



Media Statement

Government of Alberta Takes First Step Toward Sustainable Legal Aid Funding

**For Immediate Release
Thursday, October 30, 2014**

Calgary, Alberta - The Law Society has been involved in the governance of Alberta's legal aid program for more than 40 years. We are currently party to a five-year governance agreement with Legal Aid Alberta and the Alberta Government, signed in February 2011. Our role is to protect the independence of Legal Aid Alberta and the lawyers handling the work, and to ensure that the Alberta Government is informed about the issues affecting Albertans' access to civil and criminal legal aid.

Legal Aid Alberta has been substantially underfunded for many years. The funding shortfall constrains the ability of Legal Aid Alberta to deliver services, which adversely affects people in need of legal assistance before the criminal, civil and family courts. Inadequate legal assistance creates inefficiencies within those courts, puts pressure on other provincial government services, and causes huge but avoidable downstream costs for the legal system and the Alberta Government.

Inadequate legal assistance also has an adverse impact on other vulnerable members of the community including the victims of crime (who may be subjected to delay and deprived of restorative remedies), the children of parents in conflict, and those segments of society who are over-represented before the courts such as aboriginal Canadians and people with mental disabilities.

Social investment in a properly functioning justice system reduces overall government expenditures. Studies have concluded that every dollar spent on legal aid saves more than a dollar in other publicly funded systems such as healthcare, corrections and social services.

The social investment also ensures that all Albertans, regardless of financial status, are treated fairly and equally under the law -- a desirable and fundamental value.

Over the past six months, the Law Society has been engaged in a constructive dialogue about legal aid funding with representatives of the Government of Alberta, Legal Aid Alberta, and the private bar, with the goal of securing an agreement on a long-term strategy for a sustainable and adequately funded legal aid program.

Earlier today Premier Jim Prentice pledged improved access to legal aid. The Premier stated the legal aid system "must be responsive to current demands on this program, most importantly by ensuring low income Albertans, including AISH recipients, have access to the services they need." The Premier and Minister of Justice Jonathan Denis [announced](#) an additional \$5.5 million of funding for Legal Aid Alberta for this fiscal year.

During the news conference, the Minister stated that he intends this new money to form part of the base funding in future years, subject to approval in the next provincial budget, and that the



government is committed to ensuring "predictable and long-term planning for the delivery of legal aid services in this province."

The announcement is a positive first step in reversing the underfunding of Legal Aid Alberta. The Law Society will continue its dialogue with the Government of Alberta about a long-term, sustainable funding model that will enable Legal Aid Alberta to function in a stable manner and to retain lawyers to undertake this important work.

We look forward to further progress on this important issue as the Alberta Government works towards the next provincial budget in the early spring of 2015.

Speaking Notes from Government of Alberta Press Conference – October 30, 2014

Kevin Feth, QC
President, Law Society of Alberta

Today's announcement is a positive first step and the Law Society commends the Premier and the Minister of Justice for taking action.

We also need to continue the discussion to address the crisis beyond the current year and to establish a long term strategy for a sustainable and adequately funded legal aid program. We look forward to that dialogue as the Government works towards the next provincial budget.

Improving access to justice is a priority for the Law Society.

Inadequate access to legal aid creates inefficiencies for the courts, puts pressure on other government services, and increases downstream costs for the Alberta Government.

Inadequate access also has a negative impact on the victims of crime because court proceedings are delayed and restorative justice options, like restitution for the victim and resolving the root cause of the criminal behavior, are not properly addressed.

Inadequate access to legal aid in family matters harms innocent children, because unresolved disputes between parents create hardship and uncertainty for all family members – even emotional and psychological damage that can impair their ability to move forward in their lives.

Prudent investment, like today's announcement, enhances social justice but also saves tax payers' money. Studies tell us that every dollar spent on legal aid actually saves more than a dollar in other publicly funded systems, such as healthcare, corrections, and social services.

The social investment in legal aid therefore benefits a broad cross-section of Albertans, while being fiscally responsible.

The Law Society values the conversation the Alberta Government is having to discuss real solutions to longstanding social problems and we look forward to continued progress.



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The Law Society serves the public interest by promoting a high standard of legal services and professional conduct through the regulation of an independent legal profession in Alberta.