

Budget Challenges: LSS Update

By Heather Compeau.

At the March 27th 2009 Government & Legal Librarians Gathering at SFU, Eduardo Aragon discussed the budgetary changes facing Legal Services Society (LSS) for the upcoming year.

While government funding is not expected to be reduced, it is also not expected to increase to compensate for the reduction in non-government funding sources. For example, the Notary Foundation investment monies are more than \$2 million below what was budgeted for in 2008/2009 fiscal year. As a result the LSS Board passed a budget that has the following changes already implemented unless otherwise noted.

Service and Cost Changes

In order to save money, LSS services will cut the \$40 administrative fee for all referrals. In addition, tiered pay rates for criminal cases (20 year lawyer called to the bar paid more than a 2 year lawyer) will also be eliminated.

All referrals for Adult Category 1 Offenses (examples include breach of probation, failure to appear, and breach of bail) will be cut and no longer covered by legal aid representation. LSS will provide adult clients with a letter that states they are no longer covered for category 1 offenses and now must use this letter to apply for an order for court-appointed counsel. LSS will consider covering adult clients with serious mental disabilities who are unable to speak for themselves in court. Youths facing category 1 charges will not be affected and will continue to receive legal aid representation.

Family and CFCSA

In order to create a projected annual savings of \$1.6 million, LSS will eliminate fees given for administrative referrals in Family and dispute resolution cases. Extended services and the duty council services provided in some courthouses (date not set) will also be significantly reduced.

Immigration

To monitor service levels and reduce costs, LSS plans to implement more stringent merit screening of

applications for Personal Information Form referrals and to eliminate the administrative fee for all immigration referrals. They also plan to provide increased management of Refugee Protections Division hearing referrals to stay within projected budget.

The Society plans to terminate hearing referrals issued on or after April 1, 2008 and clients will have to reapply for legal aid closer to their hearing dates. The Society will also introduce more rigorous standards to approve referrals on applications made to the LSS Appeals department.

Staff and Operational Changes

To create a projected budget savings of \$2.5 million, LSS is planning a 16% reduction in staff in the Lower Mainland. This translates into 38 jobs being cut (including 14 lawyers). In addition, the Family Legal clinic has been cut, staff for Lawline will be reduced, and the scope of special projects and staff associated with these projects will be also be reduced.

Additional Budget Adjustments

As mentioned, LSS reported that a budget adjustment of \$5 million will come from several special projects that provide services in addition to those that are government funded including LawLine and the integration of legal aid services with social services.

Despite a total budget adjustment of \$12.7 million, LSS will be required to spend more than \$3.2 million of its non-government revenue to support criminal, family and child protection legal aid services.

Operational and Strategic Review

LSS Board of Directors intends to conduct a review of core business processes and services to look for operational efficiencies. This review will assist the Board of Directors in determining further changes to service. Currently, staffing levels remain unchanged outside the Lower Mainland but the Surrey office is moving to New Westminster.



Clients who continue to qualify for legal aid after April 2009 will be referred to private bar lawyer for assistance rather than LSS staff lawyers. For more information please visit LSS at: <http://www.lss.bc.ca/>.

Heather Compeau is the Education Librarian at the University of the Fraser Valley in Chilliwack, British Columbia.