

Kensington-Bellwoods

Community Legal Services

489 College Street, Suite 205 Toronto, ON M6G 1A5 Phone: 416-924-4244 Fax: 416-924-5904 website: www.kbcls.org



Annual Report 2013 - 2014

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*32 years
of
Service and Commitment
to the
Community*

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLE

Kensington-Bellwoods Community Legal Services is committed to providing legal assistance to low income persons in the area bounded by Ossington/Strachan Avenue, Yonge Street, Bloor Street and Lake Ontario. This includes providing summary advice, representation and assistance, as well as referral on non-legal matters of concern to clients; community outreach; community organizing; community education; and organizing law reform activities aimed at improving the legal and economic status of low income persons in Ontario.

Our goal is to work towards the elimination of poverty in our society, and to ensure equality before the law. To that end we are committed to working with other individuals and groups who share that goal, and to community organizing to bring about changes in the law that would improve the legal and economic status of low income people in Ontario.

Kensington-Bellwoods Community Legal Services is committed to a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of race, creed, colour, national origin, political or religious affiliation, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family relationship and/or disability.

Envisioning the Transformation of Community Legal Clinics in Toronto

By Karishma Prasana, Community Member



Tenants, Unemployed Workers, Low-Income Families,
Immigrants, Refugees, People with Disabilities:
Your access to Justice and our ability to work with you for
better Laws and Social Policies is under threat!

PUBLIC MEETING

Thursday, September 18th 7:00 pm
Toronto City Hall Council Chambers

(100 Queen Street West at Bay Street, a short distance from Queen Subway Station)

Support Access to Justice for Poor People!
Prevent the Closing of Community-Run
Legal Services!

Please come to this important public meeting to learn about the "GTA Legal Clinic Transformation Project" and the proposal to replace 14 community legal clinics in the City of Toronto with 3 mega service centres! There will be featured speakers to give background on the Project, the implications of the proposal, and what we can do about it. There will also be a discussion period in which we encourage you to participate.

Please Visit Us and LIKE Us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/kbccls
And Sign the [Petition to the Attorney General of Ontario](#)

ORGANIZED BY

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On Thursday September 18, 2014, members of the Kensington-Bellwoods Community Legal Services joined forces with individuals from across Toronto involved in various community organizations and services, to start a much needed conversation on the recently released "Vision Report" of the GTA Legal Clinic Transformation Project. The Transformation Project, initiated by a group of legal aid clinics from east end Toronto and now funded by Legal Aid Ontario, has become the source of much frustration and confusion over the past few weeks.

The Transformation Project began originally as an attempt at stream-lining legal clinic services and cutting down on costs. The proposed Vision of the project calls for shutting down the 14 neighbourhood-based clinics in Toronto and replacing them with 3 'mega-clinics' that would include a series of undefined "access points" across the City. According to the project, the new structure of the clinics would improve access, efficiency and effectiveness. The new model also proposes a dramatic increase in staff size and assigns 33 staff members to each 'mega-clinic', in hopes that it will help the administrative and legal tasks run smoother.

The meeting that took place in City Hall Council Chambers on Thursday night, allowed members of affected communities and relevant professionals to voice their concerns and thoughts about the proposed Vision. What was clear in the aftermath of their discussion was that the Vision was not what the community needed nor wanted. Unfortunately, the project did not take the time to involve those who truly matter: the individuals in the affected communities who would be most affected. The completely top-down decision making has missed the mark and in the end has led to a misguided vision. The most prevalent theme of the night was the need to start an alternative conversation, a more community-based "Transformation" of the legal clinics.

During the meeting on Thursday, all the speakers highlighted the fundamental idea that was missing in the Vision: at the core, the legal clinics are community-based, community-engaged, and community-led. Displacing these clinics from their respective communities would damage years of history and experience in local neighbourhoods and, ultimately, take the community aspect out of the legal clinics. During the meeting, Mary Jane Mossman, Professor of Law at Osgoode Hall Law School, highlighted the fact that the clinics are there to deal with "systemic legal problems" that marginalized communities face. Shutting down 14 clinics, situated in 14 different areas takes away from the ability of the clinics to serve their clients and ultimately do what they were built to do: provide legal advice and education to marginalized citizens and organize for law reform.

