



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

Hon. Doug Downey
Attorney General of Ontario
Ministry of the Attorney General
11th Floor, 720 Bay St.
Toronto, ON M7A 2S9

September 18, 2019

Dear Attorney General Downey,

On behalf of the 17,000 full-time and contract university professors and academic librarians represented by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), I am writing to urge you to reverse the cuts to Legal Aid Ontario and to commit to protecting legal aid funding moving forward.

We share the concerns raised by Ontario's most senior judges who have warned that cutting legal aid funding will lead to a greater number of marginalized persons representing themselves in court, increase trial times and put higher demands on public services resulting in higher costs of legal proceedings for the system as a whole.

Legal Aid Ontario provides essential services for the most vulnerable in our province such as injured workers, survivors of domestic violence, persons on social assistance and other low-income and marginalized Ontarians. Faculty across Ontario are deeply concerned that the government's decision to drastically cut the Legal Aid Ontario budget by 30 per cent will undermine access to justice, which is a fundamental right and a key tenet of democracy, for these vulnerable citizens.

We are particularly concerned about the impact of these cuts on women, Indigenous Peoples, and racialized persons who are disproportionately represented in Ontario's low-income population. Your government's reckless decision to significantly reduce the LAO's budget will directly result in pushing marginalized persons further into poverty and curtail their ability to collectively advocate for their rights.

Some of the legal clinics that have received the most drastic cuts are those that have longstanding partnerships with law schools. The law students who come to the clinics through these partnerships provide vital service to marginalized communities. Due to the cuts, the future of the partnerships is in doubt, meaning a reduction in frontline services and lost learning opportunities for the students.

The cuts to Legal Aid Ontario will also negatively impact legal education in the province. Student legal aid clinics are an integral part of Legal Aid Ontario, where law students provide free legal services to marginalized persons as part of their studies and training. The experiential learning law students are exposed to at legal aid clinics is irreplaceable in its value.

In addition to being key hubs of experiential learning, the work of law students is a way to ease the strain on the legal system as a whole. This partnership with students significantly reduces operational costs for legal aid clinics. In addition, some of these clinics rely on student fees or a student levy to cover part of their operation costs. The government's "Student Choice Initiative" threatens the operations of some of Ontario's legal aid clinics that rely on student levies even further.

We cannot help but wonder why the province would interfere in university affairs to undermine the funding of legal aid clinics and other essential services, rather than protect and celebrate the role of student legal clinics in promoting access to justice in communities.

As the Financial Accountability Office has repeatedly indicated, Ontario has a revenue problem, not a spending problem. Ontario has the lowest program spending out of all other provinces, and the lowest revenue, including corporate tax rate, in all of Canada. Balancing Ontario's books on the backs of those who are most marginalized, including Legal Aid's clients, is not viable fiscal policy.

As Ontario faculty, we are alarmed by the province's legal aid cuts, which undermine access to justice for those who are most marginalized and negatively impact legal education in the province. We believe that our society as a whole makes progress when minority groups and marginalized communities have access to justice, and the province's legal aid cuts directly harm this vision.

We call on you to safeguard the basic tenets of our democracy by reinstating legal aid funding and refraining from future cuts. Instead, we urge you to celebrate the work of legal aid clinics, for their work and advocacy improve our society as a whole.

Sincerely,

Rahul Sapra



OCUFA President

The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations is the voice of 17,000 university faculty and academic librarians across Ontario. We seek to maintain and enhance the quality of our province's higher education system, and to advance the professional and economic interests of our members.