

DIGITAL EQUITY AND DIGITAL LEGAL RESOURCES: WORKERS' PERSPECTIVES

Survey, Referrals, and Focus Groups Report

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Reports from all components of the Achieving Digital Equity Project can be viewed at the project website: legalaid.bc.ca/about/reports/Achieving-Digital-Equity-Project.

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Note to Readers:

The links (URLs) referenced in this document were correct as of August 31, 2021. However, given that web-based information changes frequently, the links or content of the websites referenced may change.

Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Contents	iii
Executive Summary	v
Introduction and Context	v
Key Themes and Implications	vi
Workers' familiarity with, use of, and referrals to digital legal resources.....	vi
Clients' access to digital technology	vi
Additional barriers to use of digital legal resources	vii
Perspectives on, and capacity for, one-to-one assistance.....	vii
Introduction	1
Digital (In)Equity, and Barriers to Use of Digital Legal Resources	1
Legal Aid BC's <i>Achieving Digital Equity</i> Project	1
Workers' Perspectives	2
Survey of Community Workers	4
Survey Purpose	4
Methodology	4
Survey Respondents	5
Work Sector	5
Work Setting and Region	6
Workers' Familiarity, Use, and Referrals to Digital Legal Resources	7
LABC Digital Resources: Use and Referrals	7
All Digital Legal Resources: Frequency of Use and Referrals	9
All Digital Legal Resources: Type of Referral.....	10
Resource Referrals: Comments.....	11
Clients' Access to Digital Technology	12
Clients' Access to Digital Devices	12
Clients' Access to Internet	12
Technology Access: Comments.....	13
Additional Barriers to Use of Digital Legal Resources	16
Barriers Faced by Clients.....	16
Additional Barriers: Comments.....	17

Assisted Use of Digital Legal Resources	22
Assisted Use of Resources: Comments	23
Supports and Assistance	25
Suggested Supports	25
Capacity to offer One-to-one Help.....	30
Impacts of COVID-19	33
COVID-19: Comments	34
Tracking Referrals to Digital Legal Resources	39
Purpose and Method.....	39
Rates and Types of Referrals.....	39
Web Resources Referred	40
Reasons for Not Referring to Online Resources	41
Profile of People Served	42
Digital Resources Focus Groups	43
Purpose and Method.....	43
Workers' Familiarity with, and Referrals to, Digital Legal Resources.....	44
Clients' Access to Digital Technology.....	45
Additional Barriers to use of Digital Legal Resources	46
Supports and Assistance	48
Workers Perspectives on, and Capacity for, One-to-one Assistance	50
Summary: Key Themes and Implications	52
Workers' Familiarity with, Use of, and Referrals to Digital Legal Resources	52
Clients' Access to Digital Technology.....	55
Additional Barriers to Use of Digital Legal Resources	58
Perspectives on, and Capacity for, One-to-one Assistance	61
References	65
Appendix A: Copy of Online Survey for Community Workers	68

Executive Summary

Introduction and Context

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, questions of digital exclusion and digital inequity have been critical to the work of Legal Aid BC (LABC). LABC has regularly been recognized for leadership in the design and delivery of digital Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) resources – including the Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC, Family Law in BC, and MyLawBC websites which feature innovative guided pathway,¹ live chat, and Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) features. While LABC engages in user testing and evaluation to improve accessibility, the organization is concerned that an array of structural barriers prevents many people from effectively accessing and using digital legal resources. Consequently, LABC has initiated the Achieving Digital Equity (ADE) project. This multi-method study examines the barriers to access and use of digital resources which are faced by people across British Columbia (BC).

This report summarizes findings from three elements of the ADE study: an online survey of community-based “intermediaries” (such as community workers, legal advocates, helping professionals or volunteers, and Elders) throughout BC; tracking of LABC staff and partners’ referrals to digital legal resources; and focus groups in which community-based intermediaries from across the province were invited to learn and offer feedback about selected digital tools. Taken together, more than 430 workers participated in these three elements of our study:

- 272 community workers completed our survey,
- 17 LABC staff and partners tracked their referrals across 311 inquiries, and
- 150 workers and staff participated in focus groups and workshops.

Within these three elements of our project, we hoped to learn about:

- community-based intermediaries’ familiarity with, use of, and referrals to digital legal resources;
- intermediaries’ observations about their clients’ access to technology;
- additional barriers (beyond technology access) that impact clients’ abilities to access and use digital legal resources;
- the types of supports that are important in enabling people to access, use, and benefit from digital legal resources;
- intermediaries’ perspectives on, and capacity for, providing one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources; and
- impacts and lessons learned in relation to clients’ access to legal help during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Often, the people who are assisted by community workers are among those British Columbians who face the greatest barriers to technology access and use, *and* to accessing justice. For this reason, the insights reflected in this report make a vital contribution to the Achieving Digital Equity project (legalaid.bc.ca/about/reports/Achieving-Digital-Equity-Project.)

¹ With guided pathways, website users are users are guided interactively (via a series of progressively more specific questions and options) to move through the tool and their issue in a step-by-step way – from problem diagnosis to solution.

Key Themes and Implications

The following key themes and implications are described in more detail in the last section of this report.

Workers' familiarity with, use of, and referrals to digital legal resources

Overall, referrals to digital legal resources reflect the diverse situations of workers and residents across BC. Community-based intermediaries and LABC staff and community partners clearly tailor their referral practices in ways that respond to these diverse situations and their clients' needs. In most cases, referring people to digital legal resources is seen as a complementary form of assistance – that is, it was not the primary or only type of help referred or provided.

Of all Legal Aid BC's online resources, the Family Law in BC website stands out as one which is widely recognized, used, and referred by workers, staff, and partners.

In cases where clients weren't referred to digital legal resources, responses suggest that in most cases, the legal issue and/or the barriers faced by these clients required other, often more intensive, forms of legal assistance. Reduced contact with clients during the COVID-19 pandemic also decreased some workers' opportunities to make referrals.

In a minority of situations, not referring a person to digital legal resources may also relate to lack of awareness or knowledge of available resources or, less commonly, to lack of digital technology comfort or access among workers.

PLEI sector organizations should continue supporting referrals to digital legal resources through outreach, orientation, and promotional materials for community-based intermediaries.

Clients' access to digital technology

In cases where people do have sufficient technology access, online legal resources and services can be an important channel for legal help. However, community workers across BC commonly report that their clients face multiple, overlapping, barriers to access and use of digital technology – with income and rural/urban divides in service being key factors. Many clients only have internet access by cell phone, and this access could be limited or interrupted. These multi-dimensional access challenges mean that many clients experience highly constrained forms of access to digital legal resources, if they have access at all.

The technology access barriers faced by many BC residents indicate the need for broad infrastructure, policy, and program interventions throughout BC. While such initiatives are generally outside the mandate of PLEI providers, public legal sector organizations may have a role to play in enhancing community technology access through community-based service locations.

In the public legal sector, design of PLEI and other services needs to account for the variety of digital technology access situations across BC – including the highly constrained forms of access, or lack of access, experienced by many of the lowest income and most systemically marginalized British Columbians. This suggests the value of person-centered and multi-channel approaches which enable peoples to access legal resources and services in the way that works best for them – whether through messaging, text, email, online chats, phone, and/or in-person services.

Additional barriers to use of digital legal resources

Apart from technology access constraints, the complexity of legal systems – and associated difficulties navigating legal processes and terminology – stands out as the most widespread, impactful barrier observed by workers. Stress and overwhelm, and difficulties navigating digital technology were also common. These “top three” barriers were often exacerbated by other issues: workers commonly described how people with disabilities, mental health issues, literacy challenges, who have faced systemic discrimination or violence, those experiencing homelessness, and those who speak languages other than English, faced “huge” challenges in accessing or benefiting from digital legal resources. Taken together, workers’, staff, and partners’ responses once again indicate a diversity of client situations – with some clients facing significant and/or multiple barriers that prevent them from accessing, using, and/or benefiting from digital legal resources.

The observations of workers, staff, and partners demonstrate the need for a range of (online and offline) supports and options for people – especially one-to-one assistance and technology access, in addition to design considerations like use of plain language. A person-centered, accessibility-focused, and multi-channel approach to delivery of PLEI can enlist digital design practices that mitigate barriers, while also providing complementary and/or alternative forms of help for people who are unable to access or use digital legal resources.

Perspectives on, and capacity for, one-to-one assistance

Across the three study elements that comprise this report, community workers, and LABC staff and partners repeatedly highlighted the importance of supportive, one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources. Survey comments and focus group discussion underscore how one-to-one assistance from someone with legal knowledge is vital in mitigating many of the most prevalent and impactful barriers; this help can greatly increase the number of people who benefit from digital legal resources.

While one-to-one assistance could enable more people to benefit from digital legal resources, some workers face challenges to providing this help. Among survey respondents, a minority indicated that technology access or skill was a barrier. Instead, barriers for workers more often related to knowledge, time constraints, and the disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many respondents were also emphatic about the need for alternative or and/or complementary types of legal help beyond digital resources and services. The need for in-person modes of assistance, including walk-in models of service, was frequently highlighted.

There is need to preserve and enhance personalized, one-to-modes of PLEI and legal assistance – both as a complement, and as an alternative, to digital legal resources. Wherever possible, one-to-one assistance could be provided in a range of (brief to more intensive) formats and via the multiple channels described above. Access to trauma-informed, multi-lingual, and drop-in formats for one-to-one assistance – alongside private and supported technology access – is especially key for some people.

Because digital legal resources are often most effective when delivered alongside one-to-one assistance, PLEI providers should continue to support intermediaries in providing effective support – for instance, through outreach, training, and instructional resources.

Introduction

Digital (In)Equity, and Barriers to Use of Digital Legal Resources

Digital technology can create new “pathways to justice” (McGill, Salyzyn, Bouclin et al., 2016, p. 2) for those facing challenges such as lack of knowledge about the legal system and available legal resources, lack of proximity to local legal services, and inability to afford a lawyer. However, alongside the obvious potential of digital technologies to increase access to legal information and resources, concerns about inequitable access—“digital divides”—remain (Digital Justice for BC Working Group, 2020; First Nations Technology Council, nd; KPMG, 2019; Smythe, 2020).

A large body of literature has emerged to explore the factors which produce this uneven landscape of technology access and use. Van Deursen and van Dijk (2019) summarize how concerns about the digital divide have evolved from an initial, “first-level”, focus on having an internet connection; to indicators of a “second-level” digital divide relating to internet skills and usage. Subsequently, authors have emphasized a “third-level” digital divide in which there is uneven distribution of internet use-related outcomes and tangible offline benefits (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). As the Digital Justice for BC Working Group has emphasized, “internet access is not only a right itself but an essential gateway to access other fundamental human rights such as health care, education, and community life” (Digital Justice for BC Working Group, 2020, para 9). Starting in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust these divides into even sharper relief as use of digital media for education, work, social support, and to access necessary information, goods, and services suddenly transitioned from ubiquitous to mandatory.

Legal Aid BC's *Achieving Digital Equity* Project

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, questions of digital exclusion and digital inequity have been of critical importance to the work of Legal Aid BC (LABC). LABC has regularly been recognized for leadership in the design and delivery of digital Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) resources. These include the Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC, Family Law in BC, and MyLawBC websites which feature innovative guided pathway,² live chat, and Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) features. For instance, LABC's new Family Resolution Centre combines a self-help tool with access to free expert coaching and mediation. While LABC regularly engages in user testing and evaluation to ensure high quality and maximize accessibility, the organization is concerned that an array of structural barriers is preventing many people from effectively accessing and using these digital resources. Consequently, LABC has initiated the Achieving Digital Equity (ADE) project. This multi-method study examines the barriers to access and use of digital resources which are faced by people across British Columbia (BC). LABC gratefully acknowledges the support of the Legal Services Society/Law Foundation Legal Research Fund, which is funding this work.

² With guided pathways, website users are users are guided interactively (via a series of progressively more specific questions and options) to move through the tool and their issue in a step-by-step way – from problem diagnosis to solution.

Workers' Perspectives

This report summarizes findings from three elements of the ADE study:

- an online survey of community-based “intermediaries” (such as community workers, legal advocates, helping professionals or volunteers, and Elders) throughout BC;
- tracking LABC staff and partners’ referrals to digital legal resources; and
- focus groups in which intermediaries from across the province were invited to learn and offer feedback about selected digital legal tools.

Throughout this report, I use the terms “intermediaries” and “community workers” (or “workers”) interchangeably.

Trusted intermediaries are known to play a crucial role in supporting people who are facing legal issues but cannot afford a lawyer. PLEI sector research suggests that people are often looking for legal help in the form of a service provider, advisor, or navigator who can help them understand legal processes, clarify their options, and identify next steps. People turn to trusted personal and community networks for help and expect that service providers can refer them to appropriate online or offline resources (Public Interest Strategy & Communications Inc., 2016). The role of intermediaries is thought to be especially vital within rural, remote, and Indigenous communities which are frequently under-resourced, with few legal services available. For these reasons, research on access to justice stresses the importance of supporting community workers to effectively recognize legal issues, provide reassurance, and refer people to appropriate resources (see, e.g., CHRC, 2016; Cohl, Lassonde, Mathews et al., 2018; Forell & McDonald, 2015; McDonald, Forell, & Wei, 2019; Public Interest Strategy & Communications Inc., 2016). LABC regularly engages with community workers and organizations across BC through its Community Partners program³, Parents’ Legal Centre (PLC) Network locations⁴, and its ongoing program of free legal issues and legal resources training which is offered across the province in both in-person and virtual formats.⁵

Together with Legal Aid BC’s client-facing staff and partner agencies, community-based intermediaries have important knowledge of digital equity issues and barriers to accessing digital legal resources which are faced by people throughout BC. Often, the people who are assisted by intermediaries are among those British Columbians who face the greatest barriers to technology access and use, *and* to accessing justice. For this reason, the insights reflected in this report make a vital contribution to the Achieving Digital Equity project: Through the ADE online survey, referrals tracking, and in focus group discussions, LABC staff and partners, and intermediary participants shared important, nuanced observations about the many issues, barriers, and supports which are relevant to those at greatest risk of digital exclusion.

Additional components of the ADE study include: a review of literature on the barriers to access and use of digital technologies; a population survey of lower income BC residents; and interviews exploring individuals’ digital resource user journeys. Reports from all components of the Achieving Digital Equity

³ LABC Community Partners are a network of community-based agencies who can provide legal information, referrals to services, and support accessing Legal Aid BC intake services. See: legalaid.bc.ca/legal_aid/communityPartners

⁴ PLC network locations provide a local space and computer access people to get help from a PLC lawyer or advocate about their child protection case. See: legalaid.bc.ca/legal_aid/plc-network-locations.

⁵ LABC’s training resources for community workers are available at: legalaid.bc.ca/community_workers.

Project can be viewed at the project website: legaid.bc.ca/about/reports/Achieving-Digital-Equity-Project.

The first part of this report presents the findings from the ADE project's online survey of community workers and other intermediaries from across BC. Via the survey, diverse intermediaries were asked to share their observations regarding their own familiarity, use, and referrals to digital legal resources; their clients' access to digital technology; additional barriers faced by their clients (beyond those related to digital technology access); their perspectives on support and assistance, including their own capacity to provide one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources; and their perspectives on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part two of this report offers a brief overview of referrals data generated by selected LABC staff and community-based partners. Over a two-week period in November 2020, these participants volunteered to track their practices of referring, or not referring, clients to digital resources. Finally, the third section of this report presents Adam Fraser's summary of key themes that emerged in a series of focus group discussions on digital legal resources. Focus groups were held between February and April of 2021 with community-based intermediaries throughout BC.

Taken together, insights from these three study elements indicate that workers' awareness of, and referrals to digital legal resources varies – reflecting the diverse situations of residents and workers across BC. In cases where clients weren't referred to digital legal resources, this was usually because the legal issue and/or the barriers faced by clients required other, often more intensive, forms of legal assistance. Community workers report that their clients often face multiple, overlapping, barriers to access and use of digital technology – with income and rural/urban divides in service being key factors. Many clients only have internet access by cell phone, and this access could be limited or interrupted.

The complexity of legal systems – and associated difficulties navigating legal processes and terminology – stands out as the most widespread, impactful barrier observed by workers. Stress and overwhelm, and difficulties navigating digital technology were also common. These top three barriers were often exacerbated by other issues: workers commonly described how people with disabilities, mental health issues, literacy challenges, who have faced systemic discrimination or violence, those experiencing homelessness, and those who speak languages other than English, faced “huge” challenges in accessing or benefiting from digital legal resources.

Across the three research elements that comprise this report, community workers, and LABC staff and partners repeatedly highlighted the importance of supportive, one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources. Some workers faced barriers (like insufficient time or training) to providing this type of help. The need for in-person modes of assistance, including walk-in models of service, was frequently highlighted. Taken together, the insights presented in this report call for a person-centered, accessibility-focused, and multi-channel approach to delivery of PLEI. Such an approach can enlist digital design practices that mitigate barriers, while also offering complementary and/or alternative forms of help for people who are unable to access or use digital legal resources.

Survey of Community Workers

Through this element of the ADE project, we wanted to hear from a range of community-based intermediaries across BC about their experiences, and their clients' experiences, with accessing and using digital legal resources. For our purposes, "public digital legal resources" include:

- websites,
- online content (such as text, pdf, and video),
- online publications,
- online tools (e.g., chat tools, guided pathways, online tribunals or dispute resolution tools),
- mobile legal apps, and
- online forms (e.g. application forms) about legal issues.

Email, listservs, and personal messaging / texting are not considered public digital legal resources.

Survey themes and questions were shaped by insights that have emerged through LABC's community-based and Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) work; consultation with key informants; and a critical review of literature on digital technology access, digital equity, and digital access to justice.⁶

Survey Purpose

Through the survey, we hoped to learn:

- whether intermediaries were familiar with selected LABC digital legal resources, and how often they use digital legal resources for their own information,
- how often they refer clients to digital legal resources, and the nature of these referrals,
- what intermediaries observe regarding their clients' access to digital technology and internet,
- what intermediaries observe regarding the type and prevalence of barriers faced by their clients in accessing and using digital legal resources,
- whether intermediaries had adequate technology access, time, training, and resources to provide their clients with one-to-one support in using digital legal resources,
- which types of support may be most important for increasing their clients' abilities to benefit from digital legal resources,
- what have been the impacts and lessons regarding their clients' access to legal services, and regarding technology use, that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, and
- about the sectoral and community settings in which respondents work.

Methodology

While we originally hoped to use a combination of online and offline surveys to hear from community-based intermediaries, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required us to focus on an online survey format. We emailed the survey invitation to a broad range of community workers (approximately 1000 contacts) compiled from LABC's community training and outreach lists; it was also circulated through

⁶ ADE literature review reports are available on the project website: legalaid.bc.ca/about/reports/Achieving-Digital-Equity-Project.

other service provider networks. Recipients were encouraged to forward the invitation to interested colleagues (snowball sampling). We administered the survey on the online platform Simple Survey⁷, and all responses were voluntary and anonymous. The survey invitation also offered the opportunity to complete the survey by phone instead of online, however no respondents chose this option. From the last page of the online training survey, survey invitees could opt to enter a draw to win one of three gift cards. The survey was open for about three weeks in December 2020. We received 272 completed responses, and 85% of those who began the survey went on to complete it.

Because the survey was online, in English, and administered via email, our sample is limited to those respondents who had sufficient computer, internet, and email access; sufficient English literacy; and sufficient comfort with online forms to use our survey tool.

Most of the survey questions enabled respondents to select as many choices as applied to them, or conversely, to refrain from selecting any choice. Because the number of responses differs from the number of respondents, the percentages indicated in figures do not necessarily add up to 100%. Similarly, the counts don't always add up to the total responses for that question. In most cases, these values reflect the proportions of the total respondents who selected a given choice, as opposed to indicating a series of mutually exclusive groups. Survey questions are included at the end of this report as Appendix A.




















Survey Respondents

Work Sector

Respondents were asked to identify the sector(s) in which they work, by selecting one or more categories from a list. The largest group of respondents described themselves as doing Advocacy (46%). Other areas of work that were common among survey respondents included Child and family-focused services (29%), Ending Violence (25%), services for Indigenous or Aboriginal people (24%), Justice / Law-related services (23%), Housing / Homelessness (20%), and Mental Health and Substance use (20%). Figure 1, below, offers an overview of survey respondents by sector.

⁷ Simple Survey is developed, hosted and supported entirely in Canada. See: [simplesurvey.com](https://www.simplesurvey.com)

Figure 1: In what sector(s) do you work? (Please select all that apply):

Work Sector	Count						
Advocacy	125	46%					
Child and family-focused	80	29%					
Education	31	11%					
Elder / Senior-focused	36	13%					
Ending Violence	68	25%					
Disability-related	36	13%					
Government	22	8%					
Health	26	10%					
Housing / Homelessness	55	20%					
Indigenous or Aboriginal-focused	64	24%					
Justice / Law-related	63	23%					
Legal Aid intake or outreach	22	8%					
Libraries	36	13%					
Mental health / Substance Use	55	20%					
Poverty law	37	14%					
Settlement / Immigration	47	17%					
Victim Services	43	16%					
Youth-focused	20	7%					
Other sector(s) (incl. food security, employment services)	4	1%					
Total Respondents	272						

Most respondents selected two or more sectors of work, indicating the cross-sectoral nature of many community-based roles. One described how they may provide information and referrals “on any topics.” Others described the multi-faceted nature of their work, for instance:




“We serve immigrant and refugee women and their families. We have English classes, computer support, food access, settlement outreach and women’s empowerment programs.”

