

# Legal Aid BC Update

From the desk of Mark Benton, QC  
Chief Executive Officer, Legal Services Society



## Provincial budget delivers welcome news

There was good news for the Legal Services Society (LSS) in the recent provincial government budget speech. The Finance Minister had this to say about legal aid funding:

Safety goes hand in hand with access to affordable, quality legal services. Over the years, cuts to legal aid and reductions in family law services have left people without legal representation and torn families apart. That's why we're expanding legal aid, including Indigenous and family law services, with a \$26 million investment over the [three-year] fiscal plan.

This is the largest funding increase for legal aid since 2002 and is nearly a 12 percent lift over last year. This is a clear indication that government values the work undertaken by LSS and is a positive step toward improving the services British Columbians count on.

While LSS's budget has yet to be approved by the Ministry of Attorney General, but we anticipate that it will include:

- A \$4.7 million increase for expansion of our core family and child protection services
- A \$3.8 million increase for expansion of our justice transformation initiatives (particularly the Parents Legal Centre)
- Plus a \$4.3 million increase for criminal legal aid through the federal-provincial cost sharing agreement

The new funding will allow us to improve access to justice for Indigenous peoples and to better meet the legal needs of low-income families. It will also allow LSS to offer a wider range of services to low-income British Columbians and to provide more support for the lawyers who serve legal aid clients.

Details are still being finalized, but some of the many expected enhancements include: reinstating discretionary family law services that were eliminated in 2017, providing legal representation for extended families in child protection cases, additional hours for Gladue submissions in criminal cases and opening new Parents Legal Centres in several locations around the province as recommended by Grand Chief Ed John in his report on Indigenous child welfare.

We know that lawyers regularly put more time into a file than they are paid for, so LSS will also be adding hours to compensate lawyers for dealing with the many challenges legal aid clients present. In balancing service demands with our fiscal capacity, LSS determined that expanding client services and increasing the number of hours available to lawyers should be our first priority to recognize the important work of our lawyers. We believe that by working with government we can continue to make progress on other outstanding issues.

With more than \$12 million in new funding coming to LSS this year, there is a lot of work ahead of us. While some changes can be made immediately, many will not be in place until the fall.

We are grateful to the Attorney General for his support for improving legal aid.

Mark Benton, QC  
CEO, Legal Services Society



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