



The Advocates' Society La Société des plaideurs

November 13, 2018

The Hon. Caroline Mulroney, MPP
Attorney General of Ontario
Ministry of the Attorney General
11th Floor, 720 Bay Street
Toronto, ON M7A 2S9

Dear Minister:

RE: Impending Closure of Pro Bono Ontario's Law Help Centres in Toronto and Ottawa

As you know, The Advocates' Society, established in 1963, is a not-for-profit association of nearly 6,000 members throughout Canada. The mandate of The Advocates' Society includes, among other things, making submissions to governments and other entities on matters that affect access to justice, the administration of justice and the practice of law by advocates.

I write regarding the impending closure of Pro Bono Ontario's Law Help Centres for low-income unrepresented litigants in Toronto and Ottawa. As you know, these three court-based centres are scheduled to close on December 14, 2018 due to a lack of funding.

As you and I discussed earlier this fall, your Government has a strong commitment to both ensuring access to justice for Ontarians and enhancing the efficiency of the justice system. The closure of the Law Help Centres will seriously threaten both of these laudable goals, as the costs borne by the Ontario justice system will increase and unrepresented litigants who do not qualify for legal aid funding will be unable to obtain the legal assistance they need for their cases. I urge you to consider what I view as an opportunity to leverage taxpayer dollars into savings that would benefit all Ontarians while improving the justice system.

Recognizing that navigating through our justice system can be a nearly insurmountable challenge for unrepresented litigants, the Law Help Centres blend both self-help and duty counsel services. These services include summary legal advice, duty counsel representation at certain types of appearances, and help with completing court forms with the use of computer kiosks. The centres permit litigants to return for ongoing assistance, which allows for the provision of tailored, meaningful legal assistance to each individual litigant. The Law Help Centres are the only ones of their kind in Canada, and serve more than 18,000 clients each year. The centres' closure will leave a huge gap which will currently not be filled by any other programs.

The Law Help Centres ensure that unrepresented litigants participate not only effectively, but also efficiently, in the justice system. A 2017 study by The Resource for Great Programs, an American consulting firm, found that Pro Bono Ontario's court-based services to unrepresented litigants, including the Law Help Centres, provide a \$10 return for every dollar invested. The estimated cost savings and economic benefits provided by Pro Bono Ontario's services in its 2015-16 fiscal year amounted to \$5.76

million, which results from the elimination from the system of claims of doubtful merit, increased court efficiency, and the value of pro bono lawyer time leveraged from the private sector. In 2017, Ontario lawyers volunteered 22,000 hours of their time to Pro Bono Ontario's services.

The Advocates' Society has proudly supported Pro Bono Ontario's Law Help Centre project since its inception. The Advocates' Society partnered with Pro Bono Ontario to hold the first orientation and information session for volunteers of the Law Help Centre in Toronto in November 2007, a month before the first Toronto Law Help Centre was officially launched. Members of The Advocates' Society have been very dedicated to this project since then, as over 300 members of The Advocates' Society regularly volunteer with Pro Bono Ontario's programs including the Law Help Centres in Toronto and Ottawa.

The decision to close the Law Help Centres is based solely on the absence of sustained funding. Other sources of funding which have been directed to the centres (from Legal Aid Ontario and from the Law Foundation of Ontario) have been either frozen or reduced.

I urge you to consider providing financial support to keep the Law Help Centres operational, to ensure that these unrepresented litigants have access to justice and that our courts continue to operate efficiently.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian Gover". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brian Gover
President

C: Malcolm Mercer, Treasurer, Law Society of Ontario
Vicki White, Chief Executive Officer
Dave Mollica, Director of Policy and Practice