“I work with clients who have traumatic or organic brain injuries. And the senior clients I have deal with multiple issues (housing, mental health, isolation, inability to be safe in their home, no family nearby. And being low-income... of course is a barrier to almost everything else they need (dentures, glasses, wheelchairs or scooters, in-home care, and so on).”

Work Setting and Region









Respondents were also asked to characterize the geographic setting(s) in which they work. While a majority (57%) indicated they worked in urban settings, a large number (41%) described their work setting as rural and/or remote. A smaller proportion indicated they work in suburban areas (24%). More than one in five respondents described themselves as working in multiple types of geographic settings (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Please describe the setting in which you work (select all that apply):

Work Setting	Count				
Urban	155	57%			
Suburban	65	24%			
Rural / Remote	111	41%			
Total Responses:	271				

Our survey garnered responses from more than 65 different communities around BC. The largest groups of survey respondents identified their region as the Vancouver / Sunshine Coast (23%), Vancouver Island (22%), and Surrey / Fraser Valley (19%) (see Figure 3, below).

Figure 3: Respondents' Region

Respondent's Region	Count				
Vancouver/Sunshine Coast	59	23%			
Vancouver Island	57	22%			
Surrey/Fraser Valley	48	19%			
North	26	10%			
Interior/East Kootenays	22	9%			
Okanagan/West Kootenays	19	7%			
Provides BC-wide services	12	5%			
North West	9	4%			
Total Respondents:	256				

However, respondents were from all regions of the province, including the North (10%), Interior / East Kootenays (9%), Okanagan / West Kootenays (7%), and North West (4%) regions. About 5% of respondents noted that their organization provided services province-wide.

Workers' Familiarity, Use, and Referrals to Digital Legal Resources










Initial sections of the survey asked respondents about how they used and/or made referrals to digital legal resources during their work.

LABC Digital Resources: Use and Referrals

Legal Aid BC maintains an array of public digital legal resources offering: detailed information on legal issues, processes, and resources; step-by-step guided pathways that assist users in creating actionable plans and documents; guided negotiation platforms; and access to mediation services. The ADE community worker survey asked respondents about their familiarity with some of LABC's key online resources.

In general, respondents' familiarity and use of Legal Aid BC's digital legal resources varied considerably by type of resource. Of all LABC digital legal tools, the Family Law in BC website stands out as a resource that is widely recognized and used. Almost 90% of the community workers surveyed had heard of the Family Law in BC website; 42% had used it themselves for work-related information; and almost 70% of workers who had heard of this website had referred it to their clients (see Figure 4, below).

Figure 4: Which [of the following] have you heard of, used yourself, or referred to clients?

Name of Digital Legal Resource	Heard of	Used Myself	Referred to Clients	Proportion of those familiar with the resource who referred it to clients	
Family Law in BC Website	89% 230	42% 108	62% 159	69%	
Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC website	63% 162	16% 40	31% 81	50%	
MyLawBC Family Resolution Centre	65% 168	8% 20	33% 84	50%	
LABC Digital Publications	68% 176	37% 96	34% 87	49%	
MyLawBC Making a Will tool	71% 183	15% 38	31% 79	43%	
MyLawBC action plan pathways	47% 122	12% 30	18% 46	38%	
MyLawBC Remote Child Support Mediation tool	50% 129	4% 10	17% 43	33%	
MyLawBC Dialogue Tool	44% 114	5% 14	12% 31	27%	
LABC Facebook page	38% 98	8% 20	6% 15	15%	
Total Respondents:	258				

Several other LABC resources were not quite as well known but were still familiar to a majority of those surveyed. Close to two-thirds of community worker respondents had heard of LABC’s Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC website (63%), the MyLawBC Family Resolution Centre (65%), and LABC’s Digital publications (68%). For each of these tools, about half of those who had heard of these resources had referred them to clients. LABC’s Making a Will Tool was a little more widely recognized (with 71% of respondents indicating they’d heard of this tool). However, slightly fewer (43%) of workers who had heard of this resource had referred it to clients (see Figure 4, above).

In general, workers more commonly reported referring LABC’s digital legal resources to clients versus using the resources to improve their own knowledge. The exception here is LABC’s digital publications: when it came to these resources, a slightly larger proportion of those who were aware of these resources had used the publications themselves (55%) than had referred them to clients (49%). The Family Law in BC website was a second digital legal resources that had relatively high rates of use by workers themselves: 47% of those who had heard of the website has used it for their own information. Apart from these two tools, the proportions of workers familiar with the resources who used them for their own information were much lower, ranging between eight and 25 percent (see Figure 4, above.)

LABC Resources: Comments

Of those who provided additional comments, the largest group of commenters indicated a lack of awareness about some or all of the resources listed, for instance: “Wow! Wish I knew of all these great resources.” Some indicated that they more often referred clients to another resource, or to in-person services or resources. Some commenters stressed that their clients would be unable to access or use LABC’s digital tools:

“I usually refer clients with legal issues to the poverty law advocate in the area and was unaware of the digital resources because most of my clients are homeless and unable to access or use a computer.”

While one commenter indicated that LABC’s digital legal resources had been helpful in their work with clients, two others indicated they would like to learn more, and/or would need more support in order to make use of LABC’s digital legal resources in their work. One respondent stated:

“I have never heard of some of these resources and wouldn't know how to use them. I've heard of the MyLawBC Family Resolution Centre, even attended a webinar about it, but still don't know how to utilize it for my clients.”





As the latter comment suggests, some workers may require additional training or other resources and supports in order to make effective referrals and/or assist their clients in accessing or using digital legal tools. Suggestions for support and workers’ capacity to assist clients is explored in subsequent sections of this survey.

All Digital Legal Resources: Frequency of Use and Referrals

Our survey also asked about use and referrals to all digital legal resources – including the many resources which are produced by organizations other than Legal Aid BC. BC’s PLEI sector includes an array of organizations, each addressing different areas of law, and offering various online resources. These include, to name just a few: Courthouse Libraries BC’s Clicklaw aggregator site and Wikibooks (clicklaw.bc.ca); the People’s Law School’s website, publications, and webinars (peopleslawschool.ca); the Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre (TRAC)’s online guides, templates and courses (tenants.bc.ca); and the Justice Education Society of BC’s various websites on specific legal topics (see justiceeducation.ca).

Workers’ own use of these digital legal resources varied. The largest group (37%) indicated they used digital legal resources less than once per month for their own information while working. About a quarter of respondents used digital legal resources either monthly (24%) or weekly (23%), while the smallest group (16%) said they used digital legal resources on a daily basis (see Figure 5, below).

Figure 5: How often do you use any public digital legal resources for your own information while working?

Frequency of Use	Count						
Daily	43	16%					
Weekly	62	23%					
Monthly	66	24%					
Less than once per month	101	37%					
Total	272						

The frequency at which workers referred their clients to digital legal resources also varied considerably depending on workers’ role, work setting, and the situations of their clients. Similar proportions of respondents referred their clients to digital legal resources on a weekly (26%), or monthly (26%) basis, or less than once per month (27%). Smaller proportions referred clients to digital legal resources either daily (9%) or almost never (10%) (see Figure 6, below).

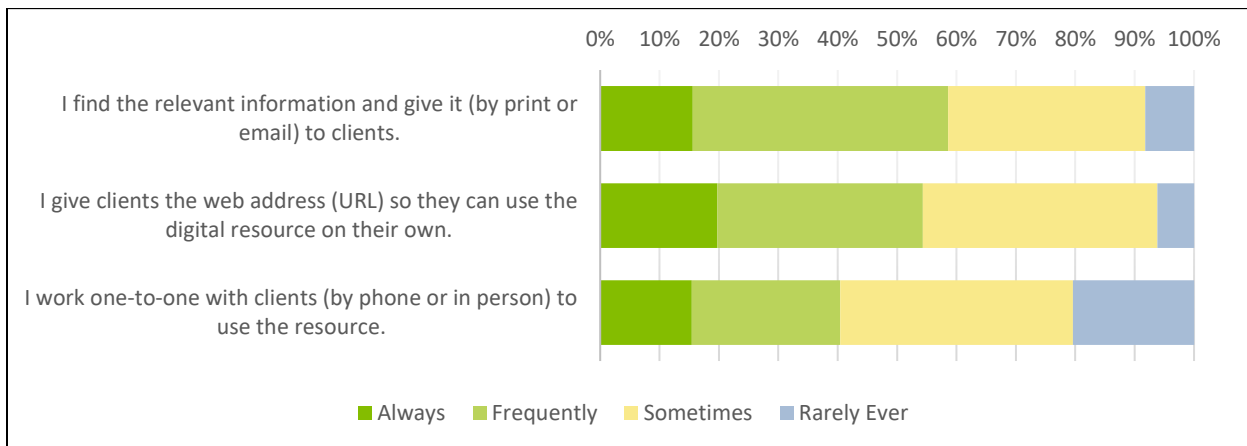
Figure 6: How often do you refer clients to [any] digital legal resources [in BC]?

Frequency of Referral	Count		
Daily	23	9%	
Weekly	70	26%	
Monthly	70	26%	
Less than once per month	73	27%	
Never / almost never	26	10%	
Other option:	7	3%	
Total	269		

All Digital Legal Resources: Type of Referral

Survey participants were asked to indicate what kinds of help they usually provided when referring clients to digital legal resources, and how often they provide each type of referral. Responses to this question once again illustrate how workers undertake a variety of approaches depending on clients’ needs and circumstances. To assist clients in accessing digital legal information, workers most often found the relevant information online and then provided the information to clients (e.g., by email or in printed form) – with 59% indicating they always or frequently helped in this way. Just over half (54%) indicated that they always or frequently direct clients to the resource to use on their own. A smaller proportion (40%) indicated that they always or frequently help clients to use digital legal resources by providing one-to-one assistance in person or by phone (see Figure 7, below.)

Figure 7: How often do you provide these kinds of help with online resources?



Resource Referrals: Comments

Some respondents described other options or offered additional comments. In some cases, respondents described how they made use of print resources such as “free booklets, brochures, or printouts” to assist their clients in being able to find more detailed information online. Most commonly, commenters described how they referred clients to digital legal resources on a personalized, as-needed basis, taking into account clients’ issues, circumstances, and barriers related to technology access, language, stress and trauma, disability or health issues, and legal complexities, among other considerations. Of these factors, lack of technology access, skill, and/or comfort were mentioned most frequently, for instance:

“I work inside a correctional facility so my clients are not able to access online services.”

“Most of my clients are seniors without access to internet / computer / phone.”

“It depends on the situation of my clients. I ask my clients to go online if they have those capabilities, or typically I will give them the Legal Aid phone [number]s – most often the local Legal Aid office [number]”

“People have trouble accessing and understanding these resources on their own. I usually assist directly.”

As in the latter two comments, several respondents described how they more commonly either provided direct assistance or referred clients to other forms of personalized or relationship-based legal assistance, including legal advocates, Legal Aid, or LABC Parents’ Legal Centres, and outreach workers from other services (such as Victims Services.) One respondent who “only sometimes” referred to digital legal resources provided the following clarification:

“I refer clients to workers that deal with family law, most of my clients need a worker to walk them through the family law steps.”

Finally, a few of those who commented indicated that they used to make referrals to digital legal resources more frequently, but that because of changes to their work setting during the COVID-19 pandemic, they currently have fewer opportunities to make these referrals. Observations about the impacts of COVID-19 on clients’ access to legal help are described further below (see p 33).

Taken together, respondent comments clearly indicate how workers tailor the kinds of referrals and assistance they provide in responsive and creative ways, for example:

“My work with clients is case-by-case. If I feel like a client will manage on their own if I give them a URL to use the resource on their own, I will. More often than not, I will call the client and help them to use the resource. During COVID-19, we have not always been able to see clients in person so calling them is usually my only option. If my client needs in-person help with digital resources, I will make an exception and see the client in office as long as we follow proper COVID-19 protocol.”

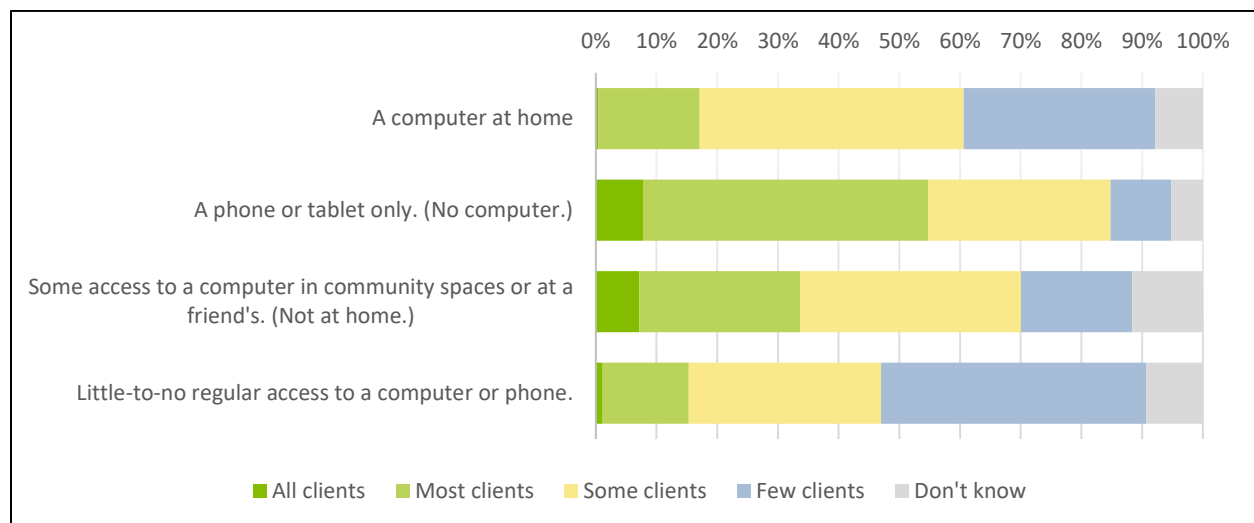
Clients' Access to Digital Technology

Our survey asked community workers to share their observations regarding clients' access to digital technology prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; we asked about digital devices and internet service.

Clients' Access to Digital Devices

Workers' observations regarding their clients' access to devices illustrates considerable variation in clients' circumstances, however some trends are apparent. First, it's clear that lower income BC residents can not be assumed to have home computers with which to find and use digital legal resources. As Figure 8 (below) indicates, fewer than one in five respondents (17%) said that all or most of their clients had a computer at home. The most noticeable pattern in device access relates to reliance on mobile phones as a primary means of internet use: just over half of respondents (55%) indicated that all or most of their clients had a cell phone or tablet only⁸, but no computer. Another substantive group, about a third of respondents (34%), indicated that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, all or most clients had some type of shared computer access – such as the ability to use a computer in a community space or at a friend's.

Figure 8: Before COVID, what proportion of your clients had:



The remaining responses illustrate how most workers observe a variety of device access situations among their clients. A relatively small number of community workers (15%) indicated that all or most of their clients had little-to-no regular access to a device, however almost half (47%) of respondents said they had at least some clients in this situation.

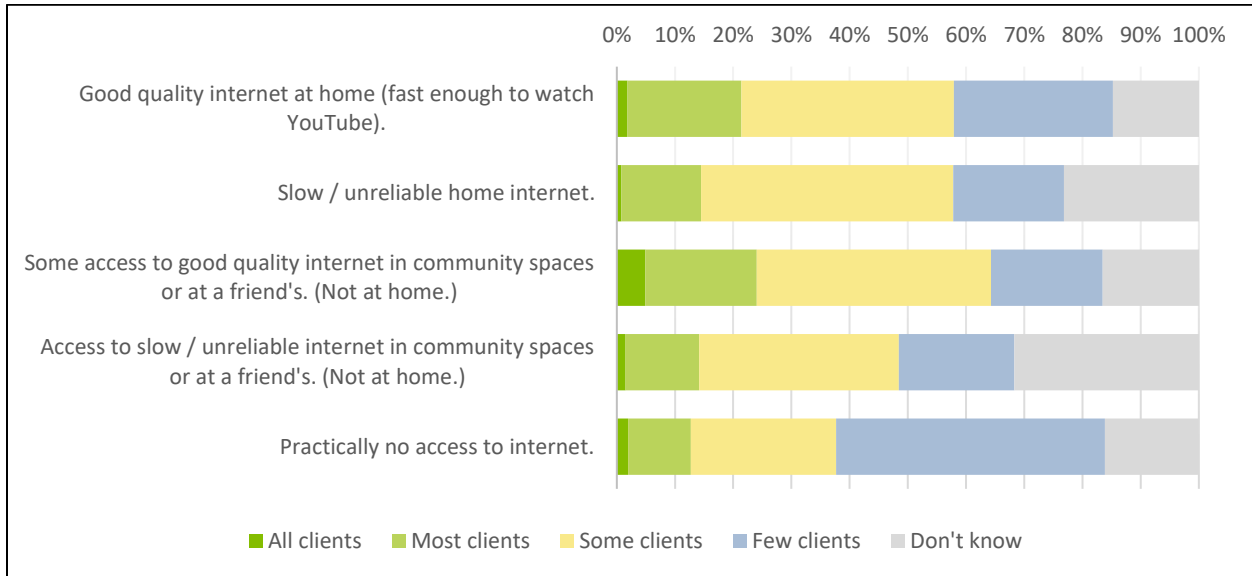
Clients' Access to Internet

Survey responses suggest that clients' access to internet varies even more than their access to devices. In general, the largest groups of respondents (between 34% and 43%) stated that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they had some clients with each type of internet access queried. About a

⁸ Based on the ADE population survey of lower income British Columbians, together with BC-wide statistics on digital technology, we can assume that most of these devices are mobile phones versus tablets (Sentis Group, 2021a; Statistics Canada, 2019).

quarter of respondents (24%), indicated that all or most of their clients had some access to good quality internet in community spaces, or at a friend’s / neighbour’s, but no internet at home. Only about one in five (21%) indicated that all or most of their clients had reliable internet at home (see Figure 9, below.)

Figure 9: Before Covid, what proportion of your clients had:



Few respondents (13%) said that all or most of their clients had practically no access to internet – a proportion similar to those who report that their clients lacked access to connected devices (above). However, responses as a whole illustrate considerable variability in the types and quality of internet access they observed, suggesting that many clients’ access to internet is either inconsistent, inconvenient, or of poor quality.

Technology Access: Comments

Affordability

Across all sections of the survey, respondents’ comments repeatedly drew attention to technology access as a key barrier impacting clients’ ability to benefit from digital legal services. These comments also illustrate how various factors interact to produce multi-dimensional access challenges. Income was clearly the biggest factor, with large groups of commenters specifying that their clients could not afford to purchase or maintain devices or reliable internet access. “My clients” stated one respondent “can barely afford any sort of rent. So, a luxury such as home internet isn’t an option.” Workers described how their clients’ limited incomes meant they didn’t have access to credit (e.g., via credit cards) and that they struggled to afford devices or pay cell phone bills.

Affordability and access-related barriers to digital technology were described as particularly significant for those experiencing homelessness or housing instability:

“Clients’ access or use of technology is dependent on acquiring and maintaining a device and access to internet. Both are dependent on financial means, safe and secure housing and/or storage. People who experience homelessness or who are insufficiently housed struggle with purchasing, keeping and maintaining devices and accessing internet.”

In these situations, respondents explained, clients were limited to accessing internet at a friend or family member’s home, or via a “support worker, library, health clinic or Salvation Army.” Another noted: “clients who are without housing or precariously housed may have a cell phone or laptop, but struggle to find a place to charge their devices.” As in the comment above (p. 11) other respondents noted that their clients in correctional facilities or who were detained (receiving involuntary treatment) under the Mental Health Act had no access to technology while being detained.

In survey comments, seniors, and recent immigrants or refugees who speak languages other than English were also commonly highlighted as groups who did not have sufficient access to technology; for these groups, and others, opportunity- and language-related barriers to learning digital skills were seen to further reduce technology access. One respondent described how the “majority” of the seniors they worked with “do not have access to a computer, cannot afford internet, [and] do not know how to use [digital technology].” A worker who described their clients as “the most vulnerable group of the immigrant community” described how “sometimes, when it’s an important matter, such as submitting a work permit extension with the time limit, clients will do everything to make it work, by going around [to see] friends by bus, to ask to borrow laptop.”

Limited Access

In other cases, workers noted that their clients were only able to afford limited forms of access that were cumbersome and frustrating: “Most cannot afford computers and have text-to-mail phones – if they have a phone.” “Many clients” stated one respondent “enroll in the low-income internet package but find the speed of that internet service is quite slow. Therefore, [they’re] discouraged from using it.” Another described how lack of affordable internet service required clients to adopt what has been termed “frugal practices” (see Hernandez & Roberts, 2018) which significantly limited their technology use: “Internet to many clients is a luxury they cannot afford right now... their cell phones mostly run on minutes purchased for texting purposes and short, important calls.” Pay-as-you-go service plans could result in “breaks in access” when clients ran out of data or minutes, and some clients had “older devices that can’t connect well even if a good connection is available.”

In many cases, respondents stressed that while their clients had access to internet by phone or other device, they did not have access to accessory technology such as printers or scanners: “Many people struggle to print out documents. Even those with computers often don’t have access to a printer.” Some commenters also described situations in which clients did not have enough devices in their households to meet the needs of all users: “Families who are living in small spaces, and having to share with school age students, a laptop [or] tablet. [There is] no space or [internet] connection... for a desktop computer.”

Urban / rural divides

A further consistent theme within survey comments related to urban / rural divides in internet access:

“It is shocking, until you actually live in a rural location, how the digital divide is so vast. Poor reception, poor access, lack of providers, increase in costs to have services because the number of providers is so low - prices are higher.”

