**STOP LEGAL CLINIC MERGERS**

**ALTERNATIVE TRANSFORMATION PRINCIPLES**

17 independent community legal clinics in Toronto (GTA) are under threat of being merged into 3-5 super-clinics with huge catchment areas. Many legal clinics have long relationships with low-income communities - this historic connection will be lost in exchange for larger more bureaucratic institutions. Clinic transformation should only be adopted *after* widespread, transparent, and open discussion amongst low income people(s) and community members has occurred. Instead, the transformation project is being rapidly pushed through. Clinic boards are being pressured to vote on mergers in the coming weeks.

We should not concede to Legal Aid Ontario’s (LAO) and/or the Government’s demands merely because they hold funding cuts over our heads. We can resist attempts to divide and rule between poverty law clinics, specialty clinics, and private bar lawyers. Given the access to justice issues at stake, we don’t need to accept mergers as inevitable. *We should define an alternative agenda.* Poverty law clinics exist because of struggle, and have always been maintained through struggle - today as much as ever.

We believe the following should be done:

**1. CHALLENGE LAO FUNDING CUTS TO POVERTY LAW LEGAL CLINICS**

* Increased funding, in line with changes in demographics and increased areas of poverty, is needed. As poverty rises in Toronto, cuts to service, space and staff should be challenged. Ensure existing clinics are adequately resourced with enough lawyers, community legal workers, and administrative staff to deliver the required legal and law reform initiatives.

**2. CLIENTS AND COMMUNITIES AT THE FOREFRONT OF CHANGE**

* Low income people should be at the forefront of any serious changes to *their* clinics, not as an afterthought or through well controlled focus groups. Transparency happens through town hall meetings, broad-based feedback from those who use the clinics, client communications, and concerted outreach efforts to local communities. We need full participation and awareness. For any major restructuring, there must be a genuine democratic process. Rapidly pushing through cost-cutting measures *after* the significant decisions have already been made is not democratic.
* Meaningful inclusion and discussion takes time. We need to slow down the process to ensure broad and inclusive feedback occurs in a fully accessible and open manner. People with critical views should be welcomed, not silenced. A few individuals driving the GTA transformation process will lead to the disenfranchisement of poor communities, and ultimately undermines the survival of the clinics.

**3. RESIST MERGERS: PUSH FOR MORE *REALISTIC* POVERTY-LAW FUNDING**

* With these mergers, instead of going to local clinics, low-income people will need to wait until clinic staff come to their area on a weekly/monthly, or ad-hoc basis. When lawyers are sent to various ‘access points’ for a few hours a week, they will have less contact with communities and spend more time travelling. This is largely a summary advice model.
* Merged ‘super-clinics’ with larger catchment areas will not substantially solve under-resourcing problems. It will likely compound them. If the goal is to reach more clients, we should push for additional funds for larger staffing complements within existing clinics, and/or new clinics in areas with higher densities of poverty, and changed demographics. We can oppose amalgamations and co-location of services, which leads to the elimination of clinic space, staff, and existing community-based boards.

**4. ENCOURAGE LOCAL DEMOCRACY - *RESIST HIERARCHIES***

* The merger of clinics is not conducive to a community-based, community-run clinic model. Existing community boards are vital to local democracy. The erasure of this history will further destabilize poverty law, and create hierarchical & less responsive clinic structures.
* If clinics feel coerced into participating in the transformation process - this is not democratic. We need to make extra efforts to ensure everyone, especially low income people, have an integral role in any re-envisioning of the legal clinics. The use of paralegals and students to cut costs is hardly in line with access to justice principles.

**6. BACK TO *BASIC PRINCIPLES* OF POVERTY LAW**

* We need to re-affirm the right to legal representation for poor people, with a solid (grassroots) community and movement-based lawyering model. A worthy transformation is one that inspires & affirms the abilities of oppressed people(s) to engage in effective resistance against the forces which seek to minimize their rights.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO TO STOP COMMUNITY LEGAL CLINIC MERGERS:**

**Organizing meeting: Sunday, July 13, 4:30 p.m., OISE, 252 Bloor St. W, Rm 5150**

 **(Accessible space - please let us know if you require further accommodations)**

**Email:** **stopclinicmergers@gmail.com** **Web:http://StopLegalClinicMergers.weebly.com**

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