keenly aware of the importance of clinics' community development work. Together with our Board members and effective casework, community development work is part of the foundation of clinics' connection to the communities we serve. But we cannot ignore the fact that this work in the GTA has been in decline as we all struggle to meet the case work demands that daily walk through our doors. Our proposal is to more than double the community development workers in the GTA clinics.

Our proposal also will see the number of clinic workers in general increase. Through our framework agreement with Legal Aid Ontario there will be no budget reductions and the savings we realize through efficiencies can be redirected to enhanced clinic client services. In this Project, transformation is not an exercise in cutting jobs; it is about redefining how we do things.

Toronto and the GTA have changed over the past 3 or 4 decades since the first clinics were established. And certainly clinics have changed too. But where our communities have become much more mobile and dispersed, clinics have not responded by changing our service delivery model. Our legal clinics are too small to respond effectively to today's challenges. If in the 1970's the word "community" referred to a local neighbourhood, such a definition has limited resonance to most Torontonians today: community is much more than a neighbourhood and our community legal clinics need to reflect that new reality more consistently. This is what our Vision tries to do.

For many reasons, the astounding growth of poverty not the least of them, the clinic system in the GTA needs more money. Our Vision Report recognizes this and states unequivocally that we cannot make the required changes without additional funding.

But our analysis also points out that our system can generate more resources by reorganizing. We have designed a service model that increases front line service staff by almost 20%, meaning we will have more people to serve our clients; and with more dedicated community development staff we have added capacity to develop and maintain more and better community partnerships. These gains cannot be realized by adding a staff member or two to existing clinics. And as noted above we have secured a formal commitment from Legal Aid Ontario that any savings transformation generates will be reinvested in the new clinics to further enhance our services.

This is an opportunity we should not forego.

Jack de Klerk  
On behalf of the Working Group and Steering Committee of  
The GTA Legal Clinics' Transformation Project