Those who worked in rural areas commonly noted that internet service quality was very poor and/or unaffordable for clients – particularly, for residents of First Nations reserve communities. Many described how “remote Indigenous communities have very little access” because of limited and/or uneven service availability and reliance on expensive modes of internet (e.g., via satellite or “smart hubs”). “There are many areas in BC” explained one respondent, where “‘high speed’ internet is obtained via satellite and is equivalent [in quality] to dial-up. The cost of a decent internet service is very expensive.” Others described how some of their clients in remote areas do not have cell phones and rely on land lines: “there are large areas with no reliable internet or cell coverage in our district.” Poor availability and poor quality of services could significantly limit the types of online activities that were possible for these residents:

“Clients are still struggling with Zoom and Skype meetings as that would require having good, fast internet.... From time to time, the power will go out in our community for several hours – up to 3 days, as in November 2020.”

Public access

Throughout many areas of the survey, many commenters also noted both benefits and challenges relating to public technology access points – such as libraries, community centres, or offices where people could access connected computers and accessory technology such as printers and scanners. Many respondents described how their clients rely on these public access points as their primary means of using the internet, including for important tasks such as completing online government forms or applications. Some clients also relied on community agencies for tasks that required internet and even phone access. For instance:

“Some of my clients will contact me and Legal Aid with the help of other agencies and health clinics [or] supports to fax, email and call for legal advice, important Ministry meetings and [Family Case Conferences or] mediation and/or trials.”

“People who came into our building to use our computers to complete tasks often don't have access to computers / internet anywhere else. Time limits in a space also impact our clients' ability to complete the court forms they need.”

As in the latter comment, respondents also noted significant constraints on public access – even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – including: long wait times for public computers, lack of privacy, time limits on computer use, and inability to save their work for continuation at a later point. One respondent explained:

“In libraries, the client can use a computer, but has limits to download and save items to a hard drive. They might complete a form online and then can't download to print it. Everything has to be browser-based for people using public access computers.”

Some community workers described how their clients struggled to reach public technology access locations because of inadequate childcare or transportation, or because of “limited public computers in

our geographic area.” Many, especially staff in public libraries, offered further detail about the various ways in which public access could limit people’s abilities to undertake important tasks online:

“Some clients need to use our resources to fill out online forms, but run out of time, or can't save the half-completed form.... We have time limits to our public computer usage, due to high demand for this service. Clients who need additional time to fill out forms are at a disadvantage, especially if the form can't be saved. We'll often extend time for people under these circumstances, but not everyone knows, or feels comfortable to ask.”

A few respondents noted that some clients could be excluded from public access locations, for instance, if these were “unsafe spaces for persons from oppressed communities” – including those who were Indigenous and/or 2SLGBTQAI+⁹. Another noted that “not all clients have access to libraries, some of them get suspended, and these folks in particular may have legal needs.”

Additional Barriers to Use of Digital Legal Resources

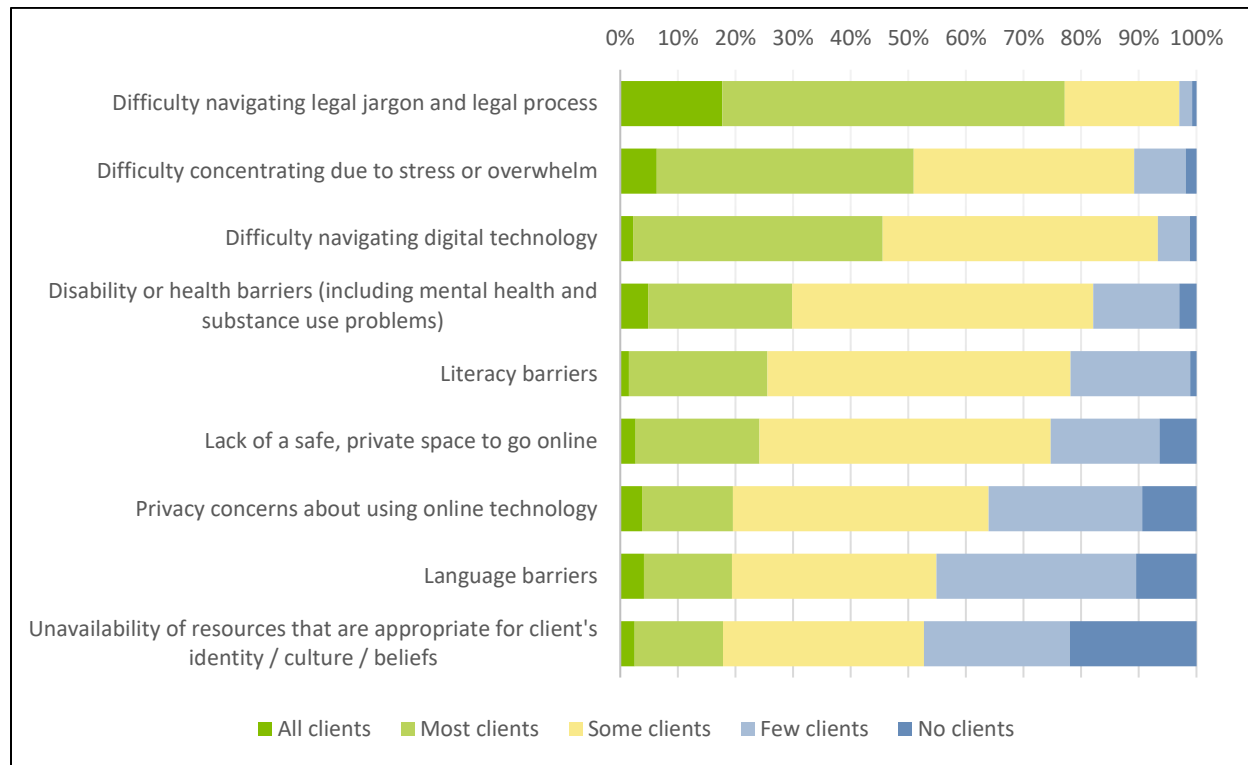
In addition to asking about clients’ technology and/or internet access, our survey asked community workers about further barriers that constrained their clients’ abilities to access and use digital legal resources. The list of barriers included in the survey were identified through our project’s literature review, and through ongoing conversations with Legal Aid BC’s community-based staff and partners, and key informants in community networks. Respondents were also invited to use open text fields to identify additional barriers or issues not included in our initial list.

Barriers Faced by Clients

Once again, responses to this question illustrate a wide diversity of client situations – with substantive proportions of respondents indicating they had some clients facing each of the barriers listed. However, certain barriers stood out as especially prevalent. Most notably, the complexity of legal systems and legal terminology stood out as widespread barrier that impacts clients’ use of digital legal resources: Over three quarters of the community workers we surveyed (77%) indicated that all or most of their clients had difficulty navigating legal jargon and legal process (see Figure 10, below).

⁹ 2S (Two-Spirit), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Asexual / Aromantic and Intersex.

Figure 10: What proportion of your clients face the following barriers when using digital legal resources?



About half of respondents indicated that all or most of their clients had difficulties concentrating due to stress or overwhelm (51%), and/or had difficulties navigating digital technology (46%). About a quarter of respondents stated that all or most of their clients faced disability, health, or mental health-related barriers (30%); literacy barriers (26%), and/or lacked a safe, private safe to go online (24%).

Interestingly, only one in five (20%) workers indicated that all or most of their clients were reluctant to use digital technology because of privacy concerns. One respondent explained: “Privacy concerns regarding online spaces are usually not brought up by the client, but by us - most of my clients appear to be very trusting regarding their personal information online.” These results present some contrast with our project’s population survey of lower income BC residents, in which 20% of British Columbians in low-income households reported that trust and privacy concerns (for instance, concerns about entering personal information online) were a reason for not using the internet or not using it more often (Sentis Group, 2021a).

Barriers related to language, and the unavailability of legal resources that are appropriate for clients’ identity, culture, or beliefs were less commonly observed by workers. However, about one in five workers reported that all or most of their clients were impacted by these issues, and over half indicated they have at least some clients affected. And, as I note below, respondent comments illustrate how the effects of these barriers for those who are impacted is significant.

Additional Barriers: Comments

Comments offered by many respondents provide additional detail about these and other barriers.

Legal systems and legal information as complex and inaccessible

Throughout the survey, numerous community workers emphasized how the complex, unfamiliar nature of BC's legal system posed barriers to both locating and accessing digital legal resources. Consistent with much national and international research on legal help-seeking (Brousalis & Mathews, 2016; Currie, 2016; Denvir, Ayad, Cordoba et al., 2018; Pleasence & Balmer, 2019), several of those who commented stressed that their clients simply weren't aware of legal services or resources, and had "no knowledge of where to look or how to access" legal help. One respondent stated that often, "clients don't know about the service [and even] I don't know about the service." Another explained that even though "wills and advance planning are huge areas of concern for seniors," most of their clients who were seniors "do not have any idea that digital legal services exist and if they did know, [they] would not be able to access [them]."

Many respondents also described how – even if clients were able to locate digital legal resources – legal processes and terminology were technical, inaccessible, and difficult for many clients to understand. Clients, stated one respondent, are "often overwhelmed or unable to navigate the pages of information" on legal issue web pages. In these situations, clients—and even workers—could become confused and frustrated by digital legal resources, "which is a further barrier." "The layers of legal information" stated one respondent, are "really difficult to navigate with a client." Further, some workers described specific ways in which legal resources failed to be inclusive or relevant to their clients' situations, identities, or culture: Respondents noted that "assumptions surrounding the definition of 'family' can be culturally inappropriate," and that "some of the parenting resources don't consider same-sex couples or trans parents and just have mother and father listed." Another respondent described how their clients who were young parents "often face issues finding information pertinent to themselves and their situations with regards to being minors [who are also] parents."

One respondent offered an example to illustrate how technical legal processes and terminology could result in confusion and negative outcomes: in court, their client had accidentally "asked for guardianship instead of parenting time, when they [said they] wanted 'custody.'" Another described how their client was "unable to describe their situation as it pertains to the Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD)" and needed help having relevant "questions ready that the legal advisor can help them to work on." Because of these types of challenges, several respondents noted that their clients often wanted to speak with a knowledgeable helper who could help them navigate legal processes and provide, or direct them to, the "actual concrete information that they are searching for."

Many of those who commented described how navigating legal systems, processes and terminology was particularly challenging for groups of clients who faced additional barriers—especially those related to disability, language, literacy, systemic discrimination, and gender-based violence. Several respondents indicated how disabilities like Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and mental health issues prevented clients from being able to understand and navigate legal processes such as those relating to child protection. "FASD" stated one respondent "is a very real barrier." In some cases, clients may "seem like they understand and 'get it' but in actuality [they are] not [able to navigate legal processes]."

Respondents who worked with new immigrants often emphasized multiple barriers related to language and literacy. "I work with Chinese seniors," stated one respondent, "they have a lot of legal questions

regarding their everyday life issues” but “due to [the] language barrier, they don’t use technology to access information.” The fact that “most sites are in English” created significant difficulties, given that “understanding of website content is reduced if not in clients’ first language.” Further, one commenter noted that “some immigrant clients cannot read in their own language, let alone in English, as they never attended school due to war or being in a refugee camp for years.”

The complexity of legal information exacerbated these challenges: “Our clients are newcomers to Canada with language and literacy barriers. Written information is hard to navigate for most of them. Adding legal jargon makes it impossible for our clients to comprehend the information provided.” Others emphasized how, for recent immigrants, BC’s legal system was often “very different from the one they experience in their home countries” and that it could be very difficult to understand the distinct systems and processes related to different areas of (e.g., criminal or family) law, in addition to different processes (e.g., for separation or divorce):

“[The] divorce process is very confusing online. Self help at [the] courthouse is much easier to follow. To be honest, online resources are good for service providers that have some knowledge about the legal system; otherwise it’s confusing. Supreme Court, Provincial Court, [and] legal terms [are] not easy for people new to the legal system – especially for victims of domestic violence with a language barrier.”

Additional comments illustrate how dynamics of oppression and systemic discrimination can create further barriers to accessing justice and use of digital legal resources. One respondent observed how experiences of powerlessness mean that many clients with mental health and disability issues “won’t ask for help, [but instead] deal with MCFD on their own, and just settle for what is happening” to them. In these cases, another worker emphasized, it’s important not to “assume that [people] understand how to do something; they may not be able to, [but] fear telling you.” Another described how some clients have “no trust in [the] legal system because of previous experience.” Speaking about those impacted by discrimination, colonial trauma, and/or multiple barriers, a different respondent explained how many clients “are capable of using *digital* resources independently but find the system so overwhelming” that they become overwhelmed when trying to use *digital legal* resources (my emphasis.)

Throughout the survey, the conditions of stress, trauma, anxiety and overwhelm experienced by many clients were frequently highlighted as barriers to use of digital legal resources. For instance, one respondent described how people experiencing homelessness may be functioning in a “survival mode” in which they highly distracted, and unable to focus on obtaining help with their issue. “Stress [and] trauma,” alongside lack of access to and comfort with technology, stated another, “limit the effectiveness” of digital legal resources: “People get overwhelmed when in crisis, and struggle with access. They still need a lot of encouragement and assistance.” For this reason, people’s ability to use digital legal resources independently “depends on [the] level of impact, and on individual coping skills.”

Finally, survey respondents who worked with survivors of violence frequently described how dynamics of legal processes could be untenable for these clients:

“Abused women I have worked with often have so many presenting issues and barriers from the incident and the criminal system that they find it difficult to start navigating the family law system. Those that do are often further controlled and abused by the offenders [with]in the family system [itself].”

“Working with those who have experienced violence, they are often suddenly dealing with multiple different systems and find the addition of legal information overwhelming. Wordy, difficult-to-use online programs can be very difficult for folks [who are] already overwhelmed, especially when coupled with a lack of resources – not enough legal aid hours, difficult eligibility requirements for legal aid, lack of support resources.”

Insufficient access for digital legal tasks

Beyond difficulties navigating legal information, additional comments illustrated how difficulties accessing and using technology could lead to further difficulties with legal tasks and processes. Many of those who commented described scenarios wherein clients’ technology access was sufficient for basic types of communication (e.g., text, messaging, or email) but was too old, or not adequate to enable completion of legal tasks: For instance, clients who “do not know how to scan and email, or do not have the technology to do so... can struggle with “taking proof of income... to the legal aid office” or were unable to “receive documents, sign and then return [them].” “Many of our clients” stated one respondent “do not own a computer which is updated enough to open an application form to fill in.” Other respondents described how clients who “could not afford to fix or purchase new technology” had issues such as “smashed screens” and “glitches” which prevented them from researching information online or “participating in online meetings or visits with professionals.”

Numerous commenters underscored issues that arose because of how “many clients rely on phones to source all information.” “There are still many online resources,” stated one respondent “that are not easy to access by phone (as opposed to computers). [They] just do not fit to smaller screens.” Another explained: “We rely a great deal on the person’s ability to access digital resources, specifically Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) information and forms – very challenging with quite a number needing to complete them and only having a phone.”

Other barriers in home or work settings could prevent effective use of technology to address legal issues. For instance, one respondent described how “in our area, many people share a room in one house. [There is] absolutely no secured privacy at home when clients need [to] deal with [a] confidential matter.” Others noted challenges when “clients are distracted because of noise in their home,” barriers due to “lack of childcare” and situations where “women... cannot access legal aid during work hours.”

Once again, commenters described how survivors of intimate partner violence could face enormous barriers when it came to access and use of technology, for instance:

“A big one is having the abusive partner around, or having access to the computer, so [the] client does not feel safe using digital resources... Other clients... do not have access to a computer or internet, while others face a language barrier.”

One respondent described how survivors' abilities to access "internet via their phone... can drastically change when they are a victim of violence as many situations involve the abuser destroying their phone." Others noted that leaving a violent relationship may mean that even those who used to have technology access at home may no longer have a phone or computer "for leaving a message and receiving a call-back", or access to "a printer or scanner, to sign legal documents." Further, noted one commenter, "women escaping violence do not feel safe [using] public spaces" despite that this is "the most crucial time when they need access to relevant information."

While video calls could be an effective alternative to in-person services, one respondent noted there are "massive barriers for those that are not comfortable using video conferencing technology." Others described how video conferencing was not possible in situations where clients had poor Wi-fi or their "phone screen [was] not big enough to show more than one parent in a virtual meeting." "Many newcomers to Canada that I have dealt with" stated one respondent "only have a cell phone or a tablet. It is impossible to actually have a zoom call and share documents on a cell phone." Video conferencing was described as especially difficult for clients who lacked privacy at home and/or who relied on public Wi-fi or public access computers which "do not [or] cannot support this due to technology limitations and usage management (public space, talking, etc.)"

In contrast, a few respondents described how lack of opportunity to use technology occurred because legal service providers were not equipped to support these modes of communication. For instance, one noted that: "unlike other industries, virtual legal services haven't really been created yet."

Another stated:

"Most of our clients have eventually learned to utilize online phone or meeting applications, such as Zoom, Google meet, WebEx, or WhatsApp to discuss complicated issues that require looking over documents, etc. But this is not an option for accessing legal services."

Digital skill and comfort

A considerable proportion – almost one quarter – of all survey respondents chose to provide further detail about widespread barriers related to technology experience, comfort, and skill. As one respondent noted, "not having money to have the technology in your home, nor the training and skills to operate [technology, and] research and complete apps online, is a huge barrier to most people."

Barriers related to digital skill or comfort were most commonly identified in relation to seniors as well as clients with cognitive disabilities and/or mental health issues. One respondent noted:

"As a mental health advocate, a considerable amount of my clients have severe mental health issues and the internet is often over stimulating or paranoia inducing. Many of my clients are unable to even be in the same room with a computer for various reasons."

Brain injuries, substance use issues, and physical disabilities such as blindness were also identified as conditions that impacted clients' abilities to learn, use, and benefit from digital technology.

Various respondents described how clients who were newcomers also faced barriers to digital skill development, because of language barriers, because they were “arriving from [a] country with no/slow access to internet,” or because their job and home responsibilities meant they did not have the time or opportunity to prioritize developing digital skills. Further, while one respondent noted “my clients are youth and young adults, and are typically very literate in technology,” another stated: “with... younger clients aged 16-25, there is a misconception that because of their age they have a high digital literacy; but [this] is often not the case.”

Some described how lack of opportunities to learn and use technology contributed to feelings of intimidation, overwhelm, and feeling “forced” to use technology. These clients “want to talk to someone on the phone or have printed materials.” In some cases, “clients don't have a phone number or email or cannot remember their password because they use a computer so infrequently.” Some respondents also cited barriers related to being “isolated... with limited means of transportation.” One commenter observed: “Some older clients just haven't got onboard with digital technology. These clients are often on their own, with no close family or friends to help them navigate the online experience.”

Others noted that while many clients had “a basic understanding [of] how to navigate internet browsers,” they may not have sufficient experience to deal with technical issues such as “software upgrades.” Several respondents who worked in public libraries also noted that clients may not feel comfortable asking for assistance. Writing about their clients’ attempts to learn digital skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, one worker stated:

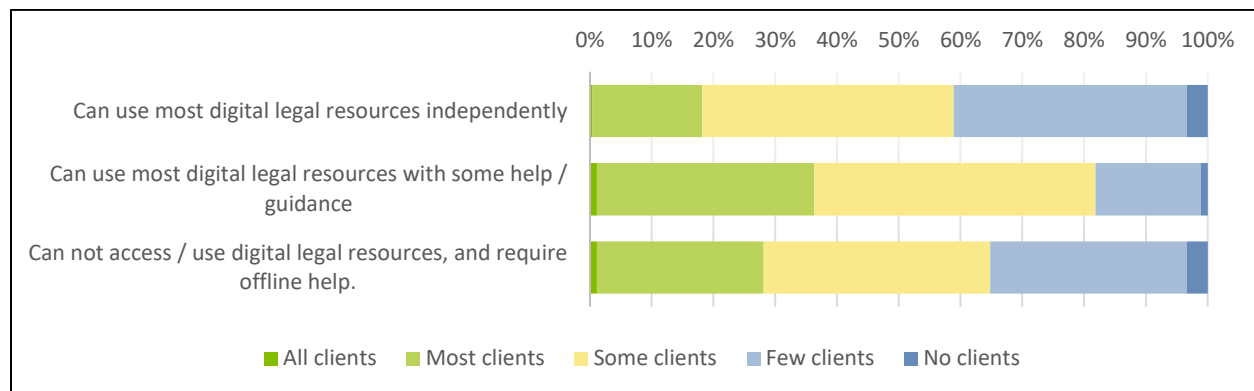
“It was difficult to teach use of technology while using technology. Language, limited time, stress, limited access to devices and internet, limited [or] no prior experience with technology. All these challenges made the task of engaging clients online very difficult.”

As I describe further (p. 33, below), various respondents detailed how these and other technology-related barriers had worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: “Most of my clients cannot use computers. With limited access to me as an advocate, this often means clients missing or not completing important tasks or limitations [deadlines]...”

Assisted Use of Digital Legal Resources

In light of the myriad barriers described above, we also asked community workers to estimate what proportions of their clients could use digital legal resources with or without assistance. Once again, responses to this question reflect a variety of client situations, with the largest groups of respondents (37-46%) indicating they had some clients in each category. A further trend emerging here is that, according to community workers, while comparatively fewer clients can use digital legal resources independently, larger proportions of clients are able to use these resources with some assistance: over a third of respondents (36%) indicated that all or most of their clients could use digital legal resources with some help and/or guidance (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: What proportion of your clients:



Responses to this question also indicate that workers see a sizeable proportion of clients who – because of the barriers described throughout this report – are unable to access or use digital legal resources at all: over a quarter (28%) of respondents said that all or most of their clients cannot use these digital tools and require offline types of legal services or help (See Figure 11).

