

Accessing Justice By Building Connections with Community Agencies and Supporting Front-Line Workers

Canadian Institute for the Administration of Justice – June 11, 2021



CONNECTING OTTAWA

- Since 2012, the Connecting Ottawa project has worked to improve access to justice for people who are not proficient in English or French or who face communication challenges due to a disability or sensory impairment (“isolated by language”).
- The Law Foundation of Ontario has funded the Connecting Ottawa project since its inception.
- Connecting Ottawa is a collaborative project involving over 50 community service agencies. The lead agency is Community Legal Services of Ottawa.

CONNECTING OTTAWA

- OUR TARGET POPULATIONS:
 - People who do not speak English or French as their first language and have a communication barrier
 - People with a disability or sensory impairment which affects their ability to communicate

Connecting Across Language and Distance: Linguistic and Rural Access to Legal Information and Services

[December 2008]



George Thomson & Karen Cohl

- **“When people need legal information or services, they are often in a time of crisis or experiencing pivotal events in their lives.”** (Cohl and Thomson, page 1)
- “There are many aspects of access to justice, but we believe that the Law Foundation properly identified linguistic and rural access as two fundamental issues. As Ontario becomes increasingly diverse, and as rural and remote communities face lost or regionalized services, **the need for innovative solutions is ever more pressing.**” (page 52)
- “We believe that the preferred solution is to provide **multiple points of access to an integrated system**, which, from the client’s perspective, is seamless.” (page 54).
- “Through partnerships, formal or informal, **organizations can share expertise, pool resources** (such as interpreters and technology), **coordinate services, provide training, distribute legal information, and conduct outreach to target populations.**” (page 72)
- **“Front-line workers in community organizations would be able to get real-time help....**from lawyers, paralegals, or community legal workers, particularly when they are serving clients in crisis. Through interactive websites and hotlines, sufficiently resourced and staffed, and coordinated or linked, **community organizations would not have to sort through multiple information sources to find the assistance they need.**” (page 69)

CONNECTING OTTAWA

- The Connecting Ottawa project implements this vision:
 - Resources for frontline workers in community agencies, to direct them to legal information and advice, as their clients need.
 - Connecting Ottawa's bilingual website - information about legal issues and local resources: **connectingottawa.com**; **connexionottawa.com**
 - Connecting Ottawa lawyers provide consulting services for frontline workers (including on-site), to build their capacity to recognize and help them resolve their clients' legal issues.
 - With partner agencies, coordinating, preparing and delivering public legal education programs for these "trusted intermediaries."
 - Managing and coordinating Connecting Ottawa's network of partner agencies.
 - Sharing information: the website, our bi-weekly communiqués, an annual conference.

WHY THIS APPROACH?

- Doing this work is a fundamental access to justice requirement.
- Because legal problems are part of a larger constellation of “cascading” issues.
- Because people frequently first go for help to their “trusted intermediaries” / “community justice helpers.”
- This makes community service agencies and their front-line workers an essential partner in accessing justice.

- The goal is to build a coordinated system:
 - Connecting the front-line workers of community organizations, providing and coordinating legal information and resources for them, and building collaboration among them.
 - Ontario's community legal clinic system is an important part of the solution: we take advantage of its unique characteristics.
 - Areas of need for information: housing, health, mental health, employment, immigration & settlement, income support, etc. The areas of need are always changing.

THE PARTNERSHIP

A network of over 50 organizations –focusing on front-line workers working with clients who are “isolated by language”

- Legal Services
- Community Services
- Immigration/Settlement Services
- Services Supporting People with Disabilities
- Community Information Services

GOVERNANCE AND STAFF MEMBERS

- An Advisory Group (currently 12 members), oversees the project. It meets quarterly.
- A part-time project manager
- Two lawyers
- Accountability to the funder by lead agency Community Legal Services of Ottawa

Welcome to Connecting Ottawa

A site to help you find legal services, social services and communication barrier assistance services in Ottawa.

To identify local services, search under the appropriate heading in the navigation bar. To learn more about Connecting Ottawa, explore under the "About Us" heading.

Connecting Ottawa is a project funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario improving access to justice for linguistic minorities and those who face communication barriers in Ottawa. We work closely with a partnership network of over 50 organizations to educate and help front-line workers provide legal information and referrals to their clients.

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