The community meeting also allowed for those who had previously used legal clinic services to voice their doubts and concerns over the Transformation Project. They demanded that the clinics stay where they are and did not seem to think that these new 'mega-clinics' would be able to successfully replace and replicate the positive experiences they had in the existing clinics. As was mentioned by one of

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the speakers of Thursday night's meeting, the legal clinics are client-based, and the prevalent theme amongst past and current clients at the meeting was a resounding "No" to the proposed Vision.

Kevin Lee, Executive Director of Scadding Court Community Center, pointed out that legal services clinics have years of history with clients and with the community. The individuals in the clinics have developed numerous close personal relationships with those they work with and a key element of these relationships built in these communities is trust. Trust doesn't appear overnight, but is built bit by bit over months and years. Individuals who have fostered trusting relationships with their community legal clinics will be forced to start all over again at these 'mega-clinics' and might not be able to experience the same sort of close community atmosphere. Reducing the number of clinics and increasing the number of staff takes away from that personal atmosphere, and instead introduces unwanted bureaucratization and complications to the legal process.

Not only does it complicate the legal process, moving the clinics away from the lived reality of most of its clients seems detrimental to their ultimate goals. To reiterate one of the major principles of legal clinics mentioned, these clinics are meant for the marginalized. And unfortunately, most of the time these individuals do not have the resources whether it be \$6 for the TTC or the time to travel to get to these 'mega-clinics'. While the Project leaders claim that implementation of the Vision will increase access, it seems that it will only do the opposite. Moving these clinics out their communities, isolates them from those that they seek to help.

In City Hall on Thursday, we also got to hear from Axelle Janczur, Executive Director at Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services. Axelle was able to share the similar experience that the health clinics across the city faced recently. Local Health Integration was a similar project that sought to integrate health clinics throughout Toronto. However, they did not find the integration to be of any great benefit and are working towards moving health services back toward community foundations. Whether it is health clinics or legal clinics, the principles are the same. These organizations are built around the community and its members and, ultimately, it makes the most sense that these clinics stay in their respective communities to continue to build on years of history and continue to foster deep interpersonal relationships with the clients that will improve their services.

But of course we cannot ignore the fact that our existing clinics do require some changes. Better funding, for example, would mean a world of difference. And as numerous speakers mentioned on Thursday night, the demographics are also changing and as a result, the face of poverty is not what it used to be. Our clinics need to work to adapt to these changes so they can continue to provide a high standard of services in the future. But this does not mean that the current Transformation Project is the answer to these problems. Those who are directly related to the clinics should be the ones to open up the channels of dialogue, and write the script for what's to come. We can direct our own community-based "Transformation" process that would ensure that when change comes it's the change we want and the change we need. Mary Jane Mossman suggested a Provincial Commission of Inquiry that facilitates a bottom-up approach and allows us to open up our own discussion on any future changes.

After the meeting on September 18th, members of the community have risen to the challenge and formed a grassroots community group. "Keep Neighbourhood Legal Clinics" aims to prevent the closing of clinics while holding clinics accountable to their communities. There is a vote coming up in December this year for all the legal clinics to say "Yes" or "No" to the proposed Vision. Until then it is up to all of us in the community to communicate our concerns and help develop a better "Vision". We need to reach out to those affected and those who are in charge and make sure they hear what we have to say about the Transformation Project.

Connecting with the Community

We were privileged to have an articling student placement position sponsored by LAO. We thank Pauline Akello and Andre Rivard for their assistance and wish them well in their future endeavours.



KBCLS continues its weekly **MANDARIN LANGUAGE INTERPRETATION SERVICE**. Clients can drop in on Tuesday mornings from 9-12 and speak to Fei, our interpreter. Fei also provides assistance in ongoing cases.



Bring Bella & David to Toronto Campaign

Our George Brown Community Worker placement student, Nolan Murray, spearheaded a fundraising campaign to help our client, a refugee from Burundi, bring her two children to Toronto. The children were living in a very unstable situation and are now reunited with their mother in Toronto. Thanks to Nolan's efforts we raised \$2,000.00.



Volunteer Tengteng Gai at KBCLS information table at Grange Festival.

