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**FROM: Legal Services Society**

**TO: Hon. Shane Simpson, Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction**

**PURPOSE: To propose a coordinated response to poverty reduction in BC**

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## Introduction

The Legal Services Society (LSS) is British Columbia's legal aid provider. We help low-income people to resolve their legal problems so they can move on with their lives. Improving access to justice and reducing poverty are interrelated and overlapping social goals, with potential for a coordinated response.

Created by the *Legal Services Society Act* in 1979, LSS is a non-profit organization whose priority is to serve the interests of low-income people who are facing a legal issue. We serve a broad range of British Columbians, most of whom live in poverty, including families and single moms, Indigenous people, recent immigrants and refugees, and those living with disabilities.

The provincial government funds LSS to deliver representation, advice and related services. We also receive grants from the Law Foundation and Notary Foundation that fund our public legal education and information (PLEI) programs.

Legal representation services are available for serious family, child protection and criminal law problems, as well as for some immigration, mental health and prison issues. Legal advice services are available from duty counsel in courthouses, advice lawyers at Family Justice Centres/Justice Access Centres and for people detained coming into BC, as well as via telephone services. We base financial eligibility for all these services on nationally recognized measures of low income.

Before funding to legal aid was drastically cut in 2002, LSS also provided poverty law services to help low-income people with issues such as disability benefits, welfare, debt, and housing. Lawyers and paralegals delivered poverty law services in community locations around BC, including Indigenous and other community offices funded by LSS.

Our PLEI resources are free and also geared to the needs of low-income and disadvantaged people. A network of contracted local agents and community partners around BC deliver LSS's legal information and outreach services. Local agent offices also take legal aid applications for those who need legal representation. In addition, we provide information through our [LSS](#), [Family Law in BC](#), [Aboriginal Legal Aid in BC](#), and [MyLawBC](#) websites and print publications.

# ***Legal Aid & Poverty Reduction***

*February 2018*

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people use our services and resources to resolve legal issues. For more information on legal aid programs and the people we serve, see [www.lss.bc.ca](http://www.lss.bc.ca).

## **Relationship between Legal Issues and Poverty**

There is a strong link between legal issues and social exclusion, poverty, and disadvantage. The exact nature of the relationship is complex and symbiotic. Legal problems often stem from poverty. By resolving legal issues, legal aid services can help put people on the path towards escaping poverty. Yet many people never deal with their legal problems due to lack of resources and lack of knowledge of services, or other barriers to access. Some do not even know that they have a problem with a legal solution.

Legal aid services are by definition for the poor and most vulnerable in society, so the parallel between the demographic living in poverty and those who access legal aid is not surprising. Three out of four legal aid contracts issued to lawyers for family law cases involve female applicants. Analysis of legal aid application data shows that in 2016/2017, more than half of our family clients were female. Three out of 4 female clients were lone parents with children in the household.<sup>[1]</sup>

In addition, about 41% of LSS's child protection clients self-identify as Indigenous, as do 31% of our criminal law clients and 21% of family law clients.

Legal aid can reduce poverty directly. For example, legal aid can help a single mother to resolve a family law problem such as spousal support and improve the family's financial security. Current funding levels generally do not allow us to assist with such narrow issues. Early intervention in family and other types of legal problems can also have a positive impact on mental and physical health, abuse of drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, and other forms of violence. Providing legal aid may interrupt or reduce the severity of these social issues and enable people to take steps to overcome them – and get on with their lives.

Finally, our experience leads us to believe that an investment in legal aid can contribute to better outcomes for some of the most marginalized people in society. With additional funding, LSS could expand its family law services to address things like divorce and property, and also once again provide much-needed poverty law services for issues such as housing, debt and social benefits.

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<sup>[1]</sup>LSS derived this figure from client information provided at intake on gender, family size and marital status. We would be pleased to provide more context for the statistical analysis including assumptions and caveats.

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## LSS and BC's Poverty Reduction Strategy

LSS's experience providing services to low-income individuals means we can make a valuable contribution to the Ministry's Advisory Forum on Poverty Reduction. Our experience aligns with the poverty reduction initiative in the following ways:

- We can share anonymized data, assist with research regarding the causes of poverty, and provide advice about the relationship between access to justice for low-income people and poverty reduction.
- We are widely acknowledged as innovators, developing a wide range of services and resources, in person and online, to meet the legal needs of low-income people.
- We value and actively pursue collaborations and partnerships, both inside the justice system and with community advocates, health providers, Indigenous organizations, multicultural agencies, and others that serve low-income people.
- We have considerable expertise in community engagement and outreach, and are well positioned to connect the poverty reduction initiative to community agencies serving low-income people.
- We have a network of about 60 locations throughout BC where people can access legal aid services through contracted lawyers called local agents and community partner agencies, in addition to court-based intake services.
- We provide services that help people to resolve legal issues that affect their lives, both socially and financially.

LSS would welcome an opportunity to share more information about the low-income British Columbians we serve and to explore how we could make a useful contribution to the development of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.



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