Assisted Use of Resources: Comments

Some respondents offered additional comments and detail about the kinds of one-to-one assistance required to support clients in using digital legal resources. Once again, lack of technology and/or internet access, and insufficient digital comfort or skill emerged as recurring theme in comments about assistance. One respondent stated: “I find the website(s) informative and easy to navigate, but clients simply don’t have regular dependable access, or often the ability to navigate the sites they have to.” Another described how “many clients feel overwhelmed just looking at the home screen of digital resources, let alone navigating the many clicks required to get to where they need to go.”

Because of this, respondents shared how they would “go online with” clients to either demonstrate how to access resources or to otherwise support technology use: “I often have to navigate to helpful resources on my computer to show patrons who don't know how to use a computer, or don't have their own device at home.” One commenter described “working with clients to further reduce the barriers” to other services by “setting up phones or tablets with them so they are able to ‘talk’ with Stopping the Violence outreach or counselling.” Another described needing to focus on digital skill development as a precursor to providing other help: “many of my clients are now comfortable with Zoom and Facetime but not with 'sharing my desktop' so that I can show them how to access online resources. We are working on that now.”

In addition to providing help with technology access and skills, respondents commonly described how clients required one-to-one assistance with navigating legal services, legal information and legal tasks such as completing forms or applications. Staff at public libraries described maintaining a “Legal Resources page” so that clients don’t have to search on their own. One commenter explained:

“When [a client] doesn't know [about] any legal matters in Canadian society, they have no idea where to source the support or legal help....[And] even when I forward

to the client the web links of the organizations or government website, it's hard for them to understand on their own.”

For this reason, community workers often described various forms of intensive help with navigation and use of resources. They provided “clarifying information,” “orientation and strategies for locating information on the sites,” and explained “how to navigate the resource, or what input will be needed for forms.” Likewise, one worker explained that they sometimes:

“walk clients through the process of using an online resource. For example, over the phone I went through the MyLawBC wills pathway with a client to help them navigate. This way we were looking at the same things at the same time and I could guide them.”

Workers described providing this step-by-step assistance in-person (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), as well as explaining “over phone or email how to navigate the resource.” In other cases, clients faced so many barriers to using digital resources that, with appropriate permission, workers would complete online forms on their clients’ behalf.

A few comments specifically described how clients often needed help knowing whether the general legal information on websites applied to the specifics of their situation. One respondent communicated frustration about the difficulties this could pose:

“The language provided through digital legal resources suffers from two fatal flaws: ... it is entirely inaccessible, and vague (due to the oft-cited need to avoid legal advice). For almost all of the individuals [to whom] we provide support, it creates more confusion than clarity. Much of our staff time is taken up with knowledge translation of the language employed by online resources.”

Once again, comments on this topic reflect how one-to-one assistance was particularly important for clients with additional barriers related to language, literacy, and disabilities. One respondent indicated: “Some clients can’t read very well, so I will read the information to them and explain.” Respondents who worked with newcomers often described providing interpretation and language support, for instance: “I explain verbally, as a majority of women that I work with have a lack of English language [skills], limited tech navigation knowledge, and a majority are unable to afford... tech equipment.”

Finally, additional comments underscore how workers provide assistance in ways that address needs for emotional support and reassurance because of legal stress and trauma. Workers described how clients often experienced “doubt when reading or watching general advice that is not addressing the specifics of [their] situation”, or when using technology: “they don’t trust themselves to do it ‘right’”. One respondent stated: “while we do not have the time in our paid employment, we often volunteer our time to de-escalate folx who have found the information overwhelming and/or confusing.” Another respondent described how they attended video meetings with clients to act as a “support observer” where clients needed language support or were “anxious that they might not remember everything.”

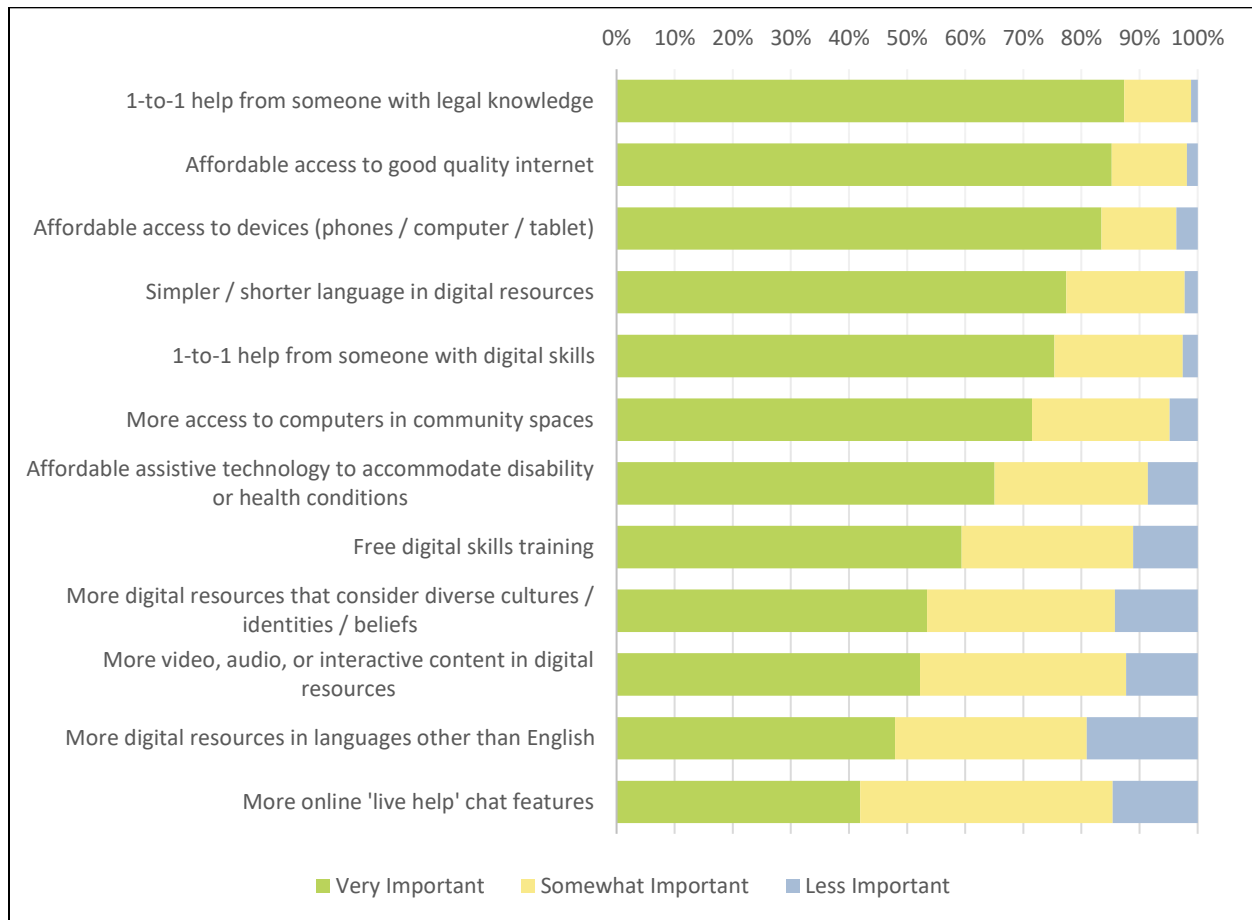
Supports and Assistance

Additional survey questions asked community workers to rate the relative importance of various types of supports that might increase their clients’ abilities to access, use, and benefit from digital legal resources. We also asked workers about their own capacity to provide one-to-one assistance.

Suggested Supports

Given the wide diversity in client situations and the intersecting barriers faced by many low-income people, it is unsurprising that most respondents ranked all types of supports as either very or somewhat important. Of all the supports queried, the most highly ranked type of support was 1-to-1 help from someone with legal knowledge, with 87% of respondents identifying this as very important in enabling their clients to benefit from digital legal resources.

Figure 12: How important are the following to help your clients benefit from digital legal resources:



Affordable access to internet and affordable access to devices were also ranked as very important supports by 85% and 83% of respondents respectively. Other supports commonly ranked as very important were: more simple / shorter language in digital resources (77%), 1 to 1 help from someone with digital skills (75%) and more access to computers in community spaces (71%). Other types of supports queried in our survey were less commonly ranked as very important, but were still deemed

at least somewhat important by over 80% of respondents. Workers' comments illustrate how these additional supports were important in more specific ways – they were extremely important for particular groups of clients, but less important for others.

Supports: Comments

Various respondents offered additional comment about the types of supports they believed would be most beneficial for their clients.

Technology access and support

Once again, the need for better availability and affordability of digital technology stood out as a key theme. For instance:

“The digital divide is huge. There needs to be better access to devices and the internet if we are to help low-income and racialized communities that need these resources most and can't afford home internet and a computer.”

“What is needed, [based on] what I have seen, is affordable cell phone plans and internet plans that allow people to access needed services. Many low-income people cannot afford to access any type of services, due to the high cost of maintaining a cell phone plan and internet services.”

Alongside people with insecure housing (see, above, p. 13), survey respondents identified “lower income families, immigrants, seniors,” people with disabilities, and survivors of intimate partner and/or gender-based violence as among those groups who especially required support accessing digital technology. One commenter emphasized that “when we are creating new modes of information delivery, we need to invest in equipment simultaneously.” Several respondents described how added resources provided during the COVID-19 pandemic had enabled them to distribute devices and, in some cases, data plans for clients. These interventions were described as helpful but not always adequate: “It has been awesome, but the majority of women didn't get them.” Another respondent explained:

“We had some extra old computers that we thought would be beneficial to clients and wanted to loan them out to clients, as most had only cell phones. However, we learned that lack of a computer wasn't always the issue. We are still trying to determine the best way to assist... with online learning [for those] who don't have access to computers or stable internet.”

Noting that “some libraries such as Surrey's now lend Chrome books to newcomers,” another respondent described how their clients also needed “tech help” with learning digital skills, including “how to use the devices in other languages” as well as help with “filling out government forms.” “Newcomers,” added the same commenter, “want to learn the basics – Zoom, etc. – in their own language.” Another worker observed that, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were “seeing the need for computer literacy classes in the North.”

Citing barriers related to technology access, digital skills, and difficulties navigating online services, several respondents emphasized the potential value of community spaces wherein clients could both access technology and receive help with online services tasks. Respondents emphasized that such spaces should be “safe,” supported, and geared towards “those who cannot access digital resources

on their own.” In some cases, this was envisioned as the provision of computer access in existing service locations – such as at a courthouse, shelter, or community centre. A few respondents also put forward suggestions for creating *multi-service* public access spaces – as in a service “hub”. One respondent envisioned a hub in the form of “a space for clients to come in to use computers, printers, Wi-Fi access, fax, and scanners to do their settlement needs, along with the onsite supporter.” Another respondent described this idea in considerable detail:

“a computer hub or centre for diverse community [members] to use and learn. The public libraries have few units available and the time to use [the computers] is very limited. Likewise, if the user is learning to access [technology], the person may want to speak their own language to understand better. If [they are in] a library, they have to maintain silence and conversation may not be feasible. A hub [could] be close to bus stops or public spaces so that people would find time to use [them] while waiting. Youth... (trained volunteers) could mentor seniors and others who may need computer literacy [assistance].”

Digital resource design

Respondents also had numerous suggestions for how to improve the accessibility of digital legal resources. Several commenters stressed the value of multi-lingual resources. In addition to provision of materials in English and French, respondents suggested the need for materials in Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Farsi (Persian), Korean, Kurdish, Pashto, Punjabi, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Tigrinya, and Urdu – with Chinese, Urdu, Farsi, and Arabic each mentioned by multiple respondents. One commenter also suggested the need for “ASL translations of materials that are on websites so that Deaf community members who have ASL as a first language are able to better understand and use the information independently.”

In addition to comments (cited above) from workers who described the need for more resources that reflected the experiences of 2SLGBTQAI+ people, minors who were parents, and which reflected culturally appropriate understandings of “family,” one respondent also describe the need for more resources to support temporary foreign workers. Other respondents called for more “culturally sensitive resources developed with input from Indigenous peoples.” One stated:

“Indigenous people need specialized resources to help them navigate legal systems, and [these] need to be well advertised on social media and with Indigenous agencies. [Important topics and services include]: name changes during residential school, obtaining ID, and legal aid provided by anti-racist legal experts.”

Survey respondents also offered numerous suggestions regarding the format and design of digital legal resources. In a few cases, respondents suggested additional channels or modes of service provision which could help their clients – for instance, “live chat in more languages.” One respondent described how Zoom could be an important channel of communication for clients with language barriers: “Clients expressed they want to show documents to explain their situation better, but [there was] no option for a Zoom meeting.” Another respondent suggested that Legal Aid BC could implement an online application process supported by digital chat:

“Have access to apply online with a live chat assistant so clients can apply for [Legal Aid] on their own.... the phone-in application process is challenging for clients. I could assist them at my office if this option were available.”

Many of those who commented emphasized the value of audio and visual content including graphics. Videos were described as “the best way to reach those with literacy issues” and also important for those with “varying learning styles.” Several respondents also noted the value of presentations, including multi-lingual presentations and tutorials: “Video tutorials would help my clients a lot as they usually struggle with literacy. Video explanations of how to use your website would help them.” One respondent who worked in Indigenous- and health-focused services emphasized:

“Video, audio, interactive content along with text content is most effective and easiest to understand for First Nations people. Also, it's important for text content to be kept simple and very clear for all audiences to understand... Keep in mind it may be a grandparent or young single mother accessing the information or anyone else who may not have high literacy skills.”

As in the latter comment, numerous commenters also stressed the value of simple explanations and plain language, including “application processes that are more user friendly, less technical, [and] easy to fill in – something anyone could understand and do.” One respondent appreciated the use of guided pathways for this reason: “Clients get overwhelmed with a lot of information or jargon. Having access to straightforward [resources] that gives them key information is helpful. The Pathways tool is great for this.” Respondents also emphasized the importance of ensuring that digital legal resources are compatible with clients’ devices: “If online services are not easily accessed through smart phones they are less likely to use it.”

Finally, although our survey primarily asked about improving access to digital resources, several respondents stressed that print resources remained important. Respondents described ordering publications to be delivered to clients, and even “delivering documents to [clients’] doorstep.” In several cases, print resources were favoured for newcomers: “Having a copy of printed materials in different languages” stated one commenter, “makes it easier and not so self-defeating.” Further, a few respondents also stressed how print material could be important as a way to promote digital legal resources. One library employee explained:

“There is still great importance in print materials. Even just to point people to reliable digital resources. Many people are susceptible to scams and misinformation; [so,] having brochures / wallet cards / booklets / posters from reputable sources is very effective [for] marginalized people who visit libraries. The People's Law School booklets in particular are so helpful in that respect and are quite popular in our library system. They help people get started in a way that is reassuring to them.”

Offline, one-to-one, and complementary supports

Of those who provided comments and suggestions relating to supports, the largest group of commenters emphasized the importance of access to supportive, one-to-one, help. Given the myriad barriers which are observed by community workers, and as is apparent in respondents’ descriptions of the kinds of one-to-one assistance they provide (above, p. 11), many commenters were clear about the value of personalized, often offline, one-to-one assistance:

“As wonderful as digital information is, for many people who are overwhelmed when fleeing domestic violence, they simply need access to person-to-person legal help and advocacy.”

One-to-one help was described as particularly important for clients who spoke languages other than English and those with disabilities: “many clients with brain injuries or cognitive development disabilities have a difficult time without a one-on-one contact to assist them.” Two respondents also emphasized that offline and/or relationship-based modes of help-seeking were more culturally appropriate for some clients – for instance, some “immigrant and refugee women [who] prefer verbal modes of seeking information [and] space to speak with an expert, rather than self-help models.” One respondent explained: “women that are part of a diverse mosaic have their learned ways of seeking assistance. In my experience, most prefer verbal modes; they prefer to be given information with examples.”

Further, many respondents drew attention to the importance of one-to-one and/or in person supports for clients facing stress, anxiety and/or trauma. What helps, a commenter explained, is “having knowledgeable people to walk them through their situation. A lot of legal assistance and materials is text-based, when often people in legal distress would really benefit most from human interaction – a safe, neutral professional of some sort.”

As in the latter comment, suggestions about one-to-one help often emphasized the importance of help from “someone with legal knowledge.” Greater access to legal advocacy would be a big help,” stated one respondent, “particularly legal advocacy that can work well with seniors.” Another stressed the importance of immediacy and continuity: “Clients require an assigned legal support person to navigate the system.” At the same time, various commenters described how clients’ lack of access or comfort with technology created barriers to accessing the kinds of personalized, one-to-one support that they needed. One worker stated that they “often connect clients with organizations where they can get more in-depth help over the phone or via email, however clients are struggling to keep [those] connections... due to their lack of computer literacy.”

Likewise, despite that many workers described providing one-to-one help via phone, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many survey comments also highlighted limitations and difficulties associated with phone-based services. “Trying to coach people over the phone to navigate online resources” stated one respondent “was challenging for some [clients.]” Another commenter described how “telephone court has been very difficult for clients and for staff supporting [them.]”

Phone-based services were described as particularly difficult for those who speak languages other than English. In comparison with in-person help, phones made it “harder to understand everything that is being said” and accessing interpretation by phone was also described as more difficult. It’s a “significant challenge,” said one commenter, when a service provider “asks for verbal consent and there is a language barrier.” Other respondents described how phone-based services, particularly automated phone systems, could be inaccessible for clients with disabilities and confusing or frustrating for some seniors. One respondent stated: “many of my clients are grandparents, and they still prefer in person meetings so they understand better what is being talked about.”

Several respondents also described how phone-based legal help could be extremely limiting for “clients who have anxiety with phone use,” for sharing personal information, and for those experiencing the effects of trauma and stress. “Individuals coming in with legal issues” stated one respondent “often have support needs, and phone is not the best [way] to receive support.” Another described how “the phone can be impersonal and ineffective when addressing sensitive, traumatic situations.”

In light of these various issues, many respondents were emphatic about the need to retain in-person support options – especially for clients who faced multiple barriers to accessing technology and accessing justice. Two extended comments exemplify these widespread concerns:

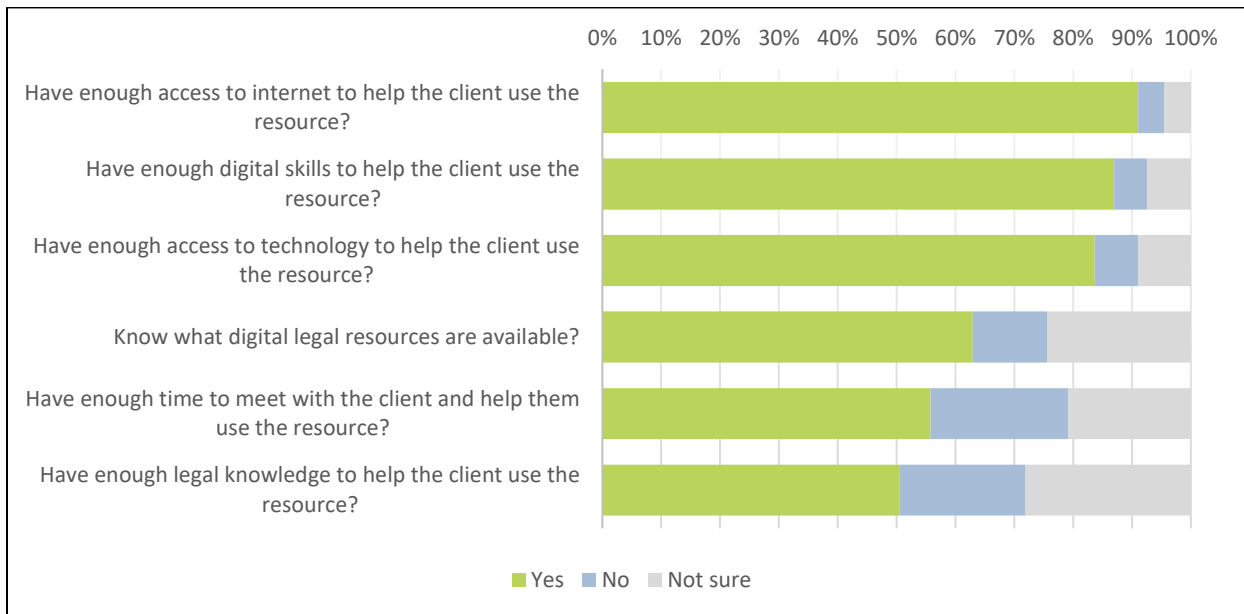
“We cannot abandon the need for in-person supports when accessing legal information. Unlike a recipe book, legal information is fraught with emotional contexts which require the guidance of a knowledgeable, informed and trained (particularly trauma-informed and anti-oppressive) support person. Without this kind of in-person attention, I often witness how the information provided can create further confusion, anxiety, and ultimately create more problems than it solves.”

“The people who need the most help need help from a person. No amount of improved access costs or interactivity of tech is going to remove the barriers that prevent them helping themselves – [barriers] such as mental illness, substance dependence, cognitive impairments.... Some people will always need people to help them, because even if the tech gets cheaper and the internet access gets better and cheaper, not everyone can be their own researcher, negotiator, and lawyer / advocate.”

