



August 17th, 2014

Bob Ward
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Ministry of the Attorney General
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To Whom It May Concern,

The UTGSU writes to express its deep concern over the amalgamation of 17 independent community legal clinics in the GTA into 3-5 larger clinics.

Community legal clinics provide essential legal services to marginalized and low-income communities and therefore have the opportunity to develop significant and lasting relationships with the communities to which they belong. Eliminating these clinics destroys this crucial interaction. Furthermore, the accessibility of these services will be greatly reduced, making the clinics far less effective than they are now.

Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) is advancing this plan with the threat of budget cuts, which is problematic in two primary ways. Firstly, any changes to a community service should be proposed to the community membership and involve transparent, open consultation and discussion on the topic. Secondly, mobilizing the threat of budget cuts is indicative of a problematic hierarchical structure that is directly and negatively impacting the constituencies these clinics are meant to serve. A government organization should never use its power to cut funding in order to fulfill its own priorities irrespective of what this means for those who rely on the service.

We urge LAO to place clients and communities at the forefront of any substantive changes, and to have open dialogue with community members. A service such as this should recognize its users as the stakeholders who are most impacted by any changes and therefore should include them in the conversation. We stress that more funding be placed into legal clinics in order to reach more clients, and provide a more complete and diverse range of services. Reaching out is the universally accepted means to effective outreach, not withdrawing in.

To reiterate, the UTGSU does not support LAO's plan to merge legal clinics because "mega clinics" will greatly reduce accessibility and service provision. It is deeply concerning that these changes are not being developed in a transparent manner and further, that they do not represent an opportunity to better serve the communities they are intended to support.

Sincerely,

Hussain Masoom (Academics and Funding Commissioner Div. 3&4)
On behalf of the University of Toronto Graduate Student's Union