Capacity to offer One-to-one Help

As in respondents’ comments above, the value of one-to-one in-person or relationship-based help is frequently identified as key to supporting use of PLEI; this insight has emerged both through Legal Aid BC’s public and community legal work, and in literature on legal help seeking (e.g., Cohl et al., 2018; Public Interest Strategy & Communications Inc., 2016). For this reason, our survey included a question asking about community workers’ capacity to provide this type of assistance to clients. Overall, a majority of respondents (84-91%) indicated that they typically had enough internet access, digital skill, and technology access to be able to provide one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources. Instead, the most common constraints reported by community workers related to having insufficient legal knowledge, and insufficient time to meet with and assist clients in using these resources (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: If a client needed one-to-one help (by phone or in person) using an online legal resource, would you usually:



The majority of community workers who responded to our survey indicated that technology issues would not be a major barrier to providing one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources. At the same time, it’s noteworthy that a small group of respondents indicated that they would not, or may not, have sufficient internet access (8%), digital skills (13%), or technology access (16%) to provide one-to-one assistance. These findings echo findings from a 2019 survey conducted by Legal Aid BC in which the majority of intermediary respondents indicated that they had sufficient internet access at work to support the audio and/or video streaming requirements of common videoconferencing platforms. This was the case even for respondents who worked in rural areas. At the same time, that survey identified a small but noteworthy proportion (nine to 13 percent) of intermediaries – most of them in rural or remote locations – who faced technical barriers to use of online video and/or multi-media tools (Murray, 2019).

In comparison with technology-related factors, legal complexity factors and time constraints emerged as more common constraints on workers’ abilities to offer one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources. When asked about time constraints - just under a half of the community workers surveyed said they would not (23%) or may not (21%) have enough time to meet with a client to assist them with a digital tool. Likewise, about half of respondents indicated that they would not (21%) or may not (28%) have enough legal knowledge to assist a client in using a digital legal resource. Further, over a third said they would not (13%) or may not (24%) know what digital legal resources were available. This latter theme was also apparent in a series of recent consultations undertaken by LABC; high rates of turnover within community agencies, together with the range of issues and services dealt with by community workers, means it is difficult for workers to stay up to date on the resources available (Simpson, Spracklin, & Sentis Group, 2020).

Capacity for one-to-one help: Comments

Respondents who made additional comments in this area did not offer any detail about the nature the technology access constraints they faced. However, a few respondents described skill-related difficulties: “I only have basic computer skills... Going into complicated websites – [it’s] very hard to help people.” Another respondent stated: “Our staff has a hard time with digital literacy, so there are few of us here to help patrons navigate the legal sites. More training opportunities to use these sites would be beneficial for rural public library staff!”

More often, respondents indicated constraints relating to awareness, confidence, or expertise with respect to legal information. Some workers indicated that they were unfamiliar with existing resources because they were new in their role. In other cases, respondents expressed hesitancy about their legal knowledge overall or in relation to specific topics: “It would depend on the kind of legal resource. For instance, I provide no assistance with family law issues as I have no experience in [family law] and would be concerned that I was giving the wrong direction.” Another respondent stated:

“Canadian law is very complicated and constantly changing. I don’t feel I have enough legal knowledge to help my clients, even though I have been here for more than 50 years. Therefore, your organization [LABC] is very valuable to me.”

Other respondents were very aware of being “not a lawyer” and of limiting their role to explaining legal information without providing a legal interpretation or legal advice, for instance:

“I am not sure if my knowledge is sufficient enough to meet... clients’ needs and requirements, since my responsibilities are information and referral only, and I cannot interpret whatever is on the website. I may translate in our language or dialect but [without] giving any legal advice.”

“We are not legally trained, although our clients often ask us for legal advice or help with complicated legal issues. We’re trained to refer people to the appropriate resources but many clients would rather have us help them all the way through.”

In many comments on this topic, respondents described how “service boundaries come up a lot” meaning their ability to help would “depend on if the client and their needs met our mandate” and that some issues or types of help were “not our job.” In these cases, workers described how they could “help a client get started” or help with basic tasks (e.g., “filling out forms”) but need to make referrals to other services for tasks that were beyond their own mandate:

“I do not have the time or the ability to book in-person appointments to walk people through using online legal resources in areas I don’t help people with. If someone needs hands-on help beyond the information I can give over the phone, I refer them to community resources.”

In this way, several commenters described how they frequently sought to bridge gaps or limits in services through referrals to, or sometimes collaboration with, other workers and agencies.

Respondents also sometimes described time constraints associated with their agencies or work; in some cases this related limited appointment availability, or appointment time limits in relation to the type of help that may be needed, for instance: “I don’t have time to sit with a client and make a complete will or separation agreement.” In another case, this related to a worker’s service mandate:

“As a youth and family counselor I... need to be careful as a large portion of my job is to encourage and facilitate but not to do it for them. The main reason for this is because my involvement is temporary and it is expected that they can do it on their own after I show them how, and walk them through the process.”

In light of various constraints, many of those who offered comment suggested the value of additional resource promotion, training, and resources to support their capacity for one-to-one help. One commenter explained that it can be:

“time-consuming finding the relevant resources, and getting the necessary information from the client while not having a level of comfort dealing with legal issues. I am not sure sometimes if [the] path I'm trying is the best way for the client. It would be nice to have a bit of training as a service provider / helper / advocate.”

“More training is needed in navigating... digital resources to improve confidence in helping clients,” stated another, because “not all staff are digitally savvy themselves.” Some commenters suggested that legal service providers could engage in more outreach – for instance, by going “out into the community, into libraries, and introduc[ing] themselves to front-line service providers such as settlement agencies and library staff.” Several commenters appreciated having “resource links emailed out.” Another commenter who described a lack of services in their northern community suggested that “workshops... would be beneficial, and agreements with the local agencies... to host information sessions and ‘how to’ workshops for learning how to navigate the legal process for custody, [Family Law Act] court orders, and criminal matters.” Other commenters emphasized the need for multiple kinds of supports, including “more time,” “more training... as well as more funding to help clients on a one-to-one basis.” As I describe below (p. 64), requests for continued training and promotion is a recurring theme within PLEI research and in various LABC consultation and evaluation processes. Finally, in describing their capacity to offer one-to-one help, many respondents described how this had been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impacts of COVID-19

The final thematic section of our survey asked community workers to share their observations regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their clients’ access to legal services.

Figure 14: Because of COVID-19, my clients' access to legal help is:

Assessed Change in Access	Count						
Substantially reduced	99	37%					
Somewhat reduced	100	37%					
The same	62	23%					
Has improved	7	3%					
Total Respondents	268						

As is illustrated in Figure 14, the largest groups of respondents felt that their clients’ access to legal help had either been substantially (37%) or somewhat (37%) reduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, almost a quarter of respondents indicated that their clients’ access to legal help had stayed the

same because of COVID-19, while a very small number (3%) reported that the pandemic had improved their clients' access to legal help.

Other recent LABC surveys found smaller proportions of Legal Aid clients and low-income BC residents who describe their access as having been reduced, however they illustrate how similar themes are at play. In LABC's recent client survey, 13% of respondents said that COVID-19 had made it more difficult to access Legal Aid services (Sentis Group, 2021b). In a 2020 survey of low-income British Columbians, among those who had a serious problem but didn't take action, 15% said they hadn't taken action because of COVID-19 and services not being available or open. In this latter survey, among the 37% of low-income British Columbians who felt their problem would have had a better outcome with more assistance, the majority (57%) felt that increased or better availability of legal services during COVID-19 might have helped (Sentis Group, 2020). The greater impacts on legal services access which are reported by community workers in the current survey likely indicate an increased number of barriers faced by clients of workers, in comparison with low-income residents more generally and those who have accessed legal aid.

COVID-19: Comments

Discussion of COVID-19 impacts was the most common topic of comments made throughout the survey – indicating how the pandemic has significantly impacted community workers and their clients.

Reductions in access to legal help

In describing the effects of COVID-19, workers most commonly emphasized how – because of the myriad barriers described throughout this report – the sudden transition to digital and phone-based services had been extremely difficult for clients. Almost four in 10 of all survey respondents offered additional comments relating to this general theme.

Commenters described how, because so many clients had previously relied on in-person modes of service, many clients were now struggling to access services and many others were unable:

“Sending me documents and even answering basic questions without coming in in-person has made it significantly harder for clients. Many clients do not have access to printers or scanners. Some of my clients have poor internet connections or live in out-of-service areas.”

“Just about every organization that provides services to our members” stated one worker, “has reduced and / or closed their doors to face-to-face interactions.” Respondents described how physical distancing protocols meant they could no longer meet with clients in clients' homes, “transport clients to and from any appointments for court or MCFD meetings,” and that “no in-person contact [often meant] lack of emotional support.” Another stated: “in-person meetings with legal resources are often not happening, so if they struggle to access or understand legal information provided online, they are left floundering for support in critical legal issues.”

Many workers also emphasized how the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated pre-existing inequities in access to technology. “It is a hardship during a pandemic,” stated one respondent, “to have to go to a library..., community centre, or Staples and pay to print or produce documents.” Others emphasized that “when public libraries shut down due to COVID, that greatly impacted a very vulnerable group of people who rely on public library computer access, Wi-Fi, printers, scanners, and staff assistance with

technology.” COVID-19 restrictions also caused many agencies to reduce access to public computers in their offices, and restricted access for clients who relied on using their friends’ devices. When asked about any lessons or insights they had gained during the pandemic, several respondents described how the pandemic had “opened my eyes to how many clients do not have access to internet, computers, phones, [and] printers,” or “the means to get somewhere in the community that has these things.”

Once again, workers described how particular groups of clients were more significantly impacted by the shift away from in-person services. One worker described how “all of my clients have literacy barriers, or disabilities that prevent them from understanding legal jargon or processes.... we are unable to meet face to face and it is challenging to support via phone.” People who speak languages other than English, people with cognitive disabilities or mental health issues, and seniors were also commonly mentioned as client groups who especially relied on in-person modes of service. Further, several respondents noted that many seniors, and others at greater personal risk from COVID-19 were “socially isolating at home,” and “too afraid” to access even those services that were open. “Many... Indigenous people” stated another respondent “are being advised not to leave their communities with the exception of getting... necessities (medicine and food.) The access to quality internet, computers and legal assistance is not being met.”

Some respondents also highlighted how impacts differed in different areas of law. One noted “the family law program is a lot more suited to online functioning compared to poverty law in that at least a big chunk of [family law] clients have access to phones and internet.” Lack of in-person service was also described as a barrier for those who “have very sensitive and complex legal issues related to MCFD or Fraser Valley Aboriginal Children & Family Services Society (FVACFSS).” Several respondents described the impacts of COVID by emphasizing how it had widened existing divides:

“For clients who have access to technology or internet in their home, have digital / literacy skills and do not have cognitive or mental health barriers, my answer would be that access to legal help is somewhat reduced. For those who have more barriers, this access is substantially reduced.”

Beyond overall reductions in in-person services, many who provided comment described how the loss of walk-in models of service were especially difficult for some clients. One worker stated: the “clients I was serving who needed legal support were mostly drop-in clients.... These are the clients who don’t have reliable [phones], or any phones, or internet.” “Drop-in clinics” explained another, were “a huge preference for many, especially those who require safe, anonymous help outside their home.”

A number of commenters also described how even when services are available, overall service restrictions were causing confusion or making clients “hesitant to reach out... some clients made assumptions that [legal] services are not offered during COVID”. Many clients, described one worker “have complained that there is ‘no where to go.’ The frustration and uncertainty [about] who can help or who to talk to, is ongoing.”

Reductions in in-person and drop-in services meant that some workers had simply lost touch with their clients: “Most of our public clients were walk-in so we don’t see those people anymore.” Several described clients who were “falling through the cracks.” Another commenter explained that the loss of in-person services meant that “we have lost connection and [lack] updates on many participants around legal matters after COVID. We’re focusing more on basic necessities like food and shelter at the moment.”

A large proportion of respondents' comments also described increased challenges relating to various service restrictions, for instance: "my clients need in-person help, and all the supportive people seem to not be working – except us front-line workers." Several commenters described seeing the need for "more resources" and more people requiring one-to-one assistance in order to "fill out government / legal forms." However, workers described how many programs were "postponed," "on hiatus," or "closed for... months." If a client requires an in-person appointment, stated one worker "it's almost pointless to refer" to some services. Another worker stated: "Many of the services that supported my clients are operating on a limited capacity. Many are staffed by volunteers; most of those volunteers are in the high-risk categories and have not been able to volunteer." Service reductions were described as especially impactful in (often remote or rural) communities where services were already limited and/or lacking. In some cases, workers also described how their inability to work with clients in-person resulted in more work and was more time-consuming for workers.

Workers commonly described how service restrictions meant that clients were experiencing lapses in communication and responsiveness; clients were "leaving messages... for months and never getting a call back," or were being "referred to phone lines that aren't answered." As a result, clients were feeling "pushed to the backburner." Many also described how wait times for various services had substantially increased; this included wait times on phones, for scheduled and in-person appointments, and, more generally, the sense that "every department takes three times longer to get answers." "Legal issues," stated one respondent "have been drawn out longer than normal due to COVID."

Many respondents described how specific legal processes or services had been impacted by the pandemic. Court processes were described as "infinitely more complicated, impersonal and threatening through online means." Commenters described how clients "are really having a lot of challenges navigating through the court process since COVID-19"; and that many "have been unable to attend court because they lack the technology to participate or receive emails reliably." Workers also described "longer court waits, less contact with lawyers, [and] increased confusion with the legal system," with "protection orders hard to access," "no refugee hearings," some cases postponed, difficulties in dealing with "issues concerning access of [the] other parent, and situations where "new actions that were not an emergency could not be filed." Another worker stated: "clients must be prepared to stay online all day in a Zoom call for a court appearance. [This] can be costly and interferes with employment, childcare, and self care."

In this context, lack of in-person access to duty counsel and other court supports was also commonly highlighted as challenge, for instance: "we no longer have ready access to duty counsel lawyers for family law matters as most proceedings are by phone or virtual and there is no regular family law list day at our courthouse." Among other in-person service reductions, the closure of pro-bono clinics and of Supreme court self-help centers, and less legal support at Residential Tenancy Branch (RTB) hearings had also impacted clients. Once again, workers described longer wait times for many phone-based services; however one respondent valued that "the Family Law Line has become more accessible to both myself and clients." While workers were aware that phone-based and online modes of service had continued in many cases, they again stressed the need for in-person help: "Courthouse Libraries BC is offering very little in person service at this time. There is excellent phone or email service, but only a fraction of clients use it."

Finally, various survey respondents described how additional aspects of the pandemic had compounded the barriers faced by clients. In some cases, clients had lost income and/or been evicted during the pandemic, resulting in loss of access to internet. One respondent who worked with women observed that the “added responsibilities of home-schooling and childcare was overwhelming” for clients. Another commenter stated: “COVID fatigue, a trauma in itself, has created more obstacles and barriers for clients trying to get the support they need; they are that much more traumatized and overwhelmed.”

In particular, many described increased challenges and barriers for those experiencing intimate partner violence. Workers described a variety of issues including long wait times or lack of response from services. Another respondent described how “intake workers prefer women to communicate via emails rather than completing the assessment over phone, making an assumption that if a woman can speak English, that she will be able to navigate with technology.” Because of this, they stated “woman have been forced to learn to use [technology] without any safe space for one-to-one [assistance]”.

Several also explained that clients were unable to “safely access [the] technology needed to access legal services” because of restricted internet access, no public technology access, and being confined to home with an abusive person who was now more often home to track clients’ technology use. One worker explained:

“Some clients have no access to phones or computer due to living with an abuser. They were not able to access computers through libraries or community services during COVID. They used to have some access while at work. Now they don't work during COVID, and they have ended up more isolated and under full control of the abuser.”

Unimpacted access to legal help

The almost 25% of respondents who reported that their clients’ access to legal help had remained the same because of COVID-19 described a variety of situations. In many cases, workers described how it had “improved for some and reduced for others, depending on their access to technology.” Some noted that access to help through help lines had remained consistent, and that some of the same issues apparent during the pandemic (such as “not enough hours, or availability for enough people,”) had also existed prior to COVID-19. In other cases, agencies and clients had found “more ways to connect or get community members connected digitally” or managed to “learn [how]... to navigate the online world better.” One respondent stated:

“Due to the nature of virtual communication with clients, many are able to access resources within our organization more easily than having to come to the office in-person. Some clients cannot attend virtually, and therefore have reduced access to resources....

COVID has opened the door to virtual communication with clients, which was not readily available prior to the pandemic. Moving forward, our organization will continue to offer all formats to clients, allowing for more options for our clients.”

Improved access to legal help

Likewise, the very few respondents (3%) who reported that their clients' access to legal help had increased during the COVID-19 pandemic described how the virtual delivery of services (especially in northern and remote communities) had reduced their clients' need to travel for legal help. One respondent explained:

“[technology] reduces barriers if a client and their family do not have to travel with children to access services or attend meetings... Many people have been patient when clients are accessing services through technology, encouraged [clients] to take their time. People have learned new skills to access community services through Skype, Zoom, Teams. When clients don't have to travel it reduces costs associated with accessing services.... I have not had any clients complain or say that meetings in person are required or needed. Clients appreciate that they are able to pick up a phone to access services and attend meetings. More family and friends are able to participate and provide support to clients this way. The only barrier has been not having access to a computer for [the] client, and [resulting difficulties] printing off material or making applications together in person.”

Tracking Referrals to Digital Legal Resources

In this element of our study, we asked some staff at Legal Aid BC and at community-based partner agencies to track their practices of referring, or not referring, people to digital legal resources.

Purpose and Method

By tracking referrals, we wanted to learn how often staff and partners referred the people they assist to digital legal resources, and what were the barriers and/or reasons that led them not to refer some people to these resources. We also wanted to better understand if there were some barriers that arose much more frequently than others. As with our online survey of community workers, the types of barriers we asked about were shaped by insights that have emerged through LABC’s community-based and Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) work; consultation with key informants; and a critical review of literature on digital technology access, digital equity, and digital access to justice.¹⁰







To generate data for this element of the project, staff and partners in a variety of outreach and intake roles volunteered track their referrals and the barriers they observed over a two-week period in November of 2020. Following each inquiry or client interaction, these staff and partners used a web form to briefly make note of referrals, barriers, and non-identifying information about the inquiry. All data was recorded anonymously (it cannot be linked to clients or to staff.)

In total, 17 staff and partners volunteered to participate in tracking referrals and barriers. Participants included those who worked in each of LABC’s service regions, including North (1), North West (2), Okanagan / West Kootenays (5), Surrey / Fraser Valley (5), Vancouver Island (3), and Vancouver / Sunshine Coast (1). Participating staff and partners worked across LABC’s service areas (including family law, immigration, criminal, and child protection), and served diverse client groups, including new immigrants or refugees, Indigenous people, and residents of remote or rural areas. Referrals and barriers were tracked for 311 inquiries or interactions with clients.

Rates and Types of Referrals

The types of referrals made by participating staff and partners is summarized in Figure 15:

Figure 15: Type of referral made by staff and partner organizations.

Type of Referral	Count		
Referred to offline services/resources (total):	214	69%	
Referred to web-based resources (total):	127	41%	
Referred to offline services/resources only:	112	36%	
Referred both online and offline resources:	102	33%	
No referral made:	72	23%	
Referred to web-based resources only:	25	8%	
Total	311		

¹⁰ ADE literature review reports are available on the project website: legalaid.bc.ca/about/reports/Achieving-Digital-Equity-Project

Overall, about seven in ten people were referred to offline services or resources – such as an agency, service, or print booklet. About four in ten people were referred to web-based resources. About a third of people were referred to both types of resources. In situations where no referrals were made (just under a quarter of interactions or inquires), staff and partners’ comments suggest they either helped the person to apply for Legal Aid services or helped directly with issues, for instance: “I was able to assist [the] client online with her application for Employment Insurance benefits [while the] client was talking to me on the phone.”

Web Resources Referred

Those who did refer people to websites or web-based resources were asked to indicate to which resources they made referrals. A breakdown of these referrals is offered in Figure 16:

Figure 16: To what online resource did you refer your client?














Name of Website or web-based resource	Count								
Family Law in BC Website	42	33%							
PLS - People's Law School / Dial-a-law	32	25%							
MyLawBC Website	24	19%							
ClickLaw	22	17%							
LABC Online Publications	10	8%							
Making a Will tool (on MyLawBC)	8	6%							
TRAC - Tenants' Resource & Advisory Centre	5	4%							
Civil Resolution Tribunal	4	3%							
JES - Justice Education Society	4	3%							
RTB Residential Tenancy Branch BC	3	2%							
ESB BC - Employment Standards Branch	2	2%							
ISS - Immigrant Services Society	2	2%							
Family Resolution Centre (Parenting Plan)	1	1%							
PovNet	1	1%							
Aboriginal Legal Aid Website	0	0%							
Dialogue Tool (for separation agreements)	0	0%							
Remote Child Support Mediation	0	0%							
Other options (e.g. legalaid.bc.ca, LSLAP Immigration & Citizenship Canada, BCHRT, Canada.ca-CERB, Nidus, CHOA BC)	49	39%							
Total	127								

As Figure 16 illustrates, staff and partners referred people to a wide range of online resources, roughly in proportion to the types of issues reported by those who contacted them (see p. 42, below). Consistent with the survey responses of community workers (p. 8, above), Legal Aid BC’s Family Law in BC website stands out as the most frequently referred web resource. The People’s Law School, MyLawBC, and Clicklaw sites were also commonly referred. Staff and partners’ comments in this area illustrate their familiarity with the wide range of web resources relevant to legal issues faced by British Columbians.

Reasons for Not Referring to Online Resources

When asked why they did not refer people to web-based resources, staff and partners very commonly indicated that the individual, or their issue, required one-to-one legal help (see Figure 17). Respondent comments indicate that people often sought and/or required lawyers' services like duty counsel, or legal advice or representation. In other cases, respondents assisted people directly: "the client just needed help doing their will. I helped her with the will, [and] then signed as I am a Commissioner of Affidavit."

Figure 17: Please share your reason(s) for not referring this client to websites or web-based resources.





















Reason for Not Referring to Web Resources	Count		
This client / issue requires one-to-one legal help (e.g. legal representation, duty counsel, help with forms). I referred them to, or provided, appropriate one-to-one help.	159	87%	
Client too overwhelmed / stressed	19	10%	
No online resource for client's legal topic	16	9%	
Client doesn't use computers / finds computers too difficult	9	5%	
Client faces literacy barriers	8	4%	
There was not enough time during the conversation	7	4%	
Client's legal issue is too complex / too urgent	7	4%	
Client doesn't have access to a computer or smartphone	6	3%	
Client faces language barriers	5	3%	
Client doesn't have good, reliable access to internet / enough data	3	2%	
Client faces disability or health-related barriers to using online resources	3	2%	
Client has no safe or private place to use the internet	1	1%	
Client uncomfortable entering personal information online	0	0%	
No web resources appropriate for client's identity / culture / beliefs	0	0%	
Other option:	7	4%	
Total responses:	182		

As in the survey responses of community workers which are described in the first section of this report, stress and overwhelm also emerged as an important factor. Stress-related barriers were noted in 10% of situations where people were not referred to online web-based resources. The unavailability of online resources for some issues also played a role in almost 10% of these situations. The legal issues faced by these people related to a mix of topics – commonly, crimes and offences, and civil issues including housing, ICBC, consumer issues, mental health, and conflict with school administration.

Profile of People Served

The following chart profiles those served by the staff and partners who volunteered to track their referrals, by issue and region (see Figure 18.)

Figure 18: Profile of those served

	Count		
Type of Legal Issue			
Family Law	101	32%	
Crimes & Offences	90	29%	
Civil – Other (e.g. ICBC, Mental Health Act)	30	10%	
Civil - Wills and Estates	26	8%	
Immigration / Refugee	20	6%	
Civil - Housing	19	6%	
CFCSA matters / child protection	17	5%	
Abuse & family violence	16	5%	
Civil - Employment	13	4%	
Civil - Income Assistance / Disability / Debt	12	4%	
Aboriginal legal issues (other than Gladue)	3	1%	
Gladue information	0	0%	
Other issues	22	7%	
Region			
Surrey / Fraser Valley	75	24%	
Vancouver / Sunshine Coast	69	22%	
Interior / East Kootenays	51	16%	
Okanagan / West Kootenays	45	14%	
Vancouver Island	38	12%	
North	13	4%	
North West	4	1%	
Unknown	16	5%	
Total people served:	311		

Digital Resources Focus Groups

Adam H. Fraser, Legal Aid BC

Purpose and Method

In addition to surveying community workers and tracking referrals to digital legal resources, the ADE project included a series of focus groups with community-based intermediaries from around BC. While our project originally intended to hold focus groups as part of in-person training conferences, the COVID-19 pandemic required us to conduct these focus group sessions entirely online.

Each ADE focus group occurred following a training session that included an overview of LABC print and digital resources, and a presentation on one of LABC's digital legal resources including the MyLawBC Make a Will pathway (mylawbc.com/paths/wills/), the MyLawBC Family Resolution Centre (mylawbc.com/mediation/), and the Family Law in BC website (family.legalaid.bc.ca/). During this first, training, portion of each session, I facilitated a brief interactive "walkthrough" of the digital tool, to demonstrate how it can be navigated and used to assist clients. This enabled participants to spend some time getting familiar with the digital legal resource prior to being asked for their perspectives and feedback.

In the second, focus group, portion of each session, we used a semi-structured format to invite community workers' feedback about the digital legal resource and about digital equity issues more broadly. Discussion questions were identified based on the digital equity issues that were emerging within Legal Aid BC's public and community legal education work, and within the project's literature review and community worker survey. In our semi-structured format, focus group discussion typically began with a series of open-ended questions inviting participate feedback and discussion on our planned topics.

In focus groups, we wanted to hear from workers about:

- How they assist clients with finding and using digital legal resources, and what is helpful or not helpful?
- What are key barriers that prevent clients from being able to use or benefit from online tools?
- According to workers, what kinds of help would clients need to access and benefit from digital PLEI resources?
- Whether workers' have capacity (i.e., the time, technology, skills, knowledge and support) to provide clients with required assistance (e.g., one-to-one help) in using digital legal resources?
- What kinds of supports, if any, are needed to assist workers in promoting or supporting use of digital legal resources?

The value of a focus group format is that it enables participants to share and build on one another's ideas in creative and nuanced ways; this format also helps to identify where there are synergies or differences across a range of workers and contexts. As group conversations progressed, I and the other facilitators used follow-up questions to invite sharing of additional ideas, detail, or clarification as required. Each session used a combination of full-group and "break-out group" formats to maximize opportunities for

participation. Participants were invited to share their comments verbally, via Zoom's chat feature, and through live-polling using the Mentimeter platform ([mentimeter.com](https://www.mentimeter.com)).

Participants were recruited through newsletter invitations sent to LABC's intermediary training lists, and through sessions held at one of LABC's spring 2021 online training conferences. In total, 150 community workers, legal advocates, LABC partners, and client-facing staff participated across the nine focus groups that comprised this element of our project. Focus group participants included workers in a range of sectors including: community support, family support, settlement, Indigenous justice, and advocacy.

Workers' Familiarity with, and Referrals to, Digital Legal Resources

As we began our focus group discussions, we asked participating community workers to share how familiar they were with the various digital legal resources that are available in BC (see p. 9, above.) In general, focus group participants shared that it was difficult to keep track of the resources available and that as a result, awareness of available digital legal resources among community workers was generally low. High rates of turnover in many client-facing roles, together with the busy and unpredictable nature of many workers' schedules means that community workers often don't have extra time to search for new digital tools and resources; they rely heavily on outreach from PLEI providers to inform them of new resources and how to use them.

When asked about how they wanted to learn about the resources available, focus group participants expressed appreciation for a regular ebulletin format (such as the monthly training newsletter recently implemented by Legal Aid BC). Participants described how this format also enabled them to easily share information about resources and training: "I received an email about this [information session], and I was interested, and I shared it with my co-workers." Many community workers indicated that they only refer clients to digital legal resources that they know are legitimate through personal experience or that of a trusted colleague or source.

Workers described that in most cases where they *do not* refer digital legal resources to clients, this is because they are aware of clients' barriers to accessing and/or using these tools. Such barriers may relate to lack of sufficient or private access to connected technology; limited literacy; or disabilities, among other factors; further, many clients are impacted by multiple barriers – significantly limiting their abilities to use and benefit from digital legal resources.

However, in other cases, workers described how their capacities to confidently make referrals to digital legal tools and services was constrained by their need for further training and support. Workers described how, if there isn't an option for them to do a "dry run" with a particular resource, they can't be sure of how the process works before using it and this can prevent them from making a referral to that tool. Focus group participants indicated that they are more likely to work with digital legal tools if they have access to training on how to provide assistance, information, or follow-up help when they are referring clients to these resources.

Clients' Access to Digital Technology

Concerns about lack of access to digital technology have emerged as a key issue within Legal Aid BC's networks of community-based practitioners, partners, and legal advocates. When asked to share their observations on this topic, while participants noted that clients' technology access situations varied considerably across different locations and situations, many described how their clients' technology access was often extremely limited. Clients often had minimal access to technology and to internet – either because services were not available, or they were prohibitively expensive.

Focus group participants described the presence of urban / rural divides in internet access across BC, with affordability as a critical factor. Rural internet was characterized as often unreliable – even at community access points. Because rural residents were often far away from any “last-mile” connection points, these clients had few affordable access options and some lacked phone access as well. One worker said she has clients who don't have vehicles and can't travel to meet her in the winter. She communicates with them by post.

Many participants explained how, even in urban areas with more access to internet services, their clients were unable to afford connected devices. Community workers indicated that clients who did have devices were most likely to have a phone versus a laptop, tablet, or home computer. In light of this, one worker stated: “I mainly talk [with clients] through text. It's difficult to get people on Zoom.” Many clients use phones with limited (pay as you go) plans; workers described how this meant that clients were reluctant to use data unless necessary; they instead sought out public Wi-Fi access to go online.

Other clients used devices belonging to friends or family members, and some came to community workers for online access. “A majority of my clients don't have cell phones,” stated one participant, “I reach out to them through Facebook Messenger or through their friend or family members' phones.” Some workers described how their clients with limited technology access were more likely to be comfortable using phones or tablets versus other devices with which they were less familiar. Focus group participants described how low-income immigrant families and people who lacked access to secure housing were often among those who faced the greatest income-related challenges to accessing technology. Workers also described a lack of access to the assistive technologies (such as screen readers) that some clients required to help them use digital tools. Participants commonly observed that seniors lacked access to devices: while other clients may stretch themselves financially or go without other necessities in order maintain technology access, low-income seniors were less likely to prioritize technology access as a critical expense.

Focus group participants also described barriers relating to public or community-based technology access. “Even if a client is capable of using [a digital legal resource]”, stated one participant “finding free access to a computer for a length of time is difficult.” Some workers described how limited opportunities to access the internet constrained clients' abilities to locate resources: “There are very few places for [clients in my community] to go to use the internet. I don't think they would be able to find a website like this without being directed to it.” In many communities, public points of access to computers and the internet are in visible, shared spaces such as at libraries or community centres (e.g., the YWCA.) Conspicuous points of access were described as inappropriate for those who need to keep their legal issue private from community members or an abusive partner. In this way, the sensitive and emotional nature of legal issues can make the only available access points insufficient for those seeking help.

Additional Barriers to use of Digital Legal Resources

Focus group discussion also reflected how community workers see clients who have myriad barriers beyond technology access; these barriers can prevent clients from using digital legal resources without aid. Many clients experience persistent multiple barriers, disabilities and situational limitations – with poverty as a common theme across most of these situations.

A significant barrier reported by many participants relates to the effects of stress and trauma on their clients. Workers described how clients experiencing the effects of stress and trauma often lacked confidence using digital legal resources. Many clients are experiencing too much stress to search for resources on their own; they approach trusted friends, family, or other community-based intermediaries as a first step in seeking help.

Focus group participants indicated that some clients find looking at screens to be stress-inducing; “walls of text” can cause clients to “shut down” because they have trouble parsing the information. One worker described how, because of low confidence, “struggling with a website or tool leads to [clients] abandoning the process altogether if it gets too frustrating.” Participants also described how longer, drawn-out digital processes can feel progressively more intimidating; individuals at all levels of digital literacy could become increasingly wary as a process continues and may give up part way through. Several participants noted that it is common for clients to be hesitant to click the “next” and “submit” buttons on digital legal resources, because they worry about having done something wrong. Because of these issues, workers described how many clients need emotional support and reassurance that they are using digital legal resources correctly.

The impacts of stress and trauma can be even more pronounced for clients with limited experience and comfort in using digital technology. In focus group discussion, workers described how digital skill and comfort could be “super varied” from client to client: “some are very digitally competent; some aren’t.” However, many indicated that lack of opportunity to develop digital literacy skills was often a major barrier for clients. Limited access to technology, as described above, significantly limits clients’ abilities to develop technology experience and related skills. Participants often described how, as a result, lack of confidence is a major barrier for clients, meaning they are hesitant to use new resources in the absence of one-to-one help. Even those clients who have some technology access may not be comfortable engaging in unfamiliar platforms or online environments. Various workers described how lack of confidence was a very significant barrier for those with difficulty reading English. One focus group participant described how different types of barriers could interact, resulting in the need for workers to support clients through one-to-one help:

“Basic literacy is a huge barrier for... clientele in my area. So, I do a lot of reading for people. Their computer literacy is also very low; even their confidence to just click “next”, or even finding the “next” button, it's really simple things that are barriers. I serve a lot of elders, so I find I do a lot of dictating of what a website reads. ... They get really intimidated when I say “hey, let's sign into your account”; they get really, really nervous. Their lack of confidence in using computers is really high.”

As in the previous quote, focus group participants indicated that older clients often had very little experience with technology; this led to reduced comfort and skill which could produce overwhelm and

significant barriers to learning – particularly in high stakes situations such as online applications related to income and benefits.

"For the last 6-7 weeks, I had eight senior citizens who came for help for a benefits application... None of them had digital literacy at all. It was challenging. I was using the computer and showing them the website. I make the font as large as possible. It was hard to support them. They didn't understand a website environment at all, even as I explained things."

Various participants described how lack of generational opportunities to use and gain experience with technology could impact seniors of varying income levels.

Focus group discussions also highlighted barriers related to mobility. Community workers noted that both seniors and people with disabilities commonly experienced mobility constraints that could prevent them from accessing technology in community spaces and could also limit their access to one-to-one assistance. Workers also described how it could be impossible for clients who lived in remote locations to access technology or services, particularly in winter or during the forest fire season.

Focus group participants also described barriers relating to the complex, technical nature of legal systems, processes, and language. Workers described how, even those clients who had access to internet did not necessarily know what language to use to locate appropriate information or resources. Many clients did not know the types of legal resources and services that were available; workers were thus a key point of access to legal help.

Some clients faced persistent and multiple barriers which significantly reduced their access to technology and their access to justice – barriers which included homelessness, health and mental health issues, disabilities including cognitive and developmental disabilities, and FASD. Workers described how many of their clients who lived in deep poverty and were experiencing homelessness also faced these additional types of health and disability issues – making the help of an intermediary especially vital. Several focus group participants described how the stress, trauma and chaos of experiencing homelessness was often a major barrier to engaging with legal processes: "I work mostly with unhoused folks. They can have difficulty keeping track of things like court dates and paperwork. Things can be just so chaotic, lots of stuff gets stolen."

Focus group discussions also highlighted how survivors of violence and people living in abusive situations have unique barriers and circumstances. Irrespective of their level of digital literacy or technology access, access to online resources or digital service points can be extremely limited for those who have experienced violence. Survivors may be monitored, or fear being monitored by their abuser, keeping them from accessing digital resources. Violence-related trauma affects learning and comprehension; community workers report that reading is often overwhelming for people experiencing stress and the effects of trauma. Workers described how those experiencing violence often preferred to text or use Facebook messenger to communicate with service providers; this is because they know how to erase their text or message history, and because these services are available by phone – meaning clients don't have to use other types of shared household devices.

Supports and Assistance

In addition to addressing barriers, our focus group questions also asked participants about the kinds of supports that were important for their clients. Community workers described the need for a continuum of supports to assist people throughout the process of accessing and using digital legal resources. As I describe below, many participants described how one-to-one assistance from a knowledgeable helper was often crucial at each point of the process.

Because many clients and intermediaries are not sure of the resources available, focus group participants stressed the need for increased outreach and promotion of digital legal resources. The most common suggestion for promotion was use of social media – specifically Facebook. Workers indicated their clients were most comfortable using familiar platforms, with Facebook or Facebook Messenger being common channels through which many clients reach out to workers for assistance. In focus group discussions, workers responded positively to the idea of shareable promotional content that they could post online (e.g., on agency or community Facebook pages) to raise awareness of the types of digital legal resources and services available.

Focus group participants also described the need for better access to digital technology. Workers suggested that PLEI providers (and other service providers) could play a role in increasing access through technology lending programs, and by providing access to assistive technologies at service locations. One participant who worked with immigrant families stated:

“I hope that in the future, agencies will be able to loan tablets or computers to clients. My agency was able to get some laptops. I am able to work with [clients on the laptops], translate for them, [and provide] one-to-one help.”

In focus groups, workers also commonly highlighted the need for private, safe, and supported points of access to technology in community spaces. These points of access were described as important for people who do not have private and safe access in a home and for people who need personal support while using online resources. Focus group participants emphasized that some clients need one-to-one help understanding legal terminology, emotional support, and technical help; libraries and community access computers are often too public to enable this kind of assistance with sensitive issues. Access to trauma counselling and trauma-informed services were identified as additional types of support that are required in such spaces.

In addition to assistance with locating and accessing digital legal resources, focus group participants also highlighted design features and complementary supports that might enhance clients’ abilities to use and benefit from these tools. Some community workers expressed that more could be done to assist users in understanding the purpose and function of a given digital legal resource, and to know that a site was trustworthy. As one focus group participant put it, “if I don’t know what it is, why would I click through to find out what it is?” Workers suggested additional up-front information explaining why a website is legitimate, plain language naming of resources (names that clearly indicate what the resource is for), and accessible descriptions at the start of each site or tool.

Related to this, many community workers also highlighted the value of “how to” resources that would assist both clients and workers in understanding what they could expect from a digital legal resource prior to engaging with it. Participants described how just getting started with resources could be daunting, and that clients want to know what to expect from their experience before they begin the

process. Workers highlighted the need for materials such as a “guide to online resources” for the public and for community workers, more FAQs, and explainer videos that walked prospective users through a site or tool. Easy-to-access video instructions were a common request. Some also suggested the need for print materials that not only directed users to a resource but also provided an overview of what it was for, what makes it legitimate, what users could expect in using it, and instructions about how to use the resource. Focus group participants also described how clients are often anxious about filling in legal information incorrectly, which can stop them from starting or following through with using tools. For this reason, several workers suggested having practice options for digital legal tools, and prompts that provided context like “this is just a trial run,” or “you don’t need to create an account.”

Many of the same themes were apparent in discussions about design features related to the “user experience” or “user journey” associated with online tools. In particular, many suggestions related to addressing the stress that can be involved in interacting with digital legal resources. Workers suggested having more navigational information displayed while interacting with digital pathways or “tunnels”; not knowing where one is in the process, or if it is possible to go backwards, can cause anxiety for clients – sometimes causing them to give up when they are close to finishing. Workers suggested built-in encouragement, like prompts such as “you’re halfway,” or “you’re almost done!” Focus group participants emphasized that, because clients could often be interrupted or become overwhelmed while using resources, it was important that they could revisit the tool and do things over multiple sessions. In these situations, it’s important for people to know how far along they are, and whether they would lose their work if they needed to exit the resource.

Additional design and content-related suggestions shared by workers related to the inclusion of accessibility elements like font-size control, alt-text, night mode, and compatibility with assistive technologies¹¹. Many also expressed the need for more multi-lingual digital legal resources on a range of topics. Further, the importance of plain language was repeatedly emphasized throughout focus group discussions. Workers emphasized that plain language was important for users who were experiencing overwhelm, stress and trauma: “Every time I [participate in] consultations, I say, ‘plain language! [Otherwise,] it’s too overwhelming! The trauma brain can’t process [complex information]!”

Participants also described how, the simpler the language used, the easier it is to explain to their clients. For those who work with clients who speak languages other than English, simple and clear language is easiest to translate without ambiguity. Workers also valued the inclusion of “explainer” information built-in to websites (e.g., to assist users in completing online forms); participants expressed that the in-line glossary on LABC’s Family Law website was a good example of this type of online support.

Finally, various focus group participants also highlighted the value of additional channels for provision of assistance to users of digital legal resources. Many workers supported the idea of a live chat to help people know if they are using the tools correctly. Participants also suggested texting and messaging options; workers described how many clients, especially younger clients, prefer to communicate through text or Facebook messenger when seeking help with issues. Multilingual supports (such access to translation services or language options) were also seen as extremely important, particularly for groups of clients (such as those experiencing violence) who face complex barriers to accessing other types of support.

¹¹ For more information on assistive technologies, see the Web Accessibility Initiative’s *Tools and Techniques* page: [w3.org/WAI/people-use-web/tools-techniques/](https://www.w3.org/WAI/people-use-web/tools-techniques/).

Workers Perspectives on, and Capacity for, One-to-one Assistance

As I've noted above, a key theme that emerged throughout focus group discussions was the importance of supportive, personalized, one-to-one assistance in navigating legal issues and digital legal tools. One participant described how the complexities of legal processes meant that clients frequently required this kind of support: "I always work one-to-one with my clients... they're seniors and things are complicated. Any process – whether it's technology, or any other process – it takes lots of time." In addition to highlighting barriers faced by seniors, community workers indicated that new immigrants, clients who had difficulty reading, and those who faced multiple barriers often experienced too many challenges to access and/or use these online tools independently. One community worker stated:

"Because of... lack of confidence..., people with multiple barriers or immigrant clients [often] rely heavily on a person to do this with them. Even making the tool easier to use wouldn't [necessarily] empower them to use this tool to completion without help."

During focus groups, participants often described how they provide support in varied, personalized ways – depending on clients' needs and situations. Many described how the impacts of stress and trauma mean that clients often required a combination of legal, technical, and emotional assistance. One worker stated: "my clients need technical and emotional support..." "someone to address the stress and overwhelm or to help them with technology." Another participant described how, because legal processes were unfamiliar yet could have "high stakes" consequences, clients often worried about making mistakes: "Lots of clients just want someone there to assure them, or reassure them, that they're filling out and interpreting the questions correctly. From an advocates' perspective, that's something we would do."

In many cases, workers described how the impacts of stress alongside other barriers mean that clients face great difficulties in reading and understanding legal information. Workers often walk clients through information, reading and explaining as they go. Because of stress, explained one worker "sometimes [clients] can't even look. I have to read [for them] – even a pamphlet, not just digital [material.]" The same participant added: "digital [information] can be a little alarming for someone who isn't used to... a screen."

Many community workers work with individuals who have difficulty with speaking and reading English. Some can translate for their clients, and others rely on translation services or available family or friends to communicate. One participant indicated that they "helped a mom apply for CERB because her English [literacy] wasn't enough to understand what she needed to do. She was able to share her screen, and I was able to walk her through it..."

Several focus group participants also described providing additional types of practical and logistical assistance. Some clients have trouble managing passwords and accounts, but many community workers are accustomed to helping keep track of this information. In cases where clients are struggling with the chaos of homelessness, often in combination with multiple other barriers, workers helped keep track of important information and paperwork: "I retain copies of my client's documents to help them." More generally, focus group discussions underscored how a vital aspect of one-to-one assistance related to prioritizing respectful, human interactions within contexts that had potential to feel alienating and

disempowering: “there is another factor... Because of [clients’] lack of confidence, to preserve their dignity around that is really challenging. [It’s so important] to treat them with compassion and kindness, to make sure that they don’t leave feeling less dignified.” Taken together, these various comments illustrate the importance of these varied and personalized types of one-to-one help.

In focus group discussions, we also asked participants about their capacities to offer one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources, and about factors that created barriers to providing this help. In response to this question, many workers described how time constraints impacted their abilities to help. Helping people to use unfamiliar technology could be very time consuming. Participants indicated they were often able to provide an initial introduction to a given resource, but that they were usually limited in time and could not help with a resource all the way through. In particular, workers who also do translation often didn’t have enough one-to-one time with clients to guide them throughout all steps of a process – particularly processes that take multiple days. Uncertainty and complexities relating to legal processes could also significantly increase the amount of time and effort required of workers, as one worker described:

“When we are working with [clients], they’re not only asking how to use the tool. They’re also asking us to define, explain and interpret. We don’t have the knowledge; we’re not lawyers. This comes back to hit us: ‘Do I have to run around and find more resources to answer the questions? Do we have the resources in town?’ Most of the time, our clients are low-income and unable to pay a fee, and those [fee-for-service options] are the only resources available.”

As in the previous quote, community workers described how the complexity of legal information and legal language created difficulties for workers as well as for clients. Many focus group participants were university-educated English speakers who had trouble with some of the legal language used in digital legal resources. Complex legal information and legal terms could be especially difficult for translators to communicate to clients. One participant recounted: “I was struggling with some of the language. Some of my clients [speak English as a second language.] Plus [there was] the added stress of the situation.” Another explained: “When I’m translating, I always have someone to assure me that I’m translating legal terms correctly.”

Because of these and other issues, participants commonly described how training opportunities were important in supporting workers to provide one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources. Because of high turnover in client-facing positions, participants noted that “a lot of people don’t know the online tools. It will be great if you can provide more webinars for front-line workers.” Many workers said they are more likely to recommend digital tools with which they are familiar; training allows them to know if the resource is suitable for their clients and enables them to better support clients who need assistance. Focus group participants highlighted the need for training on legal information that is specific to the digital legal resources that are available, and some workers also emphasized the need for training on trauma-informed delivery of legal help. A majority of focus group participants responded positively to the presentation and interactive learning sessions offered at the start of our focus group sessions. One participant explained: “now, being here, talking to you, [and] walking through [LABC’s online resolution services tools]... having more of that support... I can be confident about helping people with the tools.”

Summary: Key Themes and Implications

This section summarizes the key themes and implications that have emerged across the three Achieving Digital Equity (ADE) project elements that are described in this report – including the survey of community-based intermediaries, LABC staff and partners’ tracking of referrals to digital legal resources, and focus groups with workers about digital legal resources. Taken together, the perspectives which are summarized in this report offer important insights into the experiences and situations of people who are among those British Columbians facing the greatest barriers to accessing technology *and* to accessing justice. In the discussion that follows, findings are organized in terms of four key themes:

- workers’ familiarity, use, and referrals to digital legal resources,
- clients’ access to digital technology,
- additional, intersecting barriers faced by clients; and
- insights about one-to-one, offline, and complementary forms of support.

Workers’ insights regarding suggested supports and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are also discussed as cross-cutting key themes which inform the findings relating to each of these topics.

Throughout this section, I also draw on the insights and suggestions of community workers to highlight implications for the delivery of public legal resources in BC. Taken together, workers’ observations highlight the value of:

- continued outreach, communication, and training to support intermediaries in referring their clients to digital legal resources;
- designing digital resources with consideration of the constrained modes of technology access that are a reality for many of the lowest-income people in BC;
- designing digital legal resources to minimize barriers related to legal complexity (technical language and processes), stress and overwhelm, literacy, language, and disabilities; and
- taking a “multi-channel” approach to delivery of public legal resources and services, including
- ensuring the availability of one-to-one, offline, and complementary forms of assistance.

Because issues of digital exclusion and barriers to accessing justice are structural, systemic, and complex, addressing digital access to justice in BC requires broad infrastructure, policy, and program interventions at both province-wide and community-specific scales. While many such initiatives extend beyond the mandate or role of public legal service providers, it is nonetheless valuable to consider how PLEI sector organizations might play a collaborative and/or supportive role in relation to some of these broader (e.g., technology access and/or service delivery) initiatives.

Workers’ Familiarity with, Use of, and Referrals to Digital Legal Resources

Overall, referrals to digital legal resources reflect the diverse situations of workers and their clients across BC. Community-based intermediaries and LABC staff and community partners clearly tailor their referral practices in ways that respond to these diverse situations and their clients’ needs. In most cases, referring clients to digital legal resources is seen as a complementary form of assistance – that is, it was not the primary or only type of help referred or provided.

Intermediary survey participants described varying, moderate-to-low rates of referrals to digital legal resources, with almost equal groups referring people to these resources weekly, monthly, and “less than once per month.” Only around ten percent referred people to these resources “daily” or “almost never.” Among the Legal Aid BC staff and partners who volunteered to track their referrals, referrals were made to websites or web-based resources about 40% of the time—usually in combination with referrals to other kinds of help. These moderate-to-low rates of referral are further explained by the responses of intermediary survey participants who indicated that relatively small proportions of their clients could likely use digital legal resources independently, with fewer than one in five workers saying all or most of their clients fell into this category. Over a quarter of these workers reported that all or most of their clients could not access or use digital legal resources at all and instead require offline types of legal services or help. On the other hand, most community workers indicated they assisted a range of clients who could, or could not, benefit from independent use of these online resources.

Taken together, the responses of survey, referrals tracking, and focus group participants also demonstrate how they tailor referrals and/help to their clients in personalized ways – accounting for peoples’ legal issues; circumstances; and barriers related to technology access, language, stress and trauma, disability or health issues, and legal complexities; among other considerations. Survey responses also suggest that workers less commonly made use of digital legal resources for their own information while working. However, use of digital legal resources by workers also varied, with over 15% reporting they even use digital legal resources “daily.”

Of all Legal Aid BC’s online resources, the Family Law in BC website stands out as one which is widely recognized, used, and referred by workers, staff, and partners.

While rates of referral to specific LABC digital legal resources also varied, the Family Law in BC website stands out as a resource that is widely recognized, used, and referred to clients – both by LABC staff and partners, and by community-based intermediaries. Of survey respondents, almost 90% had heard of LABC’s family law website and almost 70% of those who heard of it had referred it to their clients. Among LABC staff and partners who tracked their referrals, the Family Law in BC site accounted for a full third of referrals to digital legal resources. In general, these staff and partners referred people to a wide range of online resources – including many non-LABC resources – reflecting their knowledge of the myriad online resources available on a range of topics.

The remaining LABC resources queried were referred to clients by about a third of workers (or fewer – especially in the case of LABC’s Facebook page). These lower rates of referral reflect less recognition of these resources by workers, and also lower rates of referral among those workers who had heard of them. In several cases, the resources referred less frequently were those with comparatively “narrow” audiences – meaning, they pertain to more specific groups of people and/or to specific legal tasks (e.g., making a will or drafting a parenting plan).

In cases where people weren’t referred to digital legal resources, responses suggest that in most cases, the legal issue and/or the barriers faced by these clients required other, often more intensive, forms of legal assistance. Reduced contact with clients during the COVID-19 pandemic also decreased some workers’ opportunities to make referrals.

In cases where people weren’t referred to digital legal resources, responses suggest that in almost nine out of ten cases, the legal issue and/or the barriers faced by these clients required other forms

of personalized or more intensive legal assistance. This assistance often included: one-to-one verbal explanations (in person or by phone) of legal information, terminology, services, and options; translation; referral to other supports; and/or especially referral to more intensive legal help from legal advocates, or Legal Aid BC services. Unsurprisingly, the nature of the enquiries received by LABC staff and community partners meant that these participants most often reported connecting people with Legal Aid BC services including representation, advice, duty counsel, and Parents Legal Centres. Some workers who responded to our survey also indicated that they used to make referrals more frequently, but that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in reduced contact with clients and thus fewer opportunities to refer them to any (online or offline) resources.

In a minority of situations, not referring a person to digital legal resources may also relate to lack of awareness or knowledge of available resources or, less commonly, to lack of digital technology comfort or access among workers.

While nine in ten of the community workers surveyed had heard of LABC’s Family Law in BC website, other LABC digital legal resources were not as well known. Of survey participants, about two thirds had heard of LABC’s digital publications (68%), the MyLawBC Family Resolution Centre (65%), and the Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC website (63%). In each case, about half of those who had heard of these resources had referred them to clients. The remaining resources queried were familiar to around half of respondents at most. When asked about assisting their clients with digital legal resources, although about six in ten survey respondents said they would know what resources were available, about four in ten said they would not know, or were “not sure.” For some digital legal resources, lower rates of recognition occur because workers are less familiar with resources that are outside the scope of the sector or legal issues related to their work. But in other cases, lower rates of recognition and referral indicate there is need for continued outreach and training to support workers to confidently orient and refer people to these online tools. Further, when asked about assisting clients with online resources, small groups of survey respondents indicated they would not, or may not, have sufficient internet access (8%), digital skill (13%), or technology access (16%) – factors which may also limit referrals.

>> PLEI sector organizations should continue supporting referrals to digital legal resources through outreach, orientation, and promotional materials for community-based intermediaries.

Workers’ responses point to the value of continued outreach and communication with intermediaries such as community workers and library staff. Taken together with a number of recent consultations undertaken by Legal Aid BC, survey and focus group comments reflect how community workers face challenges in staying up-to-date with public legal sector resources and services in BC: community agencies are frequently overstretched and under-resourced, resulting in busy schedules and high rates of turnover among client-facing staff. Also, changes in the legal landscape, and in associated services, means that resources and services can change frequently. Further, the fact that a third of workers surveyed had not heard of LABC’s many digital legal publications – which address a range of topics in multiple languages and at varying levels of depth or complexity – highlights the importance of promoting even those resources which may not be new.

Focus group discussions especially suggest the value of outreach and resource updates in an e-newsletter or e-bulletin format. Focus group respondents emphasized they don’t have time to search for information about resources; instead, they rely on PLEI providers to deliver updates about available and tools. Several participants noted that email formats also allow them to easily share updates with co-workers. This theme is consistent with the findings of other recent LABC consultations in which community workers favoured regular (e.g., monthly or bimonthly) email-based communication as a preferred format for receiving updates about available resources (Bluesky, 2019; Johnson & Van Eerden, 2019; Murray, 2019).

Because many referrals also entail orienting and/or demonstrating digital legal tools for clients, provision of training to workers is an additional, key means of supporting referrals. Both survey and focus group comments highlighted how training helps workers to feel more confident in referring people to a given resource. Training on digital legal resources may be especially important for those workers who are less confident in their skill with technology.

Finally, workers’ responses relating to referrals also highlight the value of supporting forms of assistance which extend beyond referrals to more personalized and extended one-to-one help. Because this is a recurring theme in many areas of the data, I address this implication in more detail below.

Clients’ Access to Digital Technology

In cases where people have sufficient technology access, online legal resources and services can be an important channel for legal help. However, community workers across BC commonly report that their clients often face multiple, overlapping, barriers to access and use of digital technology – with income and rural/urban divides in service being key factors. Many clients only have internet access by cell phone, and this access could be limited or interrupted. These multi-dimensional access challenges mean that many clients experience highly constrained forms of access to digital legal resources, if they have access at all.

Workers’ observations illustrate how many British Columbians with low income experience technology access which is extremely limited, inconsistent, or of poor quality – a trend which is also apparent in the population survey conducted as part of the ADE study (Sentis Group, 2021a). Across all sections of the survey and in focus group discussion, community-based intermediaries repeatedly drew attention to technology access as a key barrier impacting their clients’ abilities to benefit from digital legal services – both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While responses indicate that most workers observe a variety of technology access situations, the most noticeable trend relates to reliance on cell phones as a primary means of internet use. In the survey, just over half of respondents (55%) indicated that all or most of their clients had a mobile device only, and no computer. Only one in five survey respondents said that all or most of their clients had home internet, or a home computer. While a relatively small number of these community workers (15%) indicated that all or most of their clients had little-to-no regular access to a device (similar to the proportions with no access to internet), almost half (47%) of survey respondents said they had at least some clients in this situation.

In survey and focus group comments, many community workers stressed that income and affordability were the most significant barriers faced by their clients, particularly those experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Seniors and new immigrants or refugees were also commonly highlighted as groups who disproportionately lacked sufficient technology access. In other cases, workers noted that their

clients were only able to afford limited forms of access that were cumbersome and frustrating – for instance, older or broken devices, slow internet, limited data, text-to-mail services, and prepaid plans which they could not always afford to maintain. In survey comments, many noted that their clients did not have access to printers or scanners. Intermediaries who worked in rural areas commonly described how internet service quality was very poor and/or unaffordable for clients – especially for residents of First Nations reserve communities. Further, many community workers described how their clients rely on public technology access points – such as libraries, community centres, or offices – as their primary means of using the internet. Focus group discussants indicated that popular messaging platforms (e.g., Facebook and Facebook Messenger) were often used by clients because they could use these services via free Wi-Fi in the absence of a phone or data plan.

Workers also commonly described how their clients’ difficulties accessing and using technology could limit the types of legal resources and tasks with which they could engage. Many described scenarios wherein clients’ technology access was sufficient for basic types of communication (e.g., text, messaging, or email) but was too old, not sufficiently safe or private, or not adequate to enable tasks such as the completion of long online forms, printing, scanning, or signing documents; or video calls that required privacy, viewing documents (e.g., through screen sharing), or viewing multiple participants. In addition to lack of access to printers and scanners, the limited typing functionality and small screens of mobile phones were commonly described as a challenge in relation to use of digital legal resources and tasks.

At the same time, it’s important to note that in some cases digital delivery of PLEI and other services can help to increase access to legal help. As they described clients’ situations, some workers indicated that their clients did have sufficient access to technology and internet, alongside sufficient comfort with technology, to be able to access and benefit from digital legal tools and services. When asked about the impacts of COVID-19 on clients’ access to legal help, a small minority of the workers surveyed indicated their clients’ access to legal help had in fact increased because of how online delivery of services to remote communities had reduced their clients’ need to travel.

>> The technology access barriers faced by many people with low income indicate the need for broad infrastructure, policy, and program interventions throughout BC. While such initiatives are generally outside the mandate of PLEI providers, public legal sector organizations may have a role to play in enhancing community technology access through community-based service locations.

Survey responses and focus group discussion indicates that community workers see a clear need for improved access to digital technology through infrastructure and affordability initiatives. When asked about the types of supports that would assist their clients in benefitting from digital legal resources, affordable access to internet, and affordable access to devices were seen as very important by 85% and 83% of respondents respectively. Affordable assistive technology was also seen as very important by 65% of those surveyed. Here, community workers’ responses are consistent with research which documents the importance of regular and convenient (especially home-based) personal access to technology with respect to enabling digital technology interest and skill (Denvir, Balmer, & Pleasence, 2014; Fang, Canham, Battersby et al., 2019; Scheim, Bauer, & Coleman, 2016). People with insecure housing, low-income families, new immigrants and refugees, seniors, people with disabilities, and survivors of intimate partner violence were once again identified as groups of people who could especially benefit from access-related supports. Though not strictly an access-related intervention, it’s

worth noting that provision of free digital skills training was also ranked as either very or somewhat important by about nine in ten community workers surveyed. These responses demonstrate how holistic and integrated types of supports are needed to ensure that all British Columbians can benefit equitably from online environments, information, and services.

Workers’ responses also suggest that public legal service providers can play a role in increasing access as an element of community-based services. More access to computers in community spaces was ranked as very important by over two thirds (71%) of survey respondents. In survey comments and focus group discussion, participants emphasized the value of safe community spaces where people could access and learn to use technology and receive help with online services tasks – ideally in their own language. Some suggested providing more computer access in existing service locations, while others envisioned this in terms of a multi-agency service “hub” where people could access phones; computers with printers and scanners; and support staff who were knowledgeable about digital public services (including public legal services), resources, and tasks. Many comments also highlight the need to ensure that any such access and service locations are adequately resourced in order to ensure the necessary staff time, training, and technical support required for one-to-one assistance with digital resources.

Additionally, workers’ comments (especially those of library staff) underscore that technology access and service locations need to provide for the time and privacy that is often needed for people to complete necessary tasks (such as completing detailed online forms and participating in video calls). These suggestions are also apparent in recent literature (Denvir et al., 2018). Workers’ comments and discussion also highlight the importance of multi-lingual assistance, transportation supports, and child friendly spaces or childcare as key elements of accessibility. Further, workers’ comments about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic emphasize that extended hours and drop-in formats¹² are very important for some people (who may include those without any other technology access options, and those experiencing violence or leaving violent situations.) Technology lending programs were also suggested by some survey and focus group participants. Addressing access to technology for clients who are detained or incarcerated is an additional issue which warrants further consideration by justice system institutions and legal resource providers.

>> In the public legal sector, design of PLEI and other services needs to account for the variety of digital technology access situations across BC – including the highly constrained forms of access, or lack of access, experienced by many of the lowest income and most systemically marginalized British Columbians. This suggests the value of person-centered and multi-channel approaches which enable clients to access legal resources and services in the way that works best for them.

Within each of the study elements overviewed in this report, staff, partner and intermediary responses indicate the need for PLEI providers to offer a range of access options that respond to the diverse technology situations of clients. For many BC residents, including some low-income British Columbians and some residents of rural and remote communities, digital channels do offer valuable modes of access to PLEI and other legal help. However, the observations shared by community workers indicate the need

¹² Some medical clinics such as the BC-wide network of LifeLabs ([lifelabs.com](https://www.lifelabs.com)) offer a combination of by-appointment and drop-in formats; this type of model could be explored for use in the context of a public legal and services hub.

to take a multi-channel approach in response to the very limited technology access experienced by many of BC’s lowest-income residents.

In such an approach, digital legal resources could be designed as much as possible for compatibility with limited or older technology (particularly mobile-only access and data constraints), while also including straightforward options through which people can “switch channels” to other modes of access. PLEI providers should especially be cognizant of the types of digital tools, services and legal tasks which likely cannot be completed effectively with older or limited technology (e.g. phone-only access) or limited data. Such tasks may include completion of lengthy forms or applications; scanning, signing, and especially printing documents; video calls (particularly with multiple participants and/or where screen sharing is important); as well as lengthy voice calls.

In design of digital legal resources, triage and person-centered approaches could be employed to assist people in determining and pursuing their best option for use of a given tool or resource, and/or in locating other channels for assistance. In some cases, people could be prompted to save a partially completed form or pathway, and to text or email a link to themselves or a trusted contact for continuation at a later point when they have adequate privacy or access to a computer versus only a phone. In other cases, alternative channels for accessing resources could include: messaging, texting, email, online chats, or phone-based PLEI – including navigation assistance, legal information, and referrals. The responses of LABC staff and partners and community workers illustrate how in some cases, people may have sufficient digital access and experience to use resources; in other cases, access constraints and/or the complexity of certain digital tasks or tools will necessitate additional technology access, support and/or offline modes of help. At the most basic level, workers observations in this area underscore the importance of resisting temptations to move towards “digital-only,” or “digital-by-default” modes of service delivery, because of how this transfers costs to low-income people and communities (BCPIAC, 2015; Chen, 2017; CMHA-BC, 2018; Harris, 2019; Humphry, 2019).

Additional Barriers to Use of Digital Legal Resources

Apart from technology access constraints, the complexity of legal systems – and associated difficulties navigating legal processes and terminology – stands out as the most widespread, impactful barrier observed by workers. Stress and overwhelm, and difficulties navigating digital technology were also common. Taken together, workers’, staff and partners’ responses once again indicate a diversity of client situations – with some clients facing significant and/or multiple barriers that prevent them from accessing, using, and/or benefiting from digital legal resources.

Worker’s observations highlight how peoples’ use of online legal resources is impacted by many additional barriers beyond technology access constraints. Most notably, the complex and technical nature of legal processes and legal terminology stands out as a significant barrier for the many BC residents who don’t have legal education, training, or experience. Over three quarters of survey respondents (77%) indicated that all or most of their clients had difficulty navigating legal jargon and legal processes. In survey and focus group discussion, community workers emphasized that their clients were often unfamiliar with legal processes, services or resources – they didn’t know where “where to start” looking for help. Further, confusion about where or how to access services had worsened because of service restrictions and social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional comments indicate that even when people do locate an appropriate digital legal resource, it is often difficult to understand

legal processes and terminology and to apply general legal information to one’s own situation. Accordingly and as I describe below, the need for “one-to-one help from someone with legal knowledge” stands out as the type of support ranked as most beneficial to clients.

Difficulties concentrating due to stress and overwhelm, and difficulties navigating digital technology were also widespread barriers, with about half of survey respondents saying that all or most of their clients were impacted by these issues. Stress and overwhelm were also among the most common barriers observed by LABC staff and partners in their decision-making about referrals and were a frequent topic of conversation among focus group participants. Focus group participants noted how stress, trauma, and anxiety could prevent people from completing use of a given tool or resource.

The significant impacts of stress, trauma, and emotional or mental health barriers have also emerged as key themes within LABC’s recent consultations and in our ADE population survey. The ADE project’s survey of BC residents found that emotional or mental health issues were a barrier to online activities for about one in seven of respondents with very low income (Sentis Group, 2021a). Likewise, in Legal Aid BC’s recent Community Dialogues conversations, emotional factors emerged as one of the five key factors that significantly impacted clients’ experiences accessing legal help. Clients and workers described how clients often felt highly stressed, alone, embarrassed, and even “frantic”; this meant they needed clear, supportive, in-person, and process-focused help (Simpson et al., 2020).

In the current research, many community workers described how widespread difficulties related to stress, legal complexity, and lack of comfort with technology were exacerbated by other barriers: people with disabilities, mental health issues, literacy challenges, who have faced systemic discrimination or violence, those experiencing homelessness, and those who speak languages other than English, faced “huge” challenges in accessing or benefiting from digital legal resources. These myriad issues, together with technology access constraints, help to explain why four in ten survey respondents said that few or none of their clients could use most digital legal resources independently; likewise, almost three in ten said that all or most of their clients require offline forms of help. Similar themes were also apparent in the ADE project’s survey of BC residents. That survey found that 44% of those in lower income households face one or more barriers to using the internet; key barriers related to technology access, digital skill or comfort, and trust in entering personal information online (Sentis Group, 2021a).

Community workers’ survey responses and focus group discussions also demonstrate how the impacts of these multiple barriers became starkly apparent with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the community workers surveyed, more than seven in ten respondents felt that their clients’ access to legal help had been either substantially or somewhat reduced. Most attributed this to the pandemic’s sudden transition to digital and phone-based services, alongside loss of access to public computers and in-person assistance. These observations about COVID-19 impacts on access to justice are more pronounced than impacts reported in a recent survey of lower income BC residents (Sentis Group, 2020) – illustrating how digital exclusion from services most acutely impacts BC’s most systemically disadvantaged residents.

>> *The observations of workers, staff, and partners demonstrate the need for a range of (online and offline) supports and options for clients. A person-centered, accessibility-focused, and multi-channel approach to delivery of PLEI can enlist digital design practices that mitigate barriers, while also providing complementary and/or alternative forms of help for clients who are unable to access or use digital legal resources.*

Taken together, workers’ observations about the barriers faced by their clients suggest that technical, design, or content-based improvements are not “stand-alone” solutions when it comes to enabling use of digital legal tools – especially for the lowest income BC residents who face more fundamental barriers related to technology access among other significant challenges. In survey questions about supports, one-to-one help, technology affordability, and technology access were generally seen as more important than factors relating to the content and design of digital legal resources. At the same time, PLEI content and design is also clearly important; the latter types of improvements were still deemed as at least somewhat important by over 80% of those surveyed.

Among survey respondents, use of simpler or shorter language in digital legal tools stands out as the most highly-ranked design practice to be prioritized by PLEI providers – a trend that once again highlights the significance of legal complexity and technical legal terminology as a barrier to use of digital legal tools. In addition, simple language was seen to mitigate barriers related to literacy, language, and stress. To further address overwhelm and stress, focus group participants suggested design elements that included clear naming, orientation materials, trial or testing options, built in explainer-info, and reassuring navigational prompts (e.g. “you’re halfway!”)

In responses and comments, survey respondents also favoured: use of inclusive, culturally appropriate and culturally safe content; use of audio-visual formats (including graphics, tutorials, and presentations) which respond to different modes of literacy and learning; triage and guided pathway features;¹³ multi-lingual resources and/or supports; live chat (including multi-lingual live chat); and designing for device compatibility. Design of digital legal resources can also seek to maximize accessibility for diverse client groups through best practices such as adherence to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).¹⁴ Alongside these features, options for one-to-one and offline modes of assistance are clearly key for some people, as I detail below.

Finally, survey responses and focus group discussion also emphasized the importance of continued outreach and promotion of both online and offline forms of PLEI. Given that people typically look for resources on a “just in time” basis (Forell & McDonald, 2015), it’s unsurprising that many BC residents, and some workers, are unaware or unsure about the legal resources and services available. In survey comments and in focus groups, workers highlighted the value of promotional resources such as “free booklets, brochures, or printouts” for use in assisting their clients to find appropriate resources or information online. In addition to print resources which could be given to clients, some workers valued having promotional emails they could forward. These suggestions resonate with other PLEI research that recommends equipping intermediaries with ready-made materials they can use to identify legal issues

¹³ Guided pathways can be an effective means of triage – that is, the “effective channelling of people to needed service” (Public Interest Strategy & Communications, Inc., 2016, p. 13, citing ACAJCFM, 2013).

¹⁴ WCAG are available at: w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/.

and promote both online and offline resources to clients (Bluesky, 2019; Johnson & Van Eerden, 2019; see also CHRC, 2016; Currie, 2015; Crosby et al., 2018).

As I describe further below, instructional materials were also highly valued for use by workers and clients. Further, some focus group participants noted the potential value of social media shareables that could be easily posted to their organization’s Facebook page and promoted to clients via that popular platform.

Perspectives on, and Capacity for, One-to-one Assistance

Across the three study elements that comprise this report, community workers, and LABC staff and partners repeatedly highlighted the importance of supportive, one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources. Survey comments and focus group discussion underscores how one-to-one assistance from someone with legal knowledge is vital in mitigating many of the most prevalent and impactful barriers; this help can greatly increase the number of clients who benefit from digital legal resources.

All groups of respondents were clear about the value of one-to-one assistance in increasing their clients’ abilities to benefit from digital legal resources. For survey respondents, one-to-one assistance from someone with legal knowledge stands out as the most highly ranked type of support – with 87% of survey respondents characterizing this as very important in supporting their clients to benefit from digital legal resources. One-to-one assistance from someone with digital skills was also seen as very important by 75% of those surveyed – illustrating how both types of knowledge (legal and digital) are necessary to ensure effective use of these tools (see also Denvir et al., 2018). Put differently, technology assistance alone was less likely to be seen as “very important.” Likewise, among Legal Aid BC staff and partners who tracked their referrals, a person’s need for more intensive, one-to-one legal assistance (and especially lawyer services such as representation or advice and duty counsel) was overwhelmingly the most common reason – cited in 87% of cases – for not referring them to digital legal resources. The important role of one-to-one assistance was also echoed in Legal Aid BC’s Community Dialogue consultations. A key finding in that process was that “navigation” and “guidance” should become central principles within the delivery of PLEI and other public legal services; such guidance would entail individualized, in-depth help by a knowledgeable person who can assist with navigating legal processes (Simpson et al., 2020).

In the ADE community workers’ survey and focus group responses, providing personalized, one-to-one help with digital legal resources was often described as the most effective means of addressing widespread barriers relating to legal complexity; stress, overwhelm, and trauma; and lack of access and comfort with respect to technology. One-one-help was described as especially vital for people with cognitive disabilities, mental health issues, language and literacy barriers, and those who faced violence or systemic discrimination. Comments from community workers, and staff and partners illustrate how they creatively and effectively tailor their assistance on a personalized, as-needed basis, taking into account peoples’ issues, circumstances, and barriers.

In this way, responses illustrate how one-to-one assistance is key to bridging gaps that prevent some people from being able to benefit from the legal resources available online. Among survey respondents, while only 18% said that all or most of their clients could access and use digital legal resources independently, twice as many (36%) said that all or most of their clients could use digital legal resources with some help or guidance.

While one-to-one assistance could enable more clients to benefit from digital legal resources, some workers face challenges to providing this help. Among survey respondents, a minority indicated that technology access or skill was a barrier. Instead, barriers for workers more often related to knowledge, time constraints, and the disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although over a third of respondents (36%) indicated that all or most of their clients could use digital legal resources with some help and/or guidance, providing one-to-one assistance with digital legal resources was the least frequent type of referral described. While decisions about when and how to make referrals to online resources are multi-faceted, comments suggest that in some cases, lower rates of providing one-to-one assistance may relate to situational barriers that limit workers’ abilities to provide this help. While most survey respondents (84-91%) indicated they typically had enough internet access, digital skill, and technology access to provide one-to-one help with online resources, larger proportions said they would not, or may not, have enough legal knowledge (49%), enough time (44%), or enough awareness of the resources available (37%) to provide this one-to-one help.

In survey comments and in focus group discussion, workers clarified that these more common constraints sometimes related to their role or service mandate. In these cases, while they were personally unable to assist with a given topic or type of resource, they could refer people to other workers or services that could provide the type of assistance needed. But in other cases, these time and knowledge-related constraints occurred because workers required more access to the information, training, and resources they needed to confidently and effectively assist people with digital legal tools. Some survey respondents and focus group participants expressed a lack of confidence about their abilities to accurately understand or translate legal information and ensure they were providing information without offering a legal interpretation or legal advice. Workers – especially those who were new to their roles – were not always familiar with the resources available; focus group participants described that it was difficult to be confident about the value or appropriateness of a resource without having had the opportunity to do a “dry run” themselves. Additional barriers that had become especially prevalent in the context of COVID-19 related to lack of access to physical spaces where workers could sit with people to assist them in using digital legal tools. Several respondents described how the requirement to provide assistance via phone or videocall during the pandemic was more time-consuming and/or required more work in comparison with providing in-person help.

Many respondents were also emphatic about the need for alternative or and/or complementary types of legal help beyond digital resources and services. The need for in-person modes of assistance, including walk-in models of service, was frequently highlighted.

Community workers, and Legal Aid BC staff and partners work assist sizeable proportions of people who – because of the barriers described throughout this report – are likely unable to access or benefit from digital legal resources. Among the community workers who responded to our survey, over a quarter (28%) said that all or most of their clients cannot use these digital tools and require offline types of legal services or help. When the same respondents were asked about referrals, workers reported that they most often assisted clients with digital legal resources by finding the relevant information online and then providing the information to clients (e.g., verbally, in a printed version, or by email) – with about six in 10 indicating that they always or frequently helped in this way. Likewise, the LABC staff and partners who tracked their referrals reported referring people to digital legal resources about 40% of the time. These respondents much more commonly referred people to offline, one-to-one, and often more

intensive forms of legal help (70% of the time). In about a third of cases, staff and partners provided referrals to both (offline and online) types of resources or services); however, they rarely referred people to web-based resources only (8% of the time.)

Survey comments and focus group discussion underscored that in-person modes of assistance are vital for people who face multiple barriers to accessing technology and accessing justice. In-person options could be especially important for people who speak languages other than English, people with cognitive disabilities or mental health issues, people with literacy barriers, people who are experiencing homelessness or have precarious housing, survivors of violence, and seniors. Many of these same groups of people also faced barriers to accessing phone-based help (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic). In comments, community workers described how in-person assistance was often crucial for clients impacted by trauma, stress and overwhelm and/or those with sensitive legal issues – because of how these situations corresponded to a significant need for emotional support. A few survey respondents also described how in-person assistance was, for some clients, a more culturally appropriate and culturally safe type of help.

>> *There is need to preserve and enhance personalized, one-to-one modes of PLEI and legal assistance – both as a complement, and as an alternative, to digital legal resources. Wherever possible, one-to-one assistance could be provided in a range of (brief to more intensive) formats and via the multiple channels described above. Access to trauma-informed, multi-lingual, and drop-in formats for one-to-one assistance – alongside private and supported technology access – is especially key for some clients.*

The accounts of workers make clear that many of the lowest income British Columbians – especially those who face multiple and/or significant barriers to access and use of digital legal resources – require personalized, one-to-one modes of legal assistance. In some cases, brief or occasional assistance from a knowledgeable helper is sufficient to enable people to locate an appropriate digital legal resource and to feel reassured that they can use it effectively. In other cases, people will need more intensive, sustained, multi-lingual, and/or emotionally supportive help from a knowledgeable navigator who can walk them through a resource step-by-step. In still other cases, people will require offline, often in-person, modes of help that do not require any independent use of technology.

Once again, the most fundamental “take-away” which flows from workers’ perspectives is that PLEI providers need to avoid adopting “digital-only” modes of service delivery. Doing so would exclude many British Columbians who already face significant barriers to accessing justice. Instead (and as I’ve noted above), a person-centered, accessibility-focused, and multi-channel approach could enable access to both brief and more intensive one-to-one assistance via the channels that work best for clients – whether via messaging, text, email, online chats, phone, and/or through in-person modes of service. During survey and focus group discussion, research participants also offered further detail about the types, or qualities, of one-to-one assistance that may be key for some people. Trauma-informed assistance, help in languages other than English; access to one-to-one help in community spaces where people can also safely and privately access technology; and walk-in or drop-in models of service were described as very important for people who face significant and /or multiple barriers to accessing legal help.

Consistent with other well-known research in the PLEI and access to justice sectors, the perspectives overviewed in this report underscore the importance of treating digital legal resources as valuable tools within a spectrum of online and offline legal help options. Digital legal tools should be made available to people in ways that are timely, targeted, “joined-up” and appropriate to their situation

and needs (Chen, 2017; Forell & McDonald, 2015; Kahlon, 2017; Pleasence, Coumarelos, Forell et al., 2014; Wintersteiger, 2015); community workers and other intermediaries clearly play a key role in connecting people with digital resources in this personalized and supported way. Participant responses further illustrate how the effectiveness of online resources is maximized when these are accompanied by one-to-one assistance – a theme which is also supported in the literature on PLEI (McDonald et al., 2019). This suggests that efforts to increase the effectiveness of online resources also necessitates increasing access to complementary forms of support – including referrals, legal information, translation, and assistance in navigating these online tools.

>> *Because digital legal resources are often most effective when delivered alongside one-to-one assistance, PLEI providers should continue to support intermediaries in providing effective support – for instance, through outreach, training, and “how to” resources.*

A final implication in this area relates to the importance of resources that make it possible for community workers to provide effective support. In some cases, respondents identified broader, organizational and staffing needs for “more funding” and “more time... to help clients on a one-to-one basis” (above, p. 33). These themes have also emerged in various community-based reports which have called for all types of digital service delivery to be adequately funded to avoid shifting costs to underfunded community agencies and client-facing staff (BCPIAC, 2015; Chen, 2017; CMHA-BC, 2018; Harris, 2019).

In relation to digital legal resources, many community worker respondents called for continued outreach and training from PLEI providers, to improve workers’ capacities to confidently and effectively assist clients in using these tools. Once again, these findings from the current study echo themes in previous research and consultations which have noted the value of training for intermediaries (Bluesky, 2019; Johnson & Van Eerden, 2019; Murray, 2019; R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd, 2019; Simpson et al., 2020). In the current research, ADE focus group participants in particular offered several suggestions about the types of training and materials workers would find helpful. These include:

- orientation sessions and/or webinars that offer walk-throughs of tools to help workers gauge relevance and appropriateness for their clients;
- training on legal information that is specific to a given digital legal resource;
- support and training in providing legal information and navigational assistance without overstepping the boundary between legal information and legal advice;
- training on trauma-informed practice in relation to PLEI and digital legal resources;
- introductory and “how-to” materials in a range of (e.g. print and multi-media) formats – especially brief explainer videos that enable workers and clients to become familiar with an online tool prior to using it;
- opportunities to practice, do trials, and/or a “dry run” of a resource prior to using the resource or referring it to a client; and,
- training and/or support in translating legal information for clients.

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Appendix A: Copy of Online Survey for Community Workers



Digital Equity and Online Legal Resources

Welcome to a Legal Aid BC (LABC) survey about digital equity and online legal resources. The survey has 15 questions and will take about 12 minutes.

Additional Survey and Privacy Information:

This survey is anonymous. Please don't provide any information that would identify you or others.

You can choose to be entered in a draw to win one of three \$25 Starbucks or Tim Hortons gift cards. After the survey, you can provide your name and email if you wish to be included in the prize draw. If you provide your name and email, it will be document separately, and not linked to your survey responses. Your name and email won't be shared.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you are free to stop participating, or skip any question, at any time. Skipping questions will not impact your eligibility for the prize draw. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with LABC, or your ability to access free LABC information, resources, or training.

Thank you! If you agree to continue, please click 'Next Page.'

This survey asks about your experiences, and your clients' experiences, with public digital legal resources.

Public digital legal resources include:

- websites,
- online content (such as text, pdf, and video),
- online publications,
- online tools (e.g., chat tools, guided pathways, online tribunals or dispute resolution tools),
- mobile legal apps, and
- online forms (e.g. application forms) about legal issues.

Email, listservs, and personal messaging / texting are not considered public digital legal resources.

Legal Aid BC Resources

1. LABC has several public digital legal resources. Which have you heard of, used yourself, or referred to clients?

(Check all that apply.)

	Heard of	Used Myself	Referred to Clients
MyLawBC action plan pathways	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Digital Publications on LABC's website	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
MyLawBC Remote Child Support Mediation tool	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
MyLawBC Making a Will tool	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
MyLawBC Family Resolution Centre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
MyLawBC Dialogue Tool	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC website	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family Law in BC website	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
LABC Facebook page	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Optional comments:

For all remaining questions, please think about ALL digital legal resources in BC (not just LABC resources.)

Your Own Use of Digital Legal Resources

2. How often do you use any public digital legal resources for your own information while working?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than once per month

Working with Clients

(Thinking about all digital legal resources in BC):

3. How often do you refer clients to digital legal resources?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Less than once per month
- Never / almost never
- Other option (please describe):

Description or comments:

3a. How often do you provide these kinds of help with online resources?

	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely ever
I work one-to-one with clients (by phone or in person) to use the resource.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find the relevant information and give it (by print or email) to clients.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I give clients the web address (URL) so they can use the digital resource on their own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I help clients with digital resources in another way (please describe):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Description or additional comments:

Clients' Access to Technology

For these two questions, please think about your clients' situations before the Covid-19 pandemic:

(We ask about Covid impacts later.)

Device Access

4. Before COVID, what proportion of your clients had:

	All clients	Most clients	Some clients	Few clients	Don't know
A computer at home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A phone or tablet only. (No computer.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Some access to a computer in community spaces or at a friend's. (Not at home.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Little-to-no regular access to a computer or phone.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other option (please describe):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other option:

Internet Access

5. Before Covid, what proportion of your clients had:

	All clients	Most clients	Some clients	Few clients	Don't know
Good quality internet at home (fast enough to watch YouTube).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Slow / unreliable home internet.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Some access to good quality internet in community spaces or at a friend's. (Not at home.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Access to slow / unreliable internet in community spaces or at a friend's. (Not at home.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Practically no access to internet.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other option (please describe):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other option:

Any other comments about clients' access to technology before Covid? (Optional.)

Clients' Experiences with Digital Legal Resources

6. What proportion of your clients face the following barriers when using digital legal resources?

	All clients	Most clients	Some clients	Few clients	No clients
Privacy concerns about using online technology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literacy barriers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty navigating legal jargon and legal process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty navigating digital technology	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of a safe, private space to go online	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disability or health barriers (including mental health and substance use problems)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Challenges concentrating due to stress or overwhelm	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language barriers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Unavailability of resources that are appropriate for client's identity / culture / beliefs (please describe):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other barrier (please describe):	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Description of other barrier:

Please share any examples or comments about barriers to using digital resources faced by specific groups of clients (optional):

7. What proportion of your clients:

	All clients	Most clients	Some clients	Few clients	No clients
Can use most digital legal resources independently	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Can use most digital legal resources with some help / guidance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Can not access / use digital legal resources, and require offline help.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Optional comments:

8. If a client needed one-to-one help (by phone or in person) using an online legal resource, would you usually:

	Yes	No	Not sure
Know what digital legal resources are available?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have enough access to technology to help the client use the resource?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have enough access to internet to help the client use the resource?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have enough time to meet with the client and help them use the resource?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have enough digital skills to help the client use the resource?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have enough legal knowledge to help the client use the resource?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Optional comments:

Suggested Supports

9. How important are the following to help your clients benefit from digital legal resources:

	Very important	Somewhat important	Less important
Affordable assistive technology to accommodate disability or health conditions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1-to-1 help from someone with digital skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Simpler / shorter language in digital resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Free digital skills training	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More online 'live help' chat features	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Affordable access to devices (phones / computer / tablet)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More digital resources in languages other than English	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Affordable access to good quality internet	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More digital resources that consider diverse cultures / identities / beliefs (please describe.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More video, audio, or interactive content in digital resources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1-to-1 help from someone with legal knowledge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More access to computers in community spaces	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Additional comments or suggested supports (optional):

Impact of Covid-19

10. How would you describe the impact of Covid-19 on your clients' abilities to access legal services or help for their legal issues?

- My clients' access to legal help has improved.
- My clients' access to legal help is the same.
- My clients' access to legal help is somewhat reduced.
- My clients' access to legal help is substantially reduced.

Brief description (optional):

11. Have you learned anything about clients' technology access or use during Covid-19, that you would like to share? (Optional.)

General Information

12. In what sector(s) do you work? (Please select all that apply):

- Advocacy
- Child and family-focused
- Education
- Elder / Senior-focused
- Ending violence
- Disability-related
- Government
- Health
- Housing / Homelessness
- Indigenous or Aboriginal-focused
- Justice / Law-related
- Legal Aid intake or outreach
- Libraries
- Mental health / Substance use
- Poverty law
- Settlement
- Victim Services
- Youth-focused
- Other sector(s) (please describe):

Description or comments:

13. Please describe the setting in which you work (select all that apply):

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural / Remote.

14. What is the name of your community / region?

15. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience, or your clients' experience, with digital legal resources?

Is there anything else you'd like to add about digital equity in BC?

(Please describe):

Please submit your responses!

If you agree to send us your survey responses, please click on "Submit."

(The "Submit" button will also take you to the optional prize draw link.)

